In Memoriam: Hana Havelková

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Hana Havelková (1949–2020) was one of the most influential figures of her generation. An internationally renowned thinker and the author of more than seventy publications in Czech, English, and German, she 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. After the Velvet Revolution, she significantly enriched feminist theorising between ‘East’ and ‘West’, helped to create the conceptual apparatus for a gender analysis of state socialism, participated in oral history research of experiences of women during and after socialism. The thematic breath and analytical depth of Hana Havelková’s scholarship is impressive and remains unparalleled within Czech feminist sociology.

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, where she remained until her retirement in 2018. For many scholars across disciplines, she was a source of intellectual and personal inspiration, not only because of her ideas but also for the ways in which she was able to communicate those ideas.

Havelková’s charisma as a teacher was legendary. Her lectures were contagious in the best sense of the word. Interestingly, Havelková did not take her own pedagogical contribution too seriously and was humble when evaluating her influence. She was well aware that her courses on feminist theories were popular and overcrowded, but she always attributed the attention 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.’ (Havelková 2003: 3) However, students’ reflections made it clear where their enthusiasm stemmed from. Students dubbed her courses on feminist theories as ‘Hana Havelková’s courses’. She was able to appropriate a topic and make it her own and enthuse students hungry for new information with her critical and open-minded approach.

Havelková’s texts were unique for their complexity, depth, and a 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’ (Havelková 1992: 731). Moreover, unlike most of her colleagues writing in the same period who turned exclusively to Anglo-American feminist discourse, Havelková 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.

Hana Havelková considered feminism to be ‘an important part of modern thinking, an intellectual paradigm whose application offers not only an alternative view on gender questions, but it also broadens social and cultural contexts, redefines the essence of institutions, revisits the periodisation of history, etc.’ (Havelková 1999b: 258). She also insisted that the term ‘feminist’ is explicitly named. She remembered its roots and in both her writing and teaching she continuously reminded her readers and students that the feminist project had its historical heroines, to whom we owe a debt for having paved the way. Brave and resolute women who sacrificed a lot in their fight for women’s political and civil rights, sometimes even their lives. Brilliant women, excelling in their fields: ‘Suddenly, I realised once again the remarkable autonomy of Božena Němcová, who self-confidently and matter-of-factly placed female heroines in the centre of her stories, doing so in a completely original way, not copying the narrative forms of male literature.’ (Havelková 1999b: 56)

It was also Havelková who openly and 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 criticised the ‘enlightened activism’ of some ‘enthusiastic Western feminists’, arguing that ‘if, on the one hand, we have a reality without theory, then, on the other hand, we also have a theory without reality. What I mean by that is the universalising tone of Western theories that continuously talk of “man” and “woman” without situating them in particular social contexts’ (Havelková 1996: 244). She argued that the problem is not the use of ‘Western’ feminist theoretical approaches as such, but their unreflected ‘direct application’ to post-communist societies without their proper contextualisation and respect for the agency of women in post-communist countries.

Coping with the communist past, and especially ‘the thematisation of our specific communist and post-communist experience from a gendered perspective’ (Havelková 2007a: 108), was one of the most important questions that 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. The effort which began in 1992 with the seemingly simple question ‘Who is afraid of feminist philosophy?’ (Havelková 1992: 729) gradually grew
into a lifelong project of fighting against the amnesia of feminist thought, which for Havelková had a personal and reflexive dimension. According to her, a quarter century later, it still ‘remains a mystery why nobody (it seems) really missed feminism during the communist era as well as after its demise, despite the fact that feminism was a significant segment of pre-communist society… and, on top of that, was supported by its greatest icon, President T. G. Masaryk’ (Havelková 2015: 128).

Hana Havelková’s key thoughts bear several characteristic features. Due to her extensive training in sociology, political philosophy, and history, her main arguments are formulated in interdisciplinary ways. She also paid special attention to what she called the ‘technical side’ of scholarship. From herself, her colleagues, and her students she expected only the highest standards and theoretical-methodological thoroughness. She insisted that the house be built from the ground up and had little patience for those who were concerned more about the colour of the façade than the foundations. She 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 the 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, Havelková consistently practised the classic feminist dictum: the personal is political. Her texts reveal her efforts to merge the theoretical and analytical with the practical and engaged. In the totality of her work, she strived for nothing less than a transformation of society. With her typical charisma, she invited her readers to critically read and think about relations between the individual and society and our place in society. 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 organisations. She worked for the European UNESCO Center for Education in Human Rights, was a member of the Board of Trustees of 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.

