

## 5 Embrace or resist

### Women and collective identification in Croatia and former Yugoslavia since WWII

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The past decade marked a crisis within the global feminist movement, on both the theoretical and practical level. This crisis was largely triggered by a growing awareness among Western feminists that feminism meant radically different things to women on the other side of the former Iron Curtain, as well as those coming from third-world countries in general. Different political and economic frameworks, different discourses of power, had led to a distrust in the possibility of building bridges across the East–West divide. Eastern women – some of whom are only too willing to find shelter in the world of the household and family after decades of enduring the ‘double burden’ – stand accused of ‘buying into sexism’; by the same token, they often see their Western counterparts guilty of cultural imperialism in claiming to represent universal women’s interests. These tensions have become well known through the writing of Slavenka Drakulic (1998), Vlasta Jalousic (1994), Nanette Funk (1993), Jean Bethke Elshtain (1995), Shana Penn (1998) and others. The East–West debate has highlighted the elusiveness of the categories of ‘women’ and ‘women’s issues’ and problematized the possibility of feminist political activity.

Women from the former socialist countries are no longer an enigma for Western feminists. A dialogue across the dividing line has greatly improved since the early 1990s. This interchange was institutionalized with the establishment in 1990 of a Network of East–West Women, on the initiative of Ann Snitow and Slavenka Drakulic. Its purpose was to facilitate communication between ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ feminists and to help women in post-communist societies establish themselves as political subjects in the new democracies, by supporting the formation and activities of independent women’s movements. One important initiative, the East–East Legal Coalition (EELC), run by women’s rights lawyers from across the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe, is concerned with articulating and enforcing laws and policies that strengthen women’s legal status. The Croatian representative in the Coalition is Vesna Kesic from the Zagreb women’s group B.a.B.e. (Be-Active-Be-Emancipated).

It is clear that women in certain historical circumstances have ‘shed’ their gendered identities in favour of different ‘patriarchal discourses’,

such as nationalism, political affiliation, etc. This chapter, which offers a review of women's choices in Croatia and former Yugoslavia since World War II, validates Judith Butler's argument that 'women' cannot be interpreted as a unified, stable identity category. Although both the Yugoslav socialist discourse and the Croatian ethno-nationalism of the 1990s denied 'women' an opportunity to establish themselves as a 'performative', the most recent activities of different women's groups challenge this tradition and emphasize the strategic and political character of gender-based identification. Recent studies – particularly those dealing with the break-up of former Yugoslavia, with the horrors of ethnic cleansing and mass rapes with a political pretext – have concentrated on the gendered nature of national mythologies and topographies. This approach, however informative, suffers from uni-dimensionality and male perspective. In order to achieve a balance, we need to view the relationship between women and the ruling discourses of collective identification from women's point of view as well.

### **'There is no question of women outside the class question'**

Despite the common perception of the socialist Yugoslav identification as 'non-nationalistic' and thus conflicting with the Croatian ethno-nationalism, the two projects have elements in common: namely, a sense of distinctiveness and a belief in a mythical past and a better future which was, or which will be shared by the members of the imagined community.<sup>1</sup> The feeling of distinctiveness in the Yugoslav nationalism of Tito's imprint consisted of three main elements: self-management, non-alignment and brotherhood and unity, referring respectively to the spheres of social and political economy, international relations and the national question. Underlying the principle of brotherhood and unity, there were two dominant narratives of origin: one referred to the common Slavic ancestry and their migration in the seventh century from South Russia to Europe and a subsequent separation into 'sub-states'; the other, more important narrative, was the one of a nation forged in communist struggle and the national liberation movement in WWII. The narrative of a common destiny consisted of expectations of a gradual elimination of social classes and state mechanisms, achievable through a consistent practice of the three principles of self-management, non-alignment and brotherhood and unity.

