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**WHAT'S IN A NAME?
FEMINIST DISCOURSES IN THE
REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
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What's in a name? Feminist discourses in the Republic of Slovenia

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for Vesna, Natalija, Alenka, Darja, Maja and Ursula

(...) stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus.
(Eco 1983: 502)

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Points of Departure

When discussing anthropology of gender (or “feminist anthropology” – which, under that name, as I argued elsewhere, could not exist [Boskovic 1996b: 204-206 in response to Moore 1988: 188; see also Moore 1994 and Mathieu 1991a, 1991b]), relatively few scholars ventured into the former East European (communist) countries. When they do (like Einhorn 1993), they have serious problems in understanding pattern of behavior that differ considerably from the ones that they are used to. This is partly because of the lack of knowledge of language, and partly because of the presence of cultural patterns that for most people educated in the “mainstream” Western anthropological tradition seem difficult to comprehend. However, an actual investigation into a specific case (feminism in Slovenia) could offer interesting insights – both anthropology (as study of the other) and feminism rely on the notion of difference, and they both try (sometimes without much success) to raise awareness and respect for differences. Feminist studies has established themselves within anthropology from the late 1960s, and they could also offer interesting insights into our understanding of the social structure and processes in the former East European countries.

This paper is a product of my research in 1995 in Slovenia. I ended up with Slovenian feminists as a “wild tribe” to be studied for my Ph.D. primarily because at the time (mid-1990s) I believed that postmodern approaches which intersect with the feminist ones can offer us (anthropologists, social scientists, interested by-standers, etc.) a wealth of new directions for the future research. I do not hold this view any more, although it is reflected in one of my recent articles (Boskovic 1998c). I came to the conclusion that the use of terms “modernism” and “postmodernism” is very risky outside architecture – the only area where these terms are properly defined (Boskovic 1998a).¹ “Feminism” is a tricky one as well. In the West, it can mean almost anything, but in the former eastern European countries it mostly assumes negative connotations. Part of the problem is a perception of feminists as men-hating boring women devoid of any femininity, and another part lies in the prevailing attitudes towards women’s rights movements in the former communist countries. Following Helen Baber, I take as my working definition (Western) feminism as: “the doctrine that, insofar as possible, societies should be organized in such a way that men and women have the same opportunities at the same costs. This does not mean merely that the same options should be available to men and women but that the odds of achieving the same results should be equal for men and women in the aggregate and that no individuals should have to pay more heavily than others for exercising their options in virtue of their gender” (1993: 47). In recent years, different feminist groups throughout former Eastern European countries tried a variety of strategies, and most of them concentrated primarily on *building up a space for themselves*. This was done in different ways – some were very exclusive (if you are male, you cannot lecture at the Center for Women’s Studies in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, for example), and some were less so (the Center for Women’s Studies in Zagreb, Croatia). In any case, the exclusivism also brought charges (primarily in the academic sphere) that in some cases women were promoting other women simply because of their gender – not because of their scholarly qualities.

¹ Having said that, I have to note that there are authors who combine what could be labeled as “postmodern” style in anthropology with the study of some “classical” topics, such as kinship, in the most excellent way – such as Marilyn Strathern in her book *The Gender of the Gift*.

Charges of exclusivism probably do not stand for Slovenia – in part because most of the feminist authors have been incorporated in the institutional life – through teaching, work, etc. However, there is a sense of detachment from the “mainstream” of the society – and I hope to demonstrate the origins of this sense in this paper, as well as to present an outsider’s perspective on the feminist scene in Slovenia. I concentrated on two issues that were hot topics in 1994 and 1995 (as well as later, when it comes to the consequences, as well as the role played by various institutions) – the sun tan lotion advertisement and the Maternity Law debate.² Both cases provide examples of prejudices, the role of stereotypes, as well as (in the case of the advertisement) a certain inability of the feminists to relate to wider segments of the population. The basic question that I was asking was: what does it mean to be male and what does it mean to be female in Slovenia? How do different genders represent and “define” themselves – both in an idealized and in a practical sense.

Defining “Feminists”

Woman is by her very being more conservative, representing better her own species than herself, she does not like abstract things — that is why we, men, tell her that she is not logical (and she really is not!), she intuitively realizes the right position, she is very emotional, etc.

(Bozo Skerlj, “Men and women: Is the woman less valid?” [1929]; quoted in Zavirsek 1994: 160)

To declare oneself as a “feminist” in Slovenia can be quite risky. On the one hand, it can earn oneself some prestige in intellectual (especially academic) circles. On the other hand, this does rely to a great extent on the social milieu that a person is situated in. Intellectuals (women³) can be “feminists,” but then the question arises as to whether they actually become enclosed (and their respective discourses⁴ encapsulated)

² I am indebted to Alenka Svab for the first information on the Maternity Law debate. An analysis of the sun tan lotion campaign was published in the *New Moment* magazine (Boskovic 1998b).

³ Unlike in the West, men (at least, a great majority of them, and this does include intellectuals) do not consider themselves as “feminists” — the word can be used in a derogatory sense when applied to them. The Slovenian word **feminizem** is a male-gender noun, while the derivatives **feminist** and **feministka** are of male and female gender respectively.

