

# in memoriam



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## Who Is Afraid of Feminist Thought?

*In Memoriam: Hana Havelková  
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Hana Havelková quickly became a leading voice of Czech feminist thought in the 1990s when she participated in the “East-West” debates about the place and usefulness of feminism in postsocialist societies. When did her journey to gender theory and research begin? She tells us about those beginnings:

I did not start to take an interest in the question of the position of women in our republic at my own initiative. I had to be asked to do so, and even then, around 1990, I thought, like many others did, that there is not much to say about the topic of men and women, that there are not many problems in this area. I quickly learned how very wrong I was. I realised with a shock that the communist authorities had managed to erase from public attention and discussion even such elementary human questions as the relations between the sexes and the transformations of men’s and women’s roles, including, for example, parental roles.<sup>1</sup>

After the initial nudge, she wrote dozens of studies and essays, educated and mentored hundreds of students, gave innumerable speeches at conferences at home and abroad, and shaped the discussion on the “politics of gender culture” in Czech society, to borrow from the title of the book on which all three of us, together with a team of twelve other researchers, worked under Hana’s leadership.<sup>2</sup> But what was that first impulse? Perhaps we thought we could always ask her the next time we met. Perhaps the thought has become pressing only now, when we can ask no more.





The last time we met publicly was at the occasion of her seventieth and her husband Miloš's seventy-fifth birthday in September 2019 in Prague: an extraordinary—international—meeting of generations of researchers and students of gender, some of them tracing their own engagement with feminism and gender theory to their encounter with Hana in the early 1990s. It was at this scholarly celebration that Austrian feminist philosopher Herta Nagl-Docekal provided insight into Hana's feminist beginnings. In her speech in Hana's honor, she mentioned her lecture at the symposium "Philosophie der Geschlechterdifferenz in der Tschechoslowakei und in Ungarn" (Philosophy and Gender Difference in Czechoslovakia and Hungary) held on 4 May 1991 at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Vienna. It must have been the very first international scholarly feminist/gender event with Czechoslovak participation. This fact alone questions the myth that feminist thinking and gender research was a "Western import" that still plagues Czech and international academia: it was, after all, Hana Havelková, together with several scholars from Slovakia and Hungary who were "exporting" Czechoslovak gender critique to Austria! They may not have had the twenty-something years of British, American, French, or German feminist theorizing at their fingertips, but they had something to say on the subject of gender and philosophy in freshly postsocialist Central Europe.

Libora first met Hana in another iconic company, at a gathering of scholars, students, and activists that became the core group around the renowned Gender Studies Center and library at Jiřina Šiklová's flat in 1992. She had just returned from attending university in the United Kingdom and was eager to join the burgeoning feminist discussion at home. When Hana and her colleague from the Czech Academy of Sciences,



Marie Čermáková, began to prepare a thematic journal issue on feminism,<sup>3</sup> she invited Libora to submit a paper. It was Libora's first publication and the draft bore all the marks of a beginner. Hana tutored her for several hours, going through the text line by line and taught her to write for a scholarly audience. She gave her the gift of launching her career as a published researcher.

The episode is typical of Hana's generosity to younger scholars and to students. Also her charisma as a teacher was legendary. Her lectures were contagious in the best sense of the word. She herself held a humble opinion of her own pedagogical skills and attributed the popularity of her courses on feminist theories to the topic itself: "There is a

tremendous need for reflection. In the Faculty where I teach, I can see that students' interest in feminism is huge . . . even antifeminism did a great service . . . many students told me that it was such attacks which motivated the young and curious generation to study feminism."<sup>4</sup>

From the 1970s, Hana Havelková worked as a researcher in the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences. In 1996, she joined the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in Prague (FHS UK), which was also when she met Věra, starting together the first academic department of Gender Studies in the Czech Republic. They remained close colleagues and friends until Hana's retirement from FHS UK in 2018. During her more than twenty years at FHS UK, Hana formulated many original and complex arguments about feminist political philosophy, gender theory of culture and society, feminist epistemology, women in science, and the representation of women in politics, media, and public discourse. For many scholars across disciplines, especially those who had the privilege to work with her directly, she was a continual source of intellectual and personal inspiration.

Hana considered feminism to be "an important part of modern thought, an intellectual paradigm, the application of which does not simply provide an alternative view of gender questions, but also of a much broader social and cultural context, of the nature of institutions, of the periodisation of history, and so forth."<sup>5</sup> The thematic breadth and analytical depth of her scholarship is impressive. She invited her readers to read and think critically about relations between the individual and society and our place in society. She put great emphasis on the institutional aspect of feminist analysis. She was interested in the production of expert knowledge and its influence on the functioning of the socialist system. In all her texts and research projects, she focused her systematic and analytical attention on tensions, paradoxes, and discontinuities. Her prime concern was the relationship between abstract concerns and lived experiences, such as the concept of citizenship and the position of women in socialist society,<sup>6</sup> the concept of patriarchy and the political representation of women in the post-socialist transformation,<sup>7</sup> or the concept of state feminism and socialist emancipated womanhood.<sup>8</sup>

Hana's texts were unique for their complexity, depth, and systematic and bold writing style. Her argumentation was refined, theoretically grounded, and analytically probing. In the 1990s, when the vast majority of Czech feminist texts defined feminism as a struggle between men and women, Hana Havelková proclaimed, with her typical boldness, that "feminism is a method," which is to say that it is an epistemological method created and developed "in relative independence even of women's political practice . . . and extensively surpasses it."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, unlike most of her colleagues writing in the same period who turned exclusively to Anglo-American feminist discourse, she drew inspiration from Italian, German, Austrian, French, and Scandinavian feminisms, thus making her texts all the more exciting. It was Hana Havelková, who introduced Italian feminism and Rosi Braidotti as well as Austrian philosopher Herta Nagl-Docekal into Czech sociology in the 1990s.