In pre-WWII Yugoslavia, we can distinguish between two currents of women's activity: one is the bourgeois feminism (feminism of the 'salons') associated primarily with organizations such as Yugoslav Women's Association and the Alliance of Women's Movements; the other incorporates the activities of women's groups within the proletarian movement. The 'salon' feminists – mainly educated urban women – were critical of the authoritarian regime of the inter-war Kingdom and wanted to reform it by

introducing elements of democracy. When the Yugoslav Kingdom collapsed, these women lost their framework of reference and the movement disintegrated by the end of 1940. The other current – that embedded in the proletarian movement – was later seen as the rightful predecessor of the Antifascist Women's Front (AWF; *Antifasistički front žena*, AFZ), an organization formed within the national liberation movement in 1942. Although the demands put forward by the two currents between the two wars – such as women's suffrage and inclusion of women in the workforce – often overlapped, feminism was later seen as a negative, bourgeois phenomenon which had to be suppressed. At the first conference of the Croatian Antifascist Women's Front in 1943, one of the activists referred to feminism as a 'vampire' that, if reborn, had to be 'pierced through the heart with a big and strong rosewood stake' (Sklevicky 1996: 87–8).

The official rhetoric of post-WWII Yugoslavia often emphasized both the high level of participation of women in the national liberation movement and their overwhelming acceptance of the principle of 'brotherhood and unity' among Yugoslav nations. It is undeniable that the national liberation movement had mobilized a large number of women: of a total of six million people involved in the movement, two million were women (Jancar-Webster 1999: 69–70), of the 800,000 partisan troops, 100,000 are said to have been women (Ramet 1999: 93). However, women's supposed equality in the partisan ranks – embodied in the images of women with machine-guns in their hands that can be found in the folk poetry of the period – was later exposed as a myth. In wartime resistance publications aimed at a female readership, women were also often portrayed as welcoming Tito's troops in villages across Yugoslavia: 'Tito's army has come to us. Our sons, Serbs, Croats and Muslims, are fighting in it' (Mimica 1945: 16). Later studies have convincingly argued that 'participation in the war did not give Yugoslav women a common sense of identity that transcended family roles and ethnic distinctions' and that this absence of a common identity 'made women especially vulnerable to the authoritarian dictates of the communist regime and the neonaionalist rhetoric of the post-communist successor states' (Jancar-Webster 1999: 87). Obviously, partisan women were aware of the slogan of 'brotherhood and unity', but they could not test it against their own experience, which was limited to the co-fighters of their own nationalities. In her study of the Anti-Fascist Women's Front, the late Zagreb feminist and sociologist Lydia Sklevicky reached similar conclusions. In the vein of Eric Hobsbawm, she pointed to the practice of 'invention of tradition' in the Yugoslav socialist rhetoric on women (Sklevicky 1987: 51–60).

The Antifascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia was founded in Bosanski Petrovac in 1942. The tasks its members engaged in were varied: assistance to the army in food, clothes, sanitary equipment, organization of the home front, participation in and consolidation of the national liberation movement, care for refugees and children, sabotage of enemy supplies

and mobilization of the workforce, boycott of the enemy markets, demonstrating against provocations and participation in the armed struggle as soldiers, informers and couriers, organization of various cultural and educational activities such as literacy courses, etc.<sup>2</sup> However, already in his inaugural speech at the founding conference in Bosanski Petrovac, Tito unwittingly relegated women to the realm of the 'Other', by stating that they were fighting 'arm in arm with all the nations of Yugoslavia' and revealing his troops' rather traditional expectations of their female 'co-fighters': 'Our partisans need clothes, they need socks – it is winter – they need gloves, food and many other things. This mainly depends on you, comrade women.'<sup>3</sup>

In the immediate post-war period, a view that AWF had outlived its utility increasingly took hold. The organization was finally dissolved in 1953 on the pretext that women's equality could be better promoted through non-gender-specific agencies controlled by the party. A new Union of Women's Societies was formed, which in 1961 was amalgamated with women's committees within the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia to form the Conference for the Social Activity of Women, as a constituent part of the Socialist Alliance. In 1966, this Conference became responsible for publishing a bi-monthly magazine for women, called *Woman (Zena)*.<sup>4</sup> One of the editors-in-chief of *Zena* was Marija Soljan-Bakaric, one of the women partisan leaders in the Communist Party and wife of Tito's right-hand man, Vladimir Bakaric. This magazine, supposedly for women and about them, was the proud recipient of the gold medal of 'brotherhood and unity'. Sisterhood was yet to be (re)discovered.