Slovenian intellectuals are usually (the exception are writers) people with second-degree University level education or higher (the equivalent of British M.Phil., as well as Ph.D.). They have a comparatively well-paid jobs — usually within the Universities (there are two Universities in Slovenia, University of Ljubljana, and University of Maribor), or research institutes. Their higher earnings and this job security clearly set them apart from the majority of population. This perhaps contributes to a sense of isolation, which makes their discourses very different from the ones that one would normally encounter in everyday conversations.

⁴ By “feminist discourses,” I mean all the discourses that address the questions relating to the disproportion of powers and rights, inasmuch they relate to the gender. For the working definition of feminism, I again refer to Baber (1993:47). The aim of these discourses should be, among other things, “that a female applicant’s chances of being hired as a dishwasher, computer salesperson, gardener, mail room clerk or fork-lift operator should be the same as male applicant’s. It means in addition that women should not have to work harder than men to get the same recognition, or undertake a “double-shift” if they work outside the home, or forego having children in order to have a career, or be [the] subject of isolation, ridicule or harassment

within their own social group. Within the group, everyone understands everyone else, and everyone knows what the point of discussion is — but the further one gets away from the group, the less intelligible these discourses become, and the more it seems that the people involved in them are just talking to themselves (something like talking to one's own image in the mirror). Finally, there are large segments of society (middle class, working class, people without higher education) to whom feminist discourses mean nothing at all. In everyday life, even the intellectuals tend to shy away from using the “f” word (Salecl 1995:46).

To give an example of the attitudes towards feminism, in a 1995 televised debate on the greater inclusion of women in politics, the arguments were stressing the “biological superiority” as the reason why women should take the most powerful and decision-making positions in politics. It is exactly because they are women and (as such) have specific characteristics which define them as women: greater patience, good intuition, greater ability to cooperate and to listen to “the other side,” etc., that they should be given important positions and greater responsibilities. So the (wished for) greater participation of women in everyday political life has nothing to do with their professional capabilities, but a lot with their (biological or socially constructed⁵) nature. On the other hand, it has to be stressed that some feminists in Slovenia do occasionally take the “biological argument” in order to justify the need for more women in the decision-making places, in politics, legislature, etc. They seem to be lost when the same “biological arguments” are used against the women in general.⁶

This “biologically-centered” view of men and women (and the differences between them) is a legacy of both the communist ideology (Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia since Slovenians decided to unite with Croats and Serbs in 1918; the communist ideology was the official state ideology in Yugoslavia from 1945 until its dissolution in 1991) and the specific world view stressed by the influential representatives of the Catholic church. On the one hand, during the communist period, equality was officially proclaimed — although it did not persist in the everyday life. Of course, certain positive things that happened in this period (like the introduction of day-care and kindergartens, maternity leave, equal pay for the same work, etc.) did improve the position of women, but with all this the problem of gender inequality did not disappear, it just became less visible. Patriarchal ideology⁷ was still incorporated in all segments of the society. To quote from Renata Salecl:

For example, the liberalization of abortion did not come into being as a realization of a woman's right, but as a primarily hygienic measure,

if they succeed in obtaining “non-traditional” jobs. It means, in short that the male/female playing field should be level” (Baber, *ibid.*). I understand the contemporary feminist discourses in the Republic of Slovenia to be oriented exactly towards making “the playing field” level. But it is not the understanding of the majority of Slovenian people, a point to which I will come back later.

⁵ It is clear that in the present (Slovenian) context the female “biological” self is actually a social construction. That is to say, women are *expected to be patient, intuitive, cooperative and to listen to the others* — it certainly does not mean that it is always (or even in the majority of cases) happening.

⁶ I am very grateful to Vesna Godina for pointing this out to me.

⁷ This is a term relatively frequently used by Slovenian feminists, as well as the phrase “androcentric culture.” Although it seems to me that both terms lack a proper definition and might be too general, I will use them when referring to writings of feminist authors that do use them — like Salecl in this instance (cf. also Jogan 1990, 1991, 1994b, as well as Jogan and Sadl 1994).

which both put an end to illegal abortions and enabled women to quickly return to work. Socialism promoted a specific type of women — revolutionaries, communist activists — who entered politics through a system of quotas. This was the image of a woman dressed in a grey suit, without any make-up, and who was also a die-hard proponent of communism. (1995: 46)

The problem is, as Salecl said, that in Slovenia the word “feminist” provokes exactly the same set of associations and imagery, feminists being described as sexually frustrated women deprived of any femininity. In this context, whenever the word is used in Slovenia, it is necessary to stress that feminism does not actually advocate the extermination of men — just the equal treatment of women. It is hardly surprising then that the TV presenter (a woman) of the debate referred to above, quickly pointed out that “of course, there is no feminism involved here!”

Debating Women: Sexism and the Feminist Rhetoric

What’s in a name? asks Juliet, who is a woman and knows the tide, the ebb and flow, the pull of the real.

(de Lauretis 1987: 51)

The emergence of feminist groups⁸ in Slovenia is to a large extent associated with the “pro-democracy” movements that originated in the then northernmost part of Yugoslavia in the early 1980s. A variety of independent groups started questioning the “technologies of power” (cf. Longinovic 1994), as well as the foundations of the official (i. e., communist) ideological discourse. As the most important date for the emergence of feminist groups in Slovenia, one should probably take the theoretical supplement of the independent weekly *Mladina* published in March 1985 with several feminist articles (Mirjana Ule in Bahovec 1993a: 122). The emergence of first independent women’s groups immediately followed.

