

## Seminar TRANSFORMATIVE LEFT PARTIES IN EUROPE: THE QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION

Helsinki, Ostrobotnia ("Botta", Museokatu 10), 1-2 April 2011

Gender inclusiveness - Missing: the gender **category**!

I want to start my contribution with a comment on Conny Hildebrandt's powerpoint presentation and a remark regarding our whole seminar and even our whole work. Teivo and Franco, our speakers of the morning, talking about social Forums and social movements, were mentioning feminist movements and what we can learn of these movements.

But the moment we start to talk about parties we again forget the feminist theory which should be included in Marxist theory and analysis. So we forget of the gender category which is a basic suppression category of society – such as class and race.

When Conny was talking on the Structural Conflict Areas of parties – legislative - executive, horizontal – vertical, party – movement and majority - minority – I was missing the gender hierarchy as underlying structural conflict.

Women are not a minority! We are talking of structural discrimination, gender is a category of structural oppression – gender hierarchy is always present on all levels of innerparty conflicts and the conflicts with outside party movements.

That's also why it is also not enough to have the possibility to have a women's "current" within a party – a current which is once a communist or anticapitalist faction and once a women's organization –

Gender – as race and class - is an underlying structural category in all currents and conflicts within parties – and here the left parties cannot be excluded!

This is an appeal to include the category of gender – beside the category of class and race - into our analysis of innerparty democracy and participation as well as in all other of our working fields.

To explain the structural gender conflict and the "double burden" or even "more-than-double-burden" of women in a left party I present the example of Communist Party of Austria, which Heidi Ambrosch, *Vienna coordination office of transform and at the same time the women's speaker of CPA, member of the party board and active in various feminist contexts*, has prepared.

In the Communist Party of Austria, there are two women's collectives which are responsible for developing women's politics: a feminist basic organisation and a women's group including also non-party members, which understands itself as an active part of the EL-Fem-network.

In the feminist basic organisation we prepare seminars for women as well as the presentation at our party newspaper's feast of women's political issues, we decide upon the contributions to our monthly magazine *Volksstimme*, we talk about what our focus as left women will be in upcoming elections or in socially relevant alliances, we discuss how to celebrate International Women's Day and much more. Almost all the women in the group are members of the party's executive committee, the party's executive board for Vienna or the editorial board of *Volksstimme*, they are authoresses for the CPA-homepage, one of us is an elected municipal councillor, others are involved in feminist or mixed-sex civil-society alliances. This means that the women of the CPA do double the amount of political work.

The women's seminars taking place twice a year have become fixed dates on the annual agenda and also points of orientation.

They offer us and others who are interested – usually we are about 25 women – a chance to exchange our views on a number of topics, to deal with feminist theory for linking it up anew in our political praxis.

We want to comprehend the social relations, which we understand to be of major importance to our political education.

To illustrate how we have learned to proceed, I would like to talk about how we proceeded at our last seminar: the topic was solidarity and our interest was the question of how to counteract in a systematic way the erosion of solidarity.

In doing so we did not only want to take stock of what exists, but we were focusing on the concept of solidarity and on its merit, its meaning both in a historical sense and with regard to its importance to us here and now.

As regards the subjective perspective, we tried to answer the question how it is possible to act together in solidarity in surroundings from which solidarity is absent. How this can happen but also which obstacles – both subjectively and objectively – have to be identified and thus should also become the content of political education.

In doing so, it is important to expose the **structural obstacles**: main thesis – being aware of double burden of women – the women of the CPA do not only do double the amount of political work.

Unlike the men in the CPA they have to meet demands that are diametrically opposed to each other.

They do not only have to bring in line their jobs and their political activity but also have to reconcile both with their family duties. These do not only consist in care for children or a partner, very often there are also other care responsibilities women have to shoulder.

To explore our own interests as female gendered beings requires to specially deal with the silenced women's history, to link up Marxist and feminist theory and to get involved in both mixed-gendered structures and women-only contexts. And quite often the necessary organisational work – such as who organises a room for a meeting, sends out the information, sees to it how the hall can be decorated etc. – in mixed structures remains for women to be done as well.

It must be stated that the male comrades usually can dispose of considerably more time and material resources to become aware of their interests, to attend to them and to have them heard.

Of course, this has an impact on the culture of a party and must be understood as a conservative structural problem, which, among others has led to more men than women in recent years joining the CPA – and more than that, it is probably an overall trend in all European left parties, isn't it?

We have to understand that, not only to give consideration to the female comrades in the party but also to grasp more precisely what we expect from a society of solidarity.

I would like to link up these structural blind spots to some current discourses. In an unbelievable catch-up race women have made use of the educational paths open to them since the 1960s and have today overtaken men as far as their school graduation levels and university degrees are concerned, although the choice of subjects is still divided between the sexes.

They have acquired so-called male assertiveness, connect it with the soft skills they have been taught since they were children

and even in the top layers of the world of economy quotas are planned to be introduced, because the male fraternities would like nothing better than to cover with concrete the glass ceiling.

This new femininity scares men, because, after all it is experienced as a threat to the job which becomes more insecure for everyone these days.

At the same time the male breadwinner model, which had made it possible to perpetuate the dependence of women by material means, belongs to the past.

In many cases male superiority becomes a farce and it is no mere coincidence that anti-feminist debates are on the upswing, that an increasingly aggressive sexism can be found in advertisements, that right-extremist fathers are up in arms. Let me refer to history in this context: it was also no coincidence that after the lost Vietnam War Rambo- or Conan-films boomed in the cinemas.

But all that is not the subject of left discourses in which men can – for reasons mentioned before – set the tone. And so the understanding of social relations stops short halfway.

So I hope I made clear our appeal to firstly change our point of view on structural conflicts within party

I want to refer to Elisabeth's contribution – if we want to change society we have firstly to change ourselves. What is the necessity to become actors for party members is respect – and getting rid of double burdens. If we want to change the world we have to change ourselves and we have to change the view on ourselves and the view on our parties.