On paper, Tito's Yugoslavia could boast remarkable achievements in the area of women's equality. Its first constitution incorporated an article on equal rights of women 'in all spheres of state, economic and social life' and thus, universal suffrage was introduced; with the 1974 federal constitution, abortion was legalized; women's employment was on the increase since the early 1950s; women accounted for 40.3 per cent of university students in 1973/74; in 1978, considerable maternity benefits were introduced.<sup>5</sup> The concept of equality, which was at the centre of communist-proclaimed ideology, gave women – at least ostensibly, and at least for a while – a significant place in the ruling discourse. However, the shiny surface only needed to be slightly scratched, and a different reality became evident: women's political representation was still low within the party ranks, the delegate system and the organs of self-management;<sup>6</sup> the high participation of women in the workforce went hand in hand with the preservation of 'typically female' jobs in areas such as culture, education, medicine, social and office work, which were often also associated with lower incomes; since the onset of the economic crisis of the late 1970s, unemployment figures were increasingly higher for women than for men.

Ironically, both ethnic nationalism and gender equality struggles were



assigned the same destiny in the Yugoslav project: they were either declared to be dead, or at least destined to be forgotten 'on the road to communism'. Both of these 'ghosts from the past' were resurrected in the 1970s and culminated respectively in the Croatian ethno-nationalist revival of 1971 (the 'Croatian Spring') and the first consciously feminist organization 'Woman and Society' ('*Zena i društvo*') in 1978. The impetus for both can be traced back to the late 1960s, when the general libertarian unrest elsewhere in Europe and in the United States had spilled over Yugoslav borders.

The Croatian Spring began with demands coming from within the Communist Party and later assumed a popular impetus in its own right. The nationalists – led by Savka Dabčević-Kučar, the head of the party in Croatia and Miko Tripalo, a Croatian representative in the federal party Presidency – were critical of the high proportion of Serbs in the army, the police and the party in Croatia, as well as of the drainage of hard currency to Belgrade.<sup>7</sup> The party leadership had strong allies in *Matica Hrvatska*, a cultural institution, and Zagreb University. Later, university students, led by Dražen Budisa, emerged as the most radical wing of the movement. In November 1971, they went on a massive strike, aimed at convincing Dabčević-Kučar and Tripalo to put forward their demands more aggressively to the Yugoslav President Tito, who was initially reluctant to take a firm stand on the dissenters. Under pressure from the Soviet Union, Serbian and Bosnian communists, as well as a number of prominent Croatian party members such as Vladimir Bakarić and Milka Planinc, he decided to crush the movement. Its leaders were forced to resign from their positions; some were imprisoned; *Matica Hrvatska* was shut down; and the media were purged of reformers. However, some of the pleas emerging from the Croatian Spring were taken into account in the new Yugoslav constitution three years later, which reduced the authority of the federal government, as well as Serbia's control of its autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo. From the early 1970s to the mid-1980s, Croatian nationalism appeared dormant.

Although the Croatian Spring had at least one prominent woman on each side of the conflict – namely, Savka Dabčević-Kučar and Milka Planinc – and many more in the lower echelons representing the two opposing fractions, these women did not act from the position of gender. By the same token, when the first generation of post-WWII feminists started debunking the inconsistencies of the Yugoslav ruling discourse, they were not primarily interested in its solution of the national question. This was the period when women began noticing the fallacy of the official gender equality rhetoric. Like the interwar 'bourgeois' feminists, they perceived themselves as critics and potential reformers, rather than opponents of the regime.

### Marxism revisited

In 1976, the Marxist centres of Slovenia and Croatia organized a conference in Portoroz, which discussed issues of feminism in its own right for the first time after the war. However, an international conference in Belgrade two years later, entitled Comrade Woman (*Drug-ca zena*), is usually regarded as the first *bona fide* feminist gathering in socialist Yugoslavia. Women from France, Italy, West Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland and Hungary were invited as guests. The conference covered a wide range of topics, from the contemporary women's movement and the status of women in capitalist and socialist societies, to psychoanalysis, sexuality and female identity. It received considerable media coverage, most of it with negative, or even derisive overtones. The official line was that outside the class question, there was no question of women and that therefore feminism could not offer anything new or original in theory or practice.