These groups were associated usually with the Socialist Youth organizations (like the ZSMS) or their offshoots, although they had no official ideological (in terms of party politics) platform of their own.⁹ Some more radical groups (primarily associated with the gay and lesbian movement, like the “LL lesbian group” or “Lilith”) were marginalized even within these early groups, who were mostly consisting of the middle or upper class well educated urban women or university students. In the ideological sense, most of these early groups were still within the framework of

⁸ Among them still active in the late 1980s and early 1990s were: “Lilith,” “Lezbicna LL skupina,” Zenska sekcija pri Socioloskem drustvu, “SOS telefon za zenske — zrtve nasilja,” “Inicijativa,” “Prenner klub,” “Zenske za politiko,” “Zenska inicijativa/Iniziativa delle donne,” “Zenske z idejami,” and others (cf. Parliament of the Republic of Slovenia et. al. 1992: 45-53, Office for Women’s Policy 1995h: 12, 1995f). Several political parties have women’s caucuses, but there is no institutional organizing of the women MPs. However, it has to be noted that women form 14% of the members of the Slovenian parliament, as well as 22% of the leaders of various parliamentary committees, and they have 15% of elected ministerial posts.

⁹ They all shared the emphasis on the heterogeneity and pluralism of discourses, as well as questioning of the dominant narratives — gradually endorsing multi-party elections (which happened in Slovenia in 1990).

Marxist ideology, although more and more tended to see that the problems of inequality do not have to do exclusively with questions of class domination and class struggle.

However, these groups did not readily describe themselves as “feminist.” The notion of feminism implied throughout the former Yugoslavia something that was a “dangerous import from the West” (Malesevic 1989: 83). This a priori negative attitude in the former Yugoslavia was caused, on the one hand,

by an authoritarian-patriarchal complex of the whole culture and the in-built idea of the “otherness” and the lesser value of women, who were considered incapable of participating in the areas that “naturally” belonged to men. On the other hand, the official antagonism towards feminism as a primarily bourgeois phenomenon has its roots in the pre-war¹⁰ Yugoslav revolutionary movement. The feminists (...) never [theoretically] questioned [the basics of] the actual [capitalist] political system, despite severely criticizing it in practice.

(Malesevic 1989: 84)

Taking into account all this, it is not very surprising that the official (communist, post-WW II) ideology rejected the feminist movement as something that was not for or from “the people” (in Serbian and Croatian: *nenarodno*), and something essentially elitist (Malesevic, *ibid.*). Therefore, it is not very surprising to find the aforementioned hostility and uneasiness about “feminism,” despite the fact that many people (especially women) who feel uneasy about the term would not recognize it as coming from the previous dominant narratives. This uneasiness is especially visible in the writings of Jogan and some other authors of the “Marxist” wing of Slovenian feminists. This tradition was based upon the idea that there are no specific “women’s issues” — all the issues had to do with the society as a whole and the injustices within the social sphere (i. e., women should have equal pay for equal work, proper health and child care, etc.). There should be no political organizing of women (cf. the example that Ule quotes in Bahovec 1993a: 121), since it would only muddle up the otherwise clear situation. Consequently, all the problems will be solved when the more general issues related to society as a whole are dealt with.

This situation is even more interesting when one looks at the Slovenian feminists and the traditions that they come from: the “Marxist” wing was incorporated in the official ideological discourses, and there was no official displeasure at the research conducted by them. On the other hand, the “psychoanalytical” wing (Bahovec and the authors around the journal *Delta*, Salecl, etc.) was regarded as potentially dangerous and obstructive.¹¹ Any questioning of the underlying ideological discourses that enabled the gender bias was seen as a potential threat for the “official” ideology. Even after the fall of communism in Slovenia, this uneasiness is obviously present, for example in the fact that there are still no established gender studies programs in Slovenian universities.

I have shown so far how different images combine in current feminist discourses in Slovenia. The points of view are dependent on one’s education, background, as well as on gender. The view that women are the “gentler sex” (until quite recently, the anchorman at the main evening TV news was beginning the

¹⁰ WW II, to be exact.

¹¹ Again, I wish to emphasize the *plurality* of feminist discourse: for example, I would regard authors like Zavirsek today as “post-Marxist” — and there are certainly great differences *within* the two influential groups that are mentioned here. On the other hand, there are important authors like Dragica Korade or Mojca Dobnikar who do not easily fit within these categories.

broadcast with “*Dear female viewers and respected male viewers*”¹²!) goes side by side with instances of violence and mistreatment, and the view that men and women are equal goes side by side with feelings that they are different *biologically* (“How can we be equal? Men can’t have babies!”). The biological trap is the most obvious one for the feminist authors that demand more rights based on maternity leave, additional pay etc. and then speak about equality in ideal terms.

What does it mean to be male and what does it mean to be female is something that is woven into all levels of education — from kindergarten through the primary school. At a 1994 round table debate on sexism in the Slovenian language, Milena Blazic pointed out the history of the different approaches to boys and girls in education. In Slovenia, this can be traced as far back as 1842 (in the Slomsek Reader for the Sunday Schools). The pattern in which boys are encouraged to be assertive, self-confident, overt, and aggressive — while girls are supposed to be quiet, obedient, accommodating, and gentle can also be traced through the elementary school readers of Slovenian language published in 1909 and 1910. The most stunning for Ms Blazic, however, was that the same pattern was replicated in the 1992 reader¹³ for 8 and 9-year olds.

