

Book Review

Melissa Feinberg.

Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1950.

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

It has been quite a century – give or take a few years – for women on the planet. In 1893, New Zealand was the first country to allow women to vote. Switzerland? Not until 1974. Kuwait? 2005. Others? Still waiting.

The United Nations has taken women's rights seriously, at the rhetorical level. But it's been fifteen years since the 4th International Conference in Beijing and women are still being stoned to death (although irregularly and sometimes under protest) in a number of Islamic countries.

Limited abortion rights have been available in the United States since *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and the theoretically unlimited right to choose has been the law (or, rather, the absence of law) in Canada since *R. v. Morgentaler* (1988). Still, "conservatives" in both countries have been trying very hard to slip restrictions in through any judicial or legislative "back door" that they can find.

Iconically, the inclusion of the phrase "girl power" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* was quickly followed by the failure of the American *Equal Rights Amendment* to win the required number of ratifications by states legislatures by 30 June, 1992. Girl power, of course, was associated with the popular British music group, the Spice Girls, which was composed of five moderately talented and physically attractive young women who traded on their sexuality and claimed it represented a new form of women's cultural independence. Whether it did any more than reinforce notions of women as sexual objects and extended this to the sexualization of girls (their biggest fans were between ten and fourteen-years-old is a matter of debate among popular culture enthusiasts. Meanwhile, in the United States, the *ERA*, which would have extended important constitutional rights to women was defeated by politicians who feared a public backlash because of a perceived threat to "traditional family values."

In some places, alpha-males are wringing their hands with testosterone-induced angst; in others women are not allowed to drive automobiles ... or go to school, or leave home unless escorted by a close male relative.

In such a world as this, it is helpful to escape the confines of our immediate social circles and see what is happening on other continents or in other cultures. In doing so, we might at least achieve what literary critic Kenneth Burke once called "perspective by incongruity.

Such an exercise (except, of course, for Czechs and Slovaks of a certain age) can be vicariously experienced through a reading of Melissa Feinberg's *Elusive Equality*.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have been a primal feminist ever since coming to grips with my hormones and the cultural distortions that came with them somewhere in my early twenties. So, I have a battered and well-thumbed edition of *The Second Sex* and a pristine copy of the first issue of *Ms.* magazine, which testify both to the sincerity and the probable superficiality of my belief in and understanding of the fundamental equality of the sexes.

I am, you see, always learning something new about gender relations, and Melissa Feinberg has added something of considerable value to that store of knowledge. Her book offers historical insights into the limitations on the rights of women, despite a comparatively generous Czechoslovakian constitution in the inter-war period. Championing equality in legal theory, while denying it in social practice is, of course, nothing new; and it was certainly not specific to that landlocked European country. Nonetheless, Feinberg's discussion of issues ranging from abortion rights to access to employment opportunities in the public service are informative and enlightening. Of even greater interest, however, are the links she sketches out between gender equity and democracy and, of yet greater importance, between gender inequity and the *collapse* of democracy.

Unlike some postmodern or self-described radical feminists who have been increasingly marginalized and ghettoized in the corporate colleges and universities, Feinberg views the status of women through an explicitly political lens. Whereas the many feminist voices today seem preoccupied with everyday culture, language, identity appropriation, sexual representations and the like, she attends to formal institutional and legal relations between men and women. Women may have won the vote. Institutions of higher education no longer openly discriminate against women in hiring, if not in promotion. Women can even "enjoy" a measure of equality in the armed forces – even joining combat units in some countries. These gains, however, have not been in place for long, and some may be more fragile than some imagine. Feinberg is acutely aware that ours is not a "postfeminist" age, as some have prematurely suggested. The glass ceiling may now be more translucent, but it is not much more porous.

In her discussion of gendered politics in Czechoslovakia, Feinberg examines a range of issues from citizenship to reproductive rights and from economic roles to the ideologies that help sustain inequality in practice. She is well attuned to a polity that really did imply hope and change "we could believe in." From its establishment in 1918 to the Munich Agreement of 1938, the new republic of Czechoslovakia had the appearance of a land of open opportunities for civility, prosperity and the fulfillment of the aspirations of the European Enlightenment. Its progressive constitution, including grand promises of gender equity, was enthusiastically received by its citizens. At the outset, it would have been churlish to anticipate later tyrannies of the ostensible right and the putative left. What went wrong?

The strategic placement of Czechoslovakia on the geopolitical map of Europe did not, of course, bode well for any future claims to autonomy. As long as Germany, Russia, France and the United Kingdom were engaged in a tussle over dominance (or dominance with allies) of that fearful region, no small country could feel free to do its will. Still, in the collapse of the

Czech democracy, internal social dynamics were fatefully important as well. Feinberg's judgement is that the inchoate liberal political culture of the country was incapable of standing up for itself against both the drag of internal traditionalism and the threat of external influence as soon as either or both began to test the vigor and the depth of commitment of the people to institutional and ideological innovations. The political culture, no matter how optimistically presented, was too mired in the dregs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to move confidently forward.

Feinberg observes that a tension quickly surfaced between universal human rights and the narrower concerns of kinship and nation. Antique tribalism was not so distant as to have been quashed by the equalitarian and libertarian initiatives of the best of the twentieth (or was it the eighteenth?) century. Early and definitive displays of robust support for liberal thought and action were not forthcoming among the political classes. Feinberg suggests that a lack of conviction and a lack of experience with fundamental freedoms and representative government left the people and their leadership open to persuasion by their neighbours. The result, says Feinberg, was a state and a people "incapable of creating the kind of political culture that would support those institutions in times of true crisis."