The first feminist group in Croatia – Woman and Society – was formed under the auspices of the Croatian Sociological Society in 1977. Members of this group – around thirty of them – were university students, sociologists, psychologists and artists. They 'met regularly, promoted public discussions and lectures on many previously unquestionable matters, and became an open platform, sometimes very political, which was a rarity at the time' (Drakulic 1993: 128). It is important to note that the group from the outset included members from different republics of former Yugoslavia. Soon afterwards, similar groups were formed in Belgrade and Ljubljana. One of the first challenges was to assert the existence of a 'woman question' in Yugoslav society (Pusic 1979); another was to question the monopoly of the regime to deal with women's issues. By the late 1970s, the dominant revolutionary rhetoric had lost its original vigour. At the same time, a new rebellious generation of Yugoslav baby-boomers was coming of age. This generation was deprived of a 'time of their own', since the present had no value unless it somehow referred back to the past, i.e. to WWIL. One of the early neo-feminists remembers:

We had to be a safeguard ... of happiness, copied from the *Urzeit*, their time, the time of the Revolution which was the model, and we had to guarantee that this model would survive in the future ... For our generation, time was completely flat – it was only considered valuable if it sang the past, i.e. the Revolution.

(Ivekovic 2000)<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1970s, the uni-dimensional 'revolutionary androcentrism' was criticized in scholarly journals such as *Pitanja* and *Argumenti*. The articles of the two thematic blocs these journals devoted to women's issues in 1978 and 1979 respectively asserted that, although women had been allowed and encouraged to join the workforce and enter politics, they could not

achieve 'genuine' equality due to a range of socio-cultural factors, including women's own adherence to the traditional cultural patterns of masculinity and femininity. The practice of laying the blame for failing to achieve emancipation on women themselves was a *topos* of communist rhetoric. In an interview given to the magazine *Woman* in 1976, Tito said: 'We have many women in the Central Committee; so let them fight [for their rights] from within the Party!'<sup>9</sup> It was, however, true that, in order to achieve a genuine reform, the urban feminists had to somehow reach those masses of rural, largely uneducated women who were considered to stand in the way of their own liberation. However, as noted by Slavenka Drakulic, the system did not provide the necessary infrastructure for unsanctioned political mobilization:

We had to be an academic, elitist group, not only because of the profile of the chief female constituents (mostly university professors, journalists, and writers) but because of our lack of access to that great majority of women who needed this kind of organization the most. In other words, opportunities for raising consciousness were very limited, and there was no possibility of organizing actions such as protests, boycotts, marches, and so on.

(Drakulic 1998: 45)

This 'exile to theory', which lasted for almost a decade, was useful in preparing the terrain for the emergence of women's hands-on activity in the late 1980s. In 1986, the women's consciousness-raising group *Tresnjevka* was founded in Croatia's capital, Zagreb. Within this group, the idea of starting an SOS telephone for women and children victims of violence was conceived in 1988. This initiative – which for the first time exposed domestic violence as an unacceptable, deviant act – proved to be extremely worthwhile and its popularity was evident from the ever increasing number of calls from battered women. Ljubljana and Belgrade followed suit, establishing similar telephone hotlines for women victims of violence in 1989 and 1990 respectively. In 1989, *Tresnjevka* and the SOS telephone were registered as one organization called Women's Help Now, which also included a shelter for battered women and their children and the lesbian group *Lila Initiative*. In 1990, the groups *Croatian Women's Alliance*,<sup>10</sup> *Independent Alliance of Women*<sup>11</sup> and *Kareta* were established.

The feminist scene in former Yugoslavia was largely limited to three capital cities: Zagreb, Belgrade and Ljubljana. More importantly, feminists from these cities worked closely together, suggesting the possibility of building a sisterhood network, as an alternative to the patriarchal cliché of 'brotherhood and unity'. In the late 1980s, annual all-Yugoslav feminist meetings were introduced, with the idea of holding them each year in a different capital city (Ljubljana 1987, Zagreb 1989, Belgrade 1990 and Ljubljana 1991).