The book is divided in two parts: for the girls, Mojcas, ¹⁴*I shall become a famous princess today* [*Danes bom slavna princeska postala*], while the second part is entitled *The knight is coming* [*Vitez na obisku*], for Andrejs (...). The first part contains primarily the stories where the main characters are girls: Sanjas, Nokas, Veronikas, Spelas, animals like goats and squirrels, stories like I am more beautiful (...). The second part is for Andrej, a brave knight. Almost exclusively boys appear here: Jan, Janko, Martin Krpan, Peter Klepec, Brkonja Celjustnik, Drejcek and three Martians (...)

(Milena Blazic in Office for Women’s Policy 1995c: 21; footnote added)

As noted elsewhere, and using the same example:

There are twice as many fairy tales in the first part [of the book] as in the second [one], there is more on sleeping and dreaming, it seems that the objects of the real world and their treatment are somehow more becoming for boys, in the second part. Taking the two parts together, there is half as much on female professions in comparison to male [ones], and a more elaborate analysis would show a whole range of other differences and contestable details (...)

(Drglin and Vendramin 1993: 56; cf. also Drglin in Bahovec 1993a: 153-154)

This corresponds to the view by several authors (Drglin, Vendramin, Bahovec, Ule) of the deeply embedded sexism present in the school system. It is almost as if

¹² In Slovenian: “*Drage gledalke in spostovani gledaoci*”(emphasis mine). The example was used by Professor Joze Vogrinc in his paper at the International conference *Democracy and Gender: Question of Gender and Citizenship*, on 9 November 1995, Ljubljana. Cf. also Office for Women’s Policy 1995c: 12-15.

¹³ This is a third-grade reader which is used throughout the country.

¹⁴ Mojca and Andrej are very common names for girls and boys, respectively.

“anything goes” when the boys are concerned. (“He is supposed to be naughty! He’s a boy!”) In several cases, boys would refuse to read from the first part of the above mentioned reader: “I won’t read that! That is for girls!” But they are able to get away with it.

Teachers tend to encourage boys much more than girls. As a result, girls tend to feel less confident in themselves, even when they actually show better results and get better marks. According to Zalka Držlin (in Bahovec 1993a: 146), there are no obvious gender stereotypes on the level of the “official” curriculum. However, she claims that there is a “hidden curriculum,” which incorporates all the mechanisms of gender stereotyping and gender-based segregation. These are easy to measure and prove, as seen in the previous example, so there is clearly a possibility for these elements of the “hidden curriculum” to get into the “official” one.

The Hidden “Factor”

The spring and summer of 1995 were marked by, among other things, a debate about an advertisement for a sun tan lotion: a poster featuring the backsides of five girls in bikinis. The accompanying text was: “Each one has her own factor” (“VSAKA IMA SVOJ FAKTOR”), with the obvious stress that the word “factor” could be interpreted as a different level of sun block protection, as well as (on the other side) stressing a difference between five backsides belonging to different girls in different bikinis. On the other hand, the Slovenian word *faktor* (“factor”) also implies something that puts something into motion. Therefore, the image of five almost naked backsides implies that each one of them has something (i. e., a penis) that would put them “in motion.” Therefore, the poster could also read: “Each one has her own *penis*.”¹⁵

It is easy to see why the campaign caused an outrage among some feminist groups, articulated mostly through the Office for Women’s Policy. Somewhat surprisingly, the debate about the creation of the “denigrating imagery” of women did not polarize the public opinion: I was a little bit surprised to find out (in my interviews as well as in the interviews conducted by the Slovenian media) that both men and women felt largely indifferent towards the ad or just liked it. Some women felt that there was something wrong with it only when specifically asked to elaborate on the image of five female backsides on posters all over the country.

Two things seem to be combined here:

- 1/ The image of five almost naked parts of female anatomy represents something “other” (just an advertisement), different, belonging to a different reality from the one that everyday people live in. In a way, *the image belongs to a different culture*, and as such does not threaten the (actual or perceived) position of women. This is a culture of high paid chief executives, models, actors and actresses, “high culture” which stands apart from what the ordinary people perceive to be “theirs.”¹⁶
- 2/ The obvious fact that there is a gender hierarchy in wider Slovenian society (or, more precisely, *societies*) creates a situation (well known from numerous

¹⁵ Although this line of interpretation was criticized by Irena Weber in Piran in September 1998, I think that it is supported by the “male” version of the same ad in 1997 (“EACH ONE HAS HIS OWN FACTOR”), when the males were displayed *from the front*.

¹⁶ Of course, this does not imply that the majority of people would regard this “high culture” as non-Slovenian or in any way “foreign” — it just represents “the other” in regard to the norms with which they identify themselves. These can be understood as Baudrillard’s “silent majorities.”

anthropological examples) in which the sub-dominant group identifies itself through the concepts and discourse of the dominant group (or segment of the society). In this case, women perceive themselves through men's eyes (the sexual symbolism inscribed all over the poster) and see nothing wrong with that. That is the only way in which they are able to see themselves — and that is why criticism coming from women's groups fell on deaf ears.