Feinberg tells a compelling tale that includes an excellent account of the role of Thomás Masaryk whose personal and political dedication to women's rights made that a core element of the republic. She pays due homage to the domestic Czech women's movement, which was a formidable contributor to the birth of the nation. Debates about the reduction of the role of the dominant husband in the emerging *Civil Code* are well documented and eerily familiar in the context of contemporary squabbles about transformative social change, especially in the United States, where a preoccupation with "family values" regularly insinuates itself into political discourse. According to Feinberg, the Czech failure unambiguously to affirm women's equality as a basis for political society was the first and perhaps the fatal failure of the new regime, and it happened near the beginning, in 1920.

Despite set-backs, Czech feminists were not done. On the national and international stages, Czech women agitated for the affirmation and protection of women's rights for two momentous decades. Their hope was not only to strengthen gender equality in their own country, but to put Czechoslovakian reform in the vanguard of women's rights movements around the world. They failed, but they failed surprisingly well, and against crushing odds.

Of special interest to readers of *The Innovation Journal* is the central place that Feinberg gives to the public service. As Sarah E. Summers has adroitly pointed out: "Feinberg ... sees the civil service as representative of politicians' practices and beliefs about work, salary and human rights. She argues that the ideal of the male breadwinner influenced beliefs about gender and work, even though the experiences of most Czechs diverged from that conception." The test of the liberal commitment to principle would emerge in political practice. Regrettably, the test was unsuccessful.

Feinberg tells us that the treatment of women in the Czech public service "illustrates how political concern began to lead Czech lawmakers away from the legal guidelines of their constitution" or, more forcefully, to betray its ideals in the interest of political expediency. This

is, I am sorry to say, far from a unique or even an unusual pattern. “When,” Feinberg adds, “government ministers placed restrictions on female civil servants, they clouded the state’s duty to protect individual rights.” More than ethnic or class barriers, Feinberg says, the importance of gender to the success of democracy is crucial. The exclusion of cultural minorities or the domination of society by a single social class are important; but, the permanent structural oppression of 50% of any population on no ground other than biological inheritance is intolerable. Melissa Feinberg presents a credible case.

Parallel statements about the status of women could be made today. Although an occasional female may lead a government or, proportionately less often, head a private sector corporation, the mere existence of a Margaret Thatcher or an Angela Merkel, a Michelle Bachelet or a Laura Chinchilla, a Golda Meir or an Indira Gandhi does not betoken gender equality, merely the contingent relaxation of gender boundaries. For true measures of equity, sustained evidence from aggregate data is required. We would surely benefit from studies of how women fare when established liberal constitutions are held up as a standard for workplace equity in public service or private corporations.

Feinberg’s treatment of social issues as they reflect the growing gap among constitutional ideals, government policies and public practices is also illuminating. She speaks authoritatively of the ways in which democratic (process) beliefs can weaken when confronted with moral (substantive) opinions, especially when those moral precepts are held by passionate and most often reactionary minorities of the population. The abortion debate in Czechoslovakia between the World Wars was surely as hard-fought proportionately as the current contest in the American “Bible Belt.” In *Elusive Equality*, the critical nature of this issue insofar as it defines the relationships among “the individual, the family and the state” is well argued. In particular, the way in which certain factions spoke out against moderate reforms and polarized attitudes in an already immature democracy is, perhaps, an apt warning for hard-liners on either side of critical social issues today.

Feinberg’s caution against unnecessarily divisive political action does not lead, however, to an endorsement of compromise for its own sake. She shows, instead, how excessive partisanship and factionalism can wreck progressive policies upon which almost everyone agrees (or claims to agree). She demonstrates, as well, how respect for democratic procedures is much more important than any specific and often short-term political agenda.

In her fascinating conclusion, Feinberg examines the fate of women’s equality in Czechoslovakia in the post-war era. The towering feminist figure, Milada Horáková, was instrumental in reorganizing pre-war feminists into the CCW (Council for Czechoslovak Women), but divisive ideological conflicts – even among committed feminists – denied unity to the movement. So, Horáková not only found herself on the outside of a soon-to-be government-dominated CCW, but was subsequently arrested, tried and executed for persisting in advocating women’s rights and drawing attention to gender inequities. Sexism, it was said, was a peculiarly “capitalist” injustice and that continued displays of feminist thinking were obsolete under official “socialism,” and therefore were counter-revolutionary.

As I hope I have made clear, *Elusive Equality* is an important book on three levels. It is an excellent addition to the history of Czechoslovakia. It is an important contribution to women's studies. In addition, it is a provocative essay in the relationship between gender equity and democratic theory. The Western tradition of universal human rights was recently sufficiently popular to win the acceptance of the founding members of the United Nations. The UN's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) was once commonly accepted as at least a goal, if not uniformly an achievement, at least in modern and modernizing societies. Today, that tradition is less secure. It is explicitly under attack by those whose various religious fundamentalisms stand opposed to individual freedom of conscience, but it is also in danger of erosion from within a number of Western democracies that have not yet learned that attempts to balance liberty and security inevitably dissolve liberty while seldom assuring security – a Faustian bargain at best.

For people who are genuinely committed to individual rights and liberties, the case of Czechoslovakia is telling. One of its major stories is that the institutions and ideals of liberal democracy must be rigorously defended and a culture of citizenship and civility must be constantly exercised lest rot and wrongs irredeemably corrode the polity.

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