At the heart of Havelková’s approach to academic work was her emphasis on the intersubjectivity of research. In 1999, Havelková admitted her interest in feminism was, in fact, forced by circumstances: ‘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 male and female roles, including, for example, the parental roles.’ She argued that ‘we have an enormous cultural debt’ and declared that ‘for this reason alone I feel it is my personal and professional duty to get engaged in this matter’ (Havelková 1999a: 46). Such a statement was typical for Hana Havelková. She did not wait for someone else to do the job. Instead, she always took personal responsibility: ‘The need to deal with the past and especially the need to study the past in a competent way is always crucial for our understanding of the present – of ourselves, too. We still owe ourselves, and the public as well, a thorough gender inquiry into the communist and transformational periods.’ (Havelková 2007a: 108) This appeal culminated between 2012 and 2015 with a ground-breaking research project focused on the transformation of gender culture in the period of state socialism. Hana Havelková led an interdisciplinary team of 15 researchers dealing with these issues from diverse methodological perspectives. The resulting anthology, co-edited with Libora Oates-Indruchová, Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism, received the 2015 British Association for Slavic and Easter European Studies (BASEES) Award for the best book on gender issues in Eastern and Central Europe.

In her research, Havelková put great emphasis on the analysis of structures and institutions. 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. Havelková’s 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 (Havelková 1995, 1996), the concept of patriarchy and the political representation of women in the post-communist transformation (Havelková 1993, 2006), or the concept of state feminism and socialist emancipated womanhood (Havelková 2011). During her childhood, Havelková was protected by her parents from having to confront the conflicts produced by the political regime in which she was growing up. However, as soon as she discovered the contours of the paradoxes of which she herself was a product, she made them the central point of her inquiry. The compelling statement by Olympe de Gouges, in which she described herself as ‘a woman who has only paradoxes to offer and not problems easy to resolve’ (Scott 1996: xii), mirrors the life journey of Hana Havelková as well.

Hana Havelková’s professional and personal path was neither straight nor smooth. It was a demanding and complicated journey full of twists and turns. But it certainly was not a solitary path. It was filled with many colleagues, both Czech
and international, who respected and admired her academic work. It was lined with hundreds of eager and grateful students whose lives she changed. Together with her husband, Professor Miloš Havelka, they raised two wonderful and successful daughters – Tereza, who teaches musicology at Charles University’s Faculty of Arts, and Barbara, who teaches law at the University of Oxford. Hana Havelková’s life was also enriched by her three grandchildren, Oskar, Luisa, and Simon, whom she loved more than anything.

We will all miss her amazing personality – 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.

Bibliography

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Mara Kastein

The theme of the 40th Congress of the German Sociological Association (DGS) held this year was ‘Society under Pressure’. It examined various tensions in society such as the tension ‘between rich and poor ..., between political camps and ideologies, between religions and cultural forms, between (re)emerging nations, regions and transnational organisations, between society and nature, between town and country, between generations, and ... between the sexes’.¹

In order to approach a ‘society under pressure’ and social tensions sociologically, different triggers such as climate change, demographic change, migration movements and capitalism (see ibid.) were considered.

Berlin was originally intended to be the conference venue, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a total of 2,268 people attended 231 sessions and plenary events at the first digital congress of the DGS via Zoom instead. From more than 30 countries around the world (including 607 from Austria, 263 from Switzerland, 100 from the USA and 45 from Japan), an average of 104 people listened to the lectures of all in all 1009 speakers².

‘Please wait. The webinar will start shortly.’
This phrase especially addressed the early birds to the Zoom meeting and myself too.

² This is how Hubert Knoblauch, spokesman of this year’s organizing team, sums up the congress in his closing speech.