On the one hand, there is a whole new reality (or hyperreality) being constructed (and actually lived!) here: the reality of men's gaze as something "normal," "natural," or even "neutral." Although this reality is there (in the "real life"), its existence is not readily acknowledged — and the majority of women would not agree with this statement. But feminist scholars certainly would. How men see women is "the norm" — *both for men and for women*. On the other hand, the objections to the language and the (sexist) implications of the ad are perceived as belonging to the same "high culture" as the image itself. As such, it is also constructed as "the other" in relation to everyday lives (people did not pay much attention to it prior to the debate anyway), and has no actual relevance to the "lived" (as opposed to perceived) reality. This was clearly correlated to the small minority of people who did have problems with this sun tan poster: the higher one stood on the social level, the more likely it was that she/he would be offended or in some way disturbed by this ad.

Therefore, feminist critique and feminist discourses in general tend to be perceived as a part of "high culture" as well. Of course, this does create certain problems for the women (feminist scholars and authors) wishing to speak for other women as well (although leading feminist scholars have undoubtedly experienced sexism personally, most of them seem to be well-established professionally, with permanent, full-time teaching posts, etc.) — but they tend to find themselves in opposition to traditional discourses, traditional culture, and traditional prejudices. This is where the problem of naming comes in: most of the relatively recent articles and discussions tend to focus on the questions regarding terminology and the methodological problems associated with it (Ule 1988, Zavirsek 1991, 1995, Bahovec 1992, Jalusic 1992: 121 ff, etc.).

This also brings us to the issue of the sexist (or non-sexist) use of language. The analysis of the job advertisements in the daily *Delo* for the six-months periods (January 1 to June 30) in 1988, 1991, 1992 and 1993, shows that only 4.1% of the jobs were advertised using both male and female gender, or a third (neutral) gender form. On the contrary, 88.4% of the jobs were advertised using the male gender only — particularly the ones for the managerial positions, as well as for the jobs that require higher level of education (Office for Women's Policy 1995b: 63). With all this, one has to bear in mind the relative high proportion of women among the total number of employed (48.4%). A recent debate organized by the Office for Women's Policy (a Government agency founded in 1992, which has an enormous impact in the feminist debates, supporting the publication of various books and monographs on gender-related issues, organizing conferences and round tables, etc.) highlighted the differences between the linguists and the feminist scholars (Office for Women's Policy 1995b). Even the question that there is such a thing as a "sexist" use of language was questioned.

Interpreting Women: Legacy of the Past

Public discourse dominated by nationalist ideologies and often sanctified by the church defines the family as the basis of the ethnic or wider national group, and gives it, and women as mothers within it, a mission in the name of that community. The overburdened worker-mothers of state socialism have become the revered mothers of newly nationalist democracies.

(Einhorn 1993: 7)

A very important influence for understanding gender relations in Slovenia is the legacy of the Catholic Church. In fact, the very beginnings of anthropology in Slovenia (primarily associated with the name of Dr Bozo Skerlj) are connected with the ideological discussions about gender differences and differentiation (cf. Zavirsek 1994: 161 ff). Skerlj, who published his works that would today be broadly classified as falling within the parameters of “gender studies” mostly in the 1920s and 1930s,¹⁷ was a radical proponent of eugenics (which he saw as a way of improving the “quality” of the society that he was living in) and some of his views can well be classified as fascist. However, he was continuing a line of thinking (started with the Slovenian sociologists of Catholic orientation) that accepted the gender hierarchy as something “given,” as something already “there” (in the “real world”), so that the only thing that the scholars could do was not to question this hierarchy, but to try to explain it.¹⁸ If the hierarchy was there, the thinking was, god had something to do with it. Therefore, the gender hierarchy is a part of his original design. But why is it so? In order to give the right answer to this question, social scientists from the late 19th and the early 20th century had to, basically, justify the norms and regulations of the society they were living in. These justifications and explanations were, according to Maca Jogan “supposed to contribute to the harmonization of society in general, and to peaceful relations between the genders. By these explanations, rooted in the Thomist doctrine, the ‘proper’ answers regarding the burning demands of equal rights (in the field of economy, politics, education) for both genders were constructed” (1994a: 90). To quote further from the same article:

These explanations have been justifying male authority [on all levels] from the family to the state, and even in Heaven, by stressing the “natural” role of the woman as mother and housewife with specific basic personal characteristics ([she was supposed] to be obedient, passionate, modest, suffering, awe-stricken). The constant advocacy of women’s domestication also presented the basis for the evaluation of women’s entrance into the public sphere. Women’s public activity was allowed only if they were aware and prepared to accept their primary “natural” role. In this way, the notion of the material and moral overburdening of women who are also active outside home has been established as a self-evident (i.e. natural) fact (Jogan 1990).

¹⁷ For the specific references, cf. the Bibliography in Zavirsek 1994: 297-298.

¹⁸ Of course, this also has to be seen within the rising dangers that the emergence of the first feminist groups created in Slovenia (which was until 1918 part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire); the first Slovenian women’s organization was formed in 1887 as a part of a worker’s syndicate in Trieste. The Association of Slovenian Women Teachers was formed in 1898, and the Women’s General Association in 1901 (Jogan 1994a: 95n).