It was also Hana who explicitly identified the tensions within the feminist debates of the 1990s as a problem of the unreflected interaction between "Western theory" and "Eastern reality." She criticized the "enlightened activism" of some "enthusiastic Western feminists," arguing that "[i]f, there is on the one hand a reality without a theory, . . . there is on the other hand a theory without reality, meaning the universalist tone of Western theories that constantly speak about 'a man' and 'a woman' without situating them in a concrete social context."<sup>10</sup> She argued that the problem is not the use of "Western" feminist theoretical approaches as such, but their unreflected "direct application" to post-socialist societies without their proper contextualization and respect for the agency of women in these countries. Coping with the state-socialist past, and especially "the thematisation of our specific communist and post-communist experience from a gendered perspective,"<sup>11</sup> was one of the most important questions that Hana Havelková repeatedly posed in her scholarship and tirelessly strove to answer. Her ability to reformulate this crucial question, to hoist its sails in new directions, was a part of her intellectual greatness and inspiration.

Hana never stagnated in one place. On the contrary, the more sophisticated her arguments were, the more unexamined issues she identified, and, as a result, she was continuously broadening the scope of her research interests. Even after she retired, when it was clear that illness was winning over her body, she was immersed in work on her new book—a collection of her popular lectures on feminist theory.

In all of her writings and teaching, Hana Havelková consistently practiced the classic feminist dictum: the personal is political. She put great emphasis on the institutional aspect of feminist analysis. However, she never forgot that institutions are not merely an abstract concept and that they are full of active agents who exercise their power in concrete ways. She upheld this political dimension of her argumentation throughout her career through her active engagement in state institutions and civil society organizations. She worked for the European UNESCO Center for Education in Human Rights, was a member of



the Board of Trustees of the NGO Gender Studies o.p.s. and served on the Czech Government Councils for Equal Opportunities and for the Representation of Women in Politics. For many years, she served as the chairwoman of the Czech Helsinki Committee and a co-editor of *L'Homme: Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft/European Journal of Feminist History*.

We will all miss the greatness of her spirit, her generosity, empathy, relentless energy, and endless optimism. The legacy of Hana Havelková, however, and the values she cared about will remain a source of inspiration for generations to come.

## ◆ Notes

1. Hana Havelková, "Affidamento," in *Feminismus devadesátých let českýma očima* [Feminism of the 1990s through Czech Eyes], ed. Marie Chřibková, Josef Chuchma, and Eva Klimentová (Prague: One Woman Press, 1999), 46–64, here 46.

2. Havelková and Libora Oates-Indruchová, eds., *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism: An Expropriated Voice* (London: Routledge, 2014).

3. "Gender v sociálních vědách a otázky feminizmu" [Gender in social sciences and feminist concerns], *Sociologický časopis* 31, no. 1 (1995). Thematic issue.

4. Havelková, "Ženské hnutí a genderová kultura v Česku 1989–2003" [The women's movement and gender culture in Czechia, 1989–2003] (paper presented at the Aspekt conference, Bratislava, 27 November 2003).

5. Havelková, "Lectures on Feminism at Charles University," in *Czech Sociological Review* 7, no. 2 (1999), 258–259, here 258.

6. Havelková, "Dimenze 'gender' ve vztahu soukromé a veřejné sféry" [The gender dimension in the relationship between the public and the private], *Sociologický časopis* 31, no. 1 (1995), 25–36; Havelková, "Abstract Citizenship? Women and Power in the Czech Republic," *Social Politics* 3, no. 2–3 (1996), 243–260.

7. Havelková, "'Patriarchy' in Czech Society," *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (1993), 89–96; Havelková, "Jako v loterii: politická reprezentace žen v ČR po roce 1989" [Like in a lottery: Women's political participation in the Czech Republic after 1989], in *Mnohohlasem: vyjednávání ženských prostorů po roce 1989* [Polyphony: Negotiating women's spaces after 1989], ed. Hana Hašková, Alena Křížková, and Marcela Linková (Prague: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, 2006), 25–42.

8. Havelková, "Mezi pragmatismem a ideologií—obrana socialisticky emancipovaného ženství" [Between pragmatism and ideology: A defense of the socialist-emancipated womanhood], in *Tordošijnost myšlenky: Od feministické kriminologie k teorii genderu* [The insistence of thought: From feminist criminology to gender theory], ed. Libora Oates-Indruchová (Prague: Sociologické nakladatelství, 2011), 87–101.

9. Havelková, "Kdo se bojí feministické filozofie?" [Who is afraid of feminist philosophy?] *Filozofický časopis* [The Philosophical Journal] 40, no. 5 (1992), 729–740, here 731.

10. Havelková, "Abstract Citizenship?" 244.

11. Havelková, "Náměty k diskusi o českém genderovém kontextu" [Suggestions for a discussion on the Czech gender context], in *Ročenka katedry genderových studií FHS UK v Praze 2005–2006* [The yearbook of the Department of Gender Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague, 2005–2006], ed. Blanka Knotková-Čapková (Prague: Katedra genderových studií FHS UK, 2007), 108–124, here 108.