Ironically, 1987, the year that saw the first all-Yugoslav meeting in Ljubljana, also symbolically marks the 'beginning of the end' of federal Yugoslavia. The coming to power in Serbia of Slobodan Milosevic in 1987 rekindled nationalist passions among Serbs and triggered an atmosphere of alarm in Croatia and Slovenia. Since becoming president of Croatia in 1990, the late Franjo Tudjman and his Croatian Democratic Union party had fostered the upsurge of ethno-nationalism in the republic. The vacuum left by the suspension of former socialist Yugoslav collective identification promoted a rapid development of Croatian ethno-nationalist discourse, idealized machismo and a general right-wing backlash. The Serbs from the Krajina region of Croatia were rebelling, eventually to declare regional autonomy and set up the self-proclaimed 'Republic of Serbian Krajina' by the end of 1991. Needless to say, the ensuing armed conflict and finally the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation seriously challenged the inter-republican sisterhood network.

### Who is raping Croatia?

Resentment of, among other things, the socialist regime's formal support for women's equality made the Croatia of the early 1990s highly susceptible to antifeminist influences. Croatian ethno-nationalism defines its mythical past through different versions of the so-called 'Iranian theory', in opposition to the Serbian, or by extension, Slavic narrative. This theory usually refers to archaeological evidence that the name *Hrvat* (Croat) could be of Persian, not Slavic origin. This narrative of a different mythical past provides a good starting point for the orientalist 'Serbo-Byzantine' discourse, in which 'we' (the Croats) are seen as the *antemurale Christianitatis* – masculine, civilized and western – while 'they' (primarily the Serbs) are feminized, primitive and irreparably Balkan. Spatially, the narrative refers to the border or 'exclusion-line' of the River Drina, between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, between the Western and the Eastern Church, between 'us' and 'them'.

Within this discourse,

[the] basis of the Croatian being is the male ethnic principle. The Croat is a warrior, but also a farmer. The warrior is characterized by the active energy of attack and defence, while the farmer is the ploughman who fertilizes the earth. The earth here is the passive, female principle.<sup>12</sup>

For some of the first-wave feminists, this 'constant erection of the nation, of national excitement, its incessant glorification of the self and constant attack, its visible sexual crutch [were] like a poke in the eye' (Ivekovic 1998: 40).

The practical consequences of this anti-woman discourse – coupled with the introduction of competition on the political arena and the job



market alike – were obvious from the onset of post-socialist transition in Croatia. While participation of women in the Parliament before 1990 mainly varied between 16 and 18 per cent, in 1990 it dropped to 4.7 per cent (Leinert Novosel 1999: 35–6); women's unemployment increased at a higher rate than men's; the incidence of lay-offs during maternity leave was also on the increase (Leinert Novosel 1999: 220). The main reason for alarm among feminists at the beginning of this period was a fear that the 1990 Croatian constitution – with its contradictions and inconsistencies – could open up possibilities for introducing population policies and anti-abortion laws. To quote Slavenka Drakulic,

One cannot expect that such a nationalist party [late president Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union] worried that the Croatian nation is soon going to disappear because Croatian women aren't giving birth to more than 1.8 children, is going to promote anything progressive for women.

(1993: 125)

Not surprisingly, in the same period, population policies and pro-life solutions loomed large in other Yugoslav republics' ethno-nationalist discourses. One of the last actions which brought together women activists from the former Yugoslav republics was the institution of the 'Female Parliament' in Croatia in December 1990, with the aim of contravening the proposed law on abortion. In addition to several hundred Croatian women, there were guests from Belgrade, Ljubljana and Sarajevo. It was organized by the all-Yugoslav umbrella group Independent Women's Alliance (*Nezavisni savez žena*), the legal heir of the socialist Women's Conference, Croatian Women's Association (*Savez žena Hrvatske*) and Tresnjeva. A document, which was later sent to the Croatian government, the European Parliament and the UN Commission for the Status of Women, emphasized the right of women to have power over their own bodies. The gathering brought to the fore what proved to be seeds of the future conflict between conservative women's groups supporting the ruling ethno-nationalist discourse and those refusing to subscribe to it. A number of participants, gathered around the Croatian Woman Society (*Društvo Hrvatska Žena*)<sup>15</sup> voiced their pro-life and nationalist orientation and questioned the legitimacy of the gathering. The incident received unusual attention from the media.