(Jogan 1994a: 90-91)

Although this kind of legacy is not present among the social scientists today (quite the contrary, a great majority of them being left-wing, Marxist or post-Marxist oriented), it is very prevalent in everyday discourses (on the street, in the bars, cafés, etc. — Slovenian girls definitively do not want to be described as “feminist”¹⁹). The situation on the political scene is quite different: with the emergence of a multi-party system, the Catholic Church tried (successfully, as some of the recent debates indicate) to put its weight and influence behind different right-wing parties like the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, etc.

As a direct consequence of the growing importance of the Catholic Church in political life,²⁰ an interesting coalition of “pro-life” organizations and parties like the Christian Democrats came up with the proposal that maternity leave should last three years. This is (according to all feminist scholars whom I have met, as well as for Salecl 1995: 47) a highly unusual example of the right-wing parties and organizations demanding women’s rights. The question of the three-year maternity leave (which I will outline below)²¹ was presented as a matter of “free choice” (that is to say, any woman could freely choose whether she wanted to be a mother or a career woman).²² This debate became connected to the one about universal child benefits. Proponents of the latter suggested that it would mean that all children would be treated as “equal,” forgetting that just as all people are not equal when it comes to their social status, so their children cannot be equal. As a matter of fact, poor families would (if the new proposal becomes law) get up to 40% less in child benefit than they do now (Salecl 1995: 47)!²³ The proposal of a law that would effectively ban abortion was defeated, but the doctors are given the opportunity to (at any point that they might choose) of becoming “conscientious objectors” and simply refusing to perform it, or give their patient any information on it. The paradoxical situation is that many rights that were taken for granted during the communist era (and a freedom to decide how many children a woman [or should I say: a couple] will have is certainly one of the more

¹⁹ But they certainly have nothing against having equal opportunities and equal pay to their male counterparts.

²⁰ Although not necessarily in everyday life — Jogan (1994a) strongly argues that Slovenia is actually becoming a more secularized society. Here is an example of a specific “clash of values” — on the one hand, the rural and predominantly patriarchal households where girls are frequently told to go to religious schools (while boys are given much more choice); on the other, urban communities where secularization is “the way of life” and the legacy of the previously dominant communist (atheist) ideology still very strong.

²¹ The materials, opinions, survey results, etc. were published in Office for Women’s Policy, Government of the Republic of Slovenia 1995a. The surveys of the representative sample of the population conducted in January 1995 indicated that 41.7% of the respondents believed that the three-year maternity leave would have a negative impact on the possibilities for young women to get jobs (as opposed to 19.7% who believed it might have a positive impact). Even more, 50.6%, believed that this would hinder women’s possibilities for promotions — as opposed to 7.9%, who thought that it might have a positive impact (Office for Women’s Policy, Government of the Republic of Slovenia 1995a: 13).

²² Of course, not much of the “free” or “choice” would remain after the position in which a woman looking for a job would be put after a three-year maternity leave.

²³ Salecl (*ibid.*) quotes an example from the women’s magazine *Jana*: a family with three children with parents on minimum wage currently gets 21,000 SIT (approximately £ 120) in child benefits. However, if the new law would come into effect, from January 1996 the same family would get only 13,600 SIT (approximately £ 71).

obvious ones) are suddenly becoming the subjects of debates. These debates frequently have very strong political overtones, since everything connected with the communist past (pre-1991 Slovenia) tends to be equated by the right and the nationalist parties as a priori bad and something that should have perished with the communist system. This is definitely not a view with which neither feminist authors nor a significant number of women would agree. As summed up by a prominent Slovenian journalist: “In spite of all the slander, we have to admit that the old regime had guaranteed a firm level of social and economic rights to women, even if some were, politically at least, more equal than others” (Korade 1994: 36).

On 24 December 1994, three members of the Slovenian Parliament²⁴ proposed some changes to the Work Relations Law — more specifically, to the part which covers maternity leave and leave granted for the care of children. Following Alenka Svab (1995, 1996a)²⁵, I will refer to this proposal and to this part of the Work Relations Law as the Slovenian Maternity Leave Law (SMLL).

As the proponents of change put it, Article 80 of the Slovenian Work relations Law stipulates that the (female) worker²⁶ is guaranteed 365 days as a maternity leave: 105 days before and 260 days after the childbirth. Taking into account the fact that fewer children are born in Slovenia every year (in 1979: 30,604; in 1984: 26,274; in 1990: 22,638; in 1993: 19,982), and that this actually endangers physical survival of the Slovenian nation (Office for Women’s Policy 1995a: 8),²⁷ the following changes to the Article 80 were proposed:

- 1/ That the leave for the care of a child should last 36 months instead of 105 days; and
- 2/ That instead of taking the leave, mother or father would work part-time until a child is 65 months old.

In effect, the proposed changes were supposed to influence positively both the Slovenian population policy and (by extending the maternity leave) the employment situation (since Slovenia, like many other post-communist countries, faces problems connected with the transition of the economy). The reasoning went as follows: if women would just take care of the children, they would at the same time “free” additional working places. Therefore, the proposed changes were supposed to contribute both to the physical survival (and regeneration) of the Slovenian nation, and, at the same time, to its economic well-being. In a situation that can be related to Anastasia Karakasidou’s paper “Women of the family, women of the nation,” it was (again) the women that were supposed to bring “better times” for the whole nation.²⁸ The role of mothers was to be extended to the whole of society — by taking care of the young, they were contributing to the society’s future; by vacating jobs (while taking care of the young), they were contributing to its present.

A young Slovenian scholar, Natasa Djuric, pointed out in her Diploma Thesis some of the images of women in fascist and Nazi discourses. These images are strangely similar to the ones demanding that women find their “proper place” in the kitchen and, especially, through children. This imagery is readily associated with some of the most

²⁴ They are: Nada Skuk, Miroslav Mozetic, and Stefan Kociper from the Christian Democrat party.

²⁵ For the translation of the SMLL (based on Svab 1995), see the Appendix.

²⁶ In Slovenian: **delavka**.

²⁷ The phrase “physical survival of the Slovenian nation” was not actually used by the MPs proposing the changes. They point to the fact that for the “renewing of population” (in Slovenian: “*za obnavljanje prebivalstva*”) at least 30,000 children need to be born every year.

²⁸ Cf. also Einhorn 1993: 221-224.

oppressive social and political systems in human history.²⁹ For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, Mussolini raised taxes for the single people and childless couples, and instituted money rewards for every new child. “The more children, the better,” was the message, and it was considered particularly convenient if families would have more than four children — since in that case it was assumed that they (the children) would also be healthier. “Fertile” mothers were especially highly regarded — just before the 1937 New Year, 95 largest families in Italy were awarded money prizes and special medals (Djuric in Bahovec 1993a: 60).

Following some of the arguments and examples that the late Wilhelm Reich used in his *Mass Ideology of Fascism*, Djuric also traces the identification of motherland with mother. In these discourses, mothering is seen as the main function of the woman, and the image of woman as a mother and protector is subsequently projected onto the state. This protector then has its “chosen representatives”— for example, when Hitler was asked when he intended to get married, he replied: “I am already married. My wife is Germany” (quoted by Djuric in Bahovec 1993a: 62). The strength of a nation is judged by, among other things, the number of its inhabitants. As a result of this, any proposals that might reduce the number of inhabitants (and anything dealing with birth control and reproductive rights of women!) can be regarded as hostile to the well-being of a nation. And nationalists are always quick to point this out.³⁰

The belief that women’s primary (“natural”) role is to be mothers was obvious among the legislators (one of whom was a woman) who suggested the change. In the debate that followed this proposal, it emerged that the majority of people who supported the changes were mostly oriented towards right-wing parties like the Christian Democrats (SKD) or the National Party (SNS) (*Office for Women’s Policy* 1995a: 40). Some of the articles and commentaries most bitterly denouncing the criticisms of the proposed changes were published in the National Party’s official newspaper, *Slovenec*.³¹ Their message was clear: women do have a place in the family — and that place is with children. This opinion is especially prevalent among the non-urban population. In general, as well as in the public opinion polls, the predominant views were quite different.

In public opinion polls, it emerged that 41.7% of the respondents thought that extending the maternity leave to three years would have an adverse effect on the employment opportunities of women, especially younger ones (as opposed to 19.7% who thought that it might have a positive effect). When asked about the possibilities for promotion, 50.9% thought that the proposed changes would have a negative effect on women — as opposed to just 7.9% who thought that it might have a positive effect (*Office for Women’s Policy* 1995a: 13).³² On the other hand, according to another opinion poll,³³ only a slight majority of the respondents (45.8% as opposed to 44.9%) were *against* the extension of the maternity leave. Doctors suggested that the ideal

²⁹ Cf. Einhorn 1993: 9 and Chapter 3 for the situation in East Central Europe. Serbian nationalists have also recently called upon the mothers to bear more children (Einhorn 1993: 105).

³⁰ Barbara Einhorn points at the fact that when the newly emerging states of East Central Europe started modifying and changing their legal systems, reproductive rights were very high on the list of priorities that needed to be erased from the recent communist past. In fact, they were second only to reversing the abolishment of private property.

³¹ Extensive extracts from the debate — especially regarding the articles and opinions published in daily newspapers — were published in *Office for Women’s Policy* 1995a.

³² The poll was conducted by the agency *Varianta* between 6 and 8 January 1995.

³³ This opinion poll was published in a daily *Delo* on 4. February 1995.

maternity leave would be 18 months, and most people had no problem with the idea of extending it to two years. So, while a significant proportion of the population believed that the status of women regarding maternity leave should be improved, they also (in most cases) disagreed with the way(s) in which the changes were proposed.

I used the phrase “status of women” quite intentionally — even though the SMLL is supposed to refer to both men and women. The connection between women and parenthood in general is implicit throughout the law. As a matter of fact, according to the data from December 1994, out of 15,631 individuals using this leave, only 77 (0.49%) were fathers! According to Alenka Svab, although the SMLL does offer a possibility for leave for men as well, this is presented in such a way that it actually indicates exceptional circumstances, and not something that can (and should) be a part of everyday practice.

This is done by placing the article about this possibility at the [very] end of the chapter. Therefore, the form of the law itself imposes the possibility that men (fathers) take child care leave as very rare and exceptional and thus imposes child care on mothers.

How deeply the role of mother is perceived not only as biologically grounded but also as closely linked to child care is seen in the use of two different formulations: the optional care taker (father) is mentioned as WORKER-father, while mother is mentioned as MOTHER-worker, emphasising stereotyped images of man’s work role (worker) and woman’s role as a mother.³⁴

(Svab 1996a: 8-9, footnote added)

Svab continues by pointing out that “[t]he content of the article which deals with father’s child care leave is also shaped in a way that [implies that] fathers are supposed to take child care leave only in exceptional cases.” These cases are: mother’s death, mother leaving the child, or mother being temporary or permanently incapable “for independent life and work.”