In June 1991, Slovenia declared its independence from former Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav federal army started the 'ten-day war' against that republic, on the grounds that it had to protect the federal borders. Soldiers sent to the front line had been conscripted from across the former federation and a grass-roots movement of parents – mainly mothers – demanding that their children be immediately released, initially developed as a cross-republican initiative. The idea for the Wall of Love – living walls of women around army barracks – originated in

Croatia, but it envisaged similar activities in all republics. Also, mothers from across former Yugoslavia were supposed to travel to Belgrade in convoys of buses, to besiege the army headquarters and demand that their sons be discharged from the military.

The potential power of this initiative was immediately grasped by nationalist leaders and the movement crumbled along ethno-national lines. The Belgrade Mothers' Committee supported the national cause and accused the women participating in the convoys of overthrowing Yugoslavia. The Croatian Wall of Love – as one of the more conservative women's groups, which later engaged mainly in charity and education of children – was manipulated by the politicians and the media. Another women's group that later embraced the national line was Kareta, originally established as a publisher of a feminist magazine. However, only one issue of the magazine was printed in March 1991 and the group later devoted itself to lobbying and work with refugees. The Wall of Love and Kareta later found international support from the radical feminist lawyer and campaigner against pornography, Catherine MacKinnon.

By 1992, women activists in Croatia had virtually polarized into those adopting the official ethno-national line and those rejecting it and resisting the resulting stigma. Women's Help Now, with its SOS telephone line and the shelter for battered women had split into two factions: one, which decided to discontinue the support of raped women of Serbian nationality and the other, which opted for solidarity among women, regardless of their ethnicity. The former faction, together with several other similarly inclined women's groups, received public support from the nationalist government and the media.<sup>14</sup> Rapes assumed a political dimension. The latter faction formed a separate group, which in December 1992 joined forces with Independent Women's Alliance and women from Anti-War Campaign to set up the Centre for Women Victims of War. Over the years, this centre grew into a sizeable institution,<sup>15</sup> which has consistently worked with women of different nationalities. For example, in 1999, it offered support to women escaping from both Kosovo and Serbia, as well as to some trafficked women from Romania, Moldavia and Ukraine. As late as 1998, activists of the Centre were ostracized in the mainstream media for favouring gender identification over ethno-nationalist exclusivity. In the most widely read Croatian daily, *Vecernji List*, a journalist stated that

[it was] known that more than 80% of the activists from *women's and similar marginal organisations* were Serbs, and the rest were *more or less Croats* with political or family backgrounds in the Yugoslav Secret Service, the Yugoslav Police, or Yugoslav Army officers.

(Ivkosic 1998)

The same journalist commented that some of those women were lesbians who opposed the 'laws of nature' and wanted to do the same 'in Parliament'.

Public condemnations invariably invoked similar arguments: Serbs, Yugoslavs, lesbians and barren women – indeed, in times of national consolidation, the domain of the ‘Other’ can be amazingly crowded.

With the escalation of war in Croatia, many women supported the national cause and some actively participated in fighting. In patriarchal discourse, women-fighters tend to be seen as ‘Amazons’, ‘extremely antagonistic to feminists, especially those involved in antiwar movements. Fully immersed in patriarchal ideology, they hold the nation to be supreme to everything else; any attack on the war is an attack on the nation’ (Kesić 1999: 190). Informal interviews with some of these women demystified the *topos* and revealed utterly different interpretations. In some cases, declared feminists were fighting with guns in their hands, refuting at the same time calls for hatred of the ‘Other’ embedded in ethno-nationalist rhetoric. Neva Tolle – a social worker of Tresnjevka, who had disobeyed her superior’s instructions to deny support to harassed Serbian women and thus pioneered the establishment of a non-nationalist women’s shelter – also volunteered for duty at the front. Although she believes that women are equally prone to nationalism as men are, she does not see her own combat experience as related to nationalism at all. She rather explains it as her individual response to a life-threatening situation: she was defending her ‘home’, not her ‘homeland’.<sup>16</sup>