This [also] appears to be discriminating, since it implies that it is the mother who has to be capable for independent life and work, by which [the adjective] ‘independent’ further [implies] that men are not supposed to be involved in child care. The whole article is structured and defined according to the concept of mother-worker: men can take child care leave only on the basis of a previous agreement with mother, [or] when she cannot realise the role of child caring, which has been [“naturally” or “biologically”] ascribed to her.

(Svab 1996a: 9)

Some of the stereotypical images of *what does it mean to be a woman* are very obvious here. The dichotomy nature/culture is clearly superimposed onto the female/male one. The primary task of men is socialization, while women should take care of the children — except in very special and very specific circumstances. Men are supposed to be “public,” while women are supposed to be “private.”

³⁴ See also Einhorn 1993: 5, 40.

Conclusion

Most of the critical remarks from this paper could also be viewed from the perspective of other European legal systems. Overall, Slovenian women in many ways fare much better than woman in European countries – with the possible exception of the Scandinavian ones. However, some deeply embedded prejudices still persist, some have been renewed (the role of national consciousness-raising in the debates concentrating on *women as mothers*), and the problem of violence still remains unsolved (no designated shelters for battered women, no adequate legal protection – these issues are being constantly addressed by scholars like Darja Zavirsek). Some frictions among and between feminist groups still persist – some feminists regard lesbian groups as too aggressive and egotistic, claiming that they are actually ruining the image that the “other” feminists are trying to create. In turn, many lesbian activists feel left alone and abandoned, even though they perceive their actions as the only way of opening up certain issues in public.

Contemporary feminist discourses in Slovenia remind me of Eco’s *Name of the Rose*. What is a rose? Does it actually have a name? Similarly, what is feminism in Slovenia? Is it different from feminism elsewhere? The concept of differences (which is characteristic for both feminist and anthropological discourses) is of primary importance. There are also master narratives to be deconstructed (“women as mothers”), but I found the differences in approaches between the feminists³⁵ and the “others”³⁶ really fascinating. Both feminism and anthropology were marginalized by the communist authorities between 1945 and the late 1980s, and both are trying to reestablish themselves now. Some of the most prominent authors of anthropological texts³⁷ in Slovenia can be readily described as feminist: Vesna Godina, Darja Zavirsek, Jana Rosker. Researchers like Natalija Vrecer and Alenka Svab are engaged in some very important practical projects (in Natalija’s case, helping the refugees in Slovenia). Others, like Eva Bahovec and Vlasta Jalusic, are very much engaged in debates about the politics of the body and gender representation — all of which are very relevant for contemporary anthropology. The same goes for research on educational discourses — are “girls” and “boys” really different in the way that they *learn* and *perform* at school (Dunne and Johnstone 1992; Hacker 1992; for the Slovenian perspective, Drglin in Bahovec 1993a; Bahovec 1996) — or are all these just different realities that are *inscribed* on children (by their teachers, environment, curriculum, and so on)? The educational discourses are rightly seen by Slovenian feminist scholars as an area where gender biases and stereotypes are formed and emphasized. If these stereotypes are going to be abolished (as I believe they should), one would have to start with children. In all of these areas of research, anthropological insights and feminist perspectives are combined.

My research has convinced me that not only is there no single feminist perspective in Slovenia — there is not even something that can be labeled “a woman’s point of view.” A “feminist perspective” in Slovenia always means a specific feminist speaking in a specific place (site) about a certain issue from (her) particular perspective. There are multiple voices and multiple representations, the sum of which represents specifically Slovenian discourses on gender.

³⁵ I include here men (for example, associated with the Peace Institute, or with the Institute for Humanistic Studies in Ljubljana) as well.

³⁶ The majority of population.

³⁷ I use this awkward phrase because not all the scholars writing about anthropology are anthropologists — Zavirsek, for example, is a sociologist.

Slovenia, as a small and relatively “new” country, could provide an interesting case study on the (in)ability of certain social groups to adapt to the changing circumstances, as well as on the social changes that affect its feminist groups. In the Slovenian context, What does it mean to be a man? and What does it mean to be a woman? are questions loaded with layers of political significance, as well as some social/national issues. Thus, the answers to these also depend on a variety of variables, of interest to both feminists and social scientists in general.

The main problem that feminists face in Slovenia arises from the factual removal of certain segments of population (the majority in Slovenian case) from the theoretical discussions (a great majority of supporters of the “VSAKA IMA SVOJ FAKTOR” ad were women!³⁸) in which feminist scholars engage themselves. One can see levels of hyperreality here: the experience of “everyday women” leads to the debates which in turn remain completely incomprehensible to “everyday women.” In a sense, they can even reinforce a feeling of a gap between “everyday women” and intellectuals. Like two ships going without navigational equipment across the ocean in a dark and stormy night, the chance of them meeting at some point seems almost accidental. At the same time, the persistence that many of them show and the lessons that they have learned over the past years (primarily on how to cope with authoritarian concepts that form part of the state institutions) might mean that they just may succeed in raising the consciousness of new generations, preparing them to participate in an environment without prejudices based on gender, sexual preferences, nation or profession.

³⁸ I am grateful to Sandra Basic for pointing this out to me.

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