Within a three-month period, in October 1992 and January 1993 respectively, Zagreb hosted two international meetings on women and the war. The first one, called Women in the War, was organized by the women’s groups supporting the official discourse, Kareta and Women’s Help Now. The purpose was to focus on the issue of rape as a war crime. Several feminists were attacked for holding firmly to their understanding of rape as a universal act of violence by men against women, failing thus to single out any particular nationality as either victim or perpetrator. A month later – at the international symposium on Gender Democracy and Violence in Vienna – these women decided to form their own informal political pressure group, Zagreb Women’s Lobby. Despite differences in relation to some other women’s groups – largely on the grounds of different views on nationalist exclusivity – women from the Lobby declared a commitment to avoid confrontations with them and maintain gender-based solidarity. In December 1992, the Lobby launched an appeal against rape, which emphasized that the victims were women and the perpetrators were men, regardless of their nationalities; stipulated that the International Tribunal be authorized to consider claims by individual women victims of rape; demanded that raped women be given free medical care and the right to abortion; and insisted that a network of support centres for women war victims be developed. The second international women’s meeting in Zagreb – the Congress of Women’s Solidarity, initiated by feminists from Berlin and supported by the Zagreb Women’s Lobby and associated groups – prioritized gender-based solidarity over national and political interests.

By December 1992, the controversy had already assumed spectacular proportions. A Zagreb-based weekly newspaper published an unsigned article entitled 'Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia', which pointed the finger at five prominent women writers – three of whom belonged to the first-wave of feminism associated with the group *Woman and Society* – for allegedly being disloyal to their war-torn country. The article related an event which had taken place at the Congress of PEN International Association of Literary Writers in Rio de Janeiro earlier that year, where US delegates to the Congress protested against holding the following 59th PEN Congress in Dubrovnik, Croatia (as had been previously planned), allegedly because the five women – Slavenka Drakulic, Rada Ivekovic, Vesna Kesic, Jelena Lovric and Dubravka Ugresic – had tarnished Croatia's international reputation with their public complaints about media control in the country. The PEN gathering in 1993 was held in Dubrovnik and Hvar after all, but delegations from several countries, as well as Drakulic and Ugresic – both members of the international PEN – chose not to attend.

The article set off a scandal which continued to make headlines in Croatia and the rest of Central Europe for months, even years to come. It included a chart 'exposing' some 'compromising details' about the 'Witches from Rio',<sup>17</sup> such as their age (to portray them as menopausal), parents (to accuse them of 'shameful cooperation' with the previous regime), nationality (to cast doubt on their 'pure Croatian blood'), political affiliation (to 'expose' party membership for some of them), marital status and choice of partners (to imply that they were either unmarried – 'incapable of finding partners', or married to Serbs or 'quislings'), children ('not enough of them'), property ownership ('in possession of flats and houses given to them by the previous regime'), job positions ('prestigious', owing to the privileges they were accorded by the authorities in former Yugoslavia), periods of living abroad (again, to prove how 'privileged' they were), publications and attitudes to Croatia and the war (to demonstrate 'prolific writing, always critical of Croatia'). The details in the chart were either completely incorrect or products of crude manipulation. In a bizarre rhetorical game, the women were identified with rapists, aggressors, penetrators of the mythical 'Woman-Nation'. They were accused of interpreting wartime rapes as crimes of men against women, not crimes of Serbs against Bosnian Muslims and Croats. They emphasized their gender identities at the expense of national belonging.

To counteract the 'public shame' they were exposed to, the five women resorted to the weapon they could use best: writing. Vesna Kesic published an article entitled 'Ispovijed Jugo-nostalgicne vjestice' ('Confession of a "Yugo-Nostalgic" Witch') which was published by the *Women's Review of Books* and the Split-based independent newspaper *Nedjeljna Dalmacija* in May 1993 and later included in the book *Ana's Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe* (1997). In the article, she expressed her criticism of the totalitarianism of



the former regime, adding, however, that 'at that time, equally as today' she could not 'share the paranoid passion of national intellectuals, especially not their cultural racism expressed in phrases such as "We Croats are one of the oldest cultured nations in Europe, and they are Byzantine savages"' (ibid.: 196). She declared herself an enemy of 'mass conformism' and 'never-ending hypocrisy' and undertook to correct the injustice committed to the five women by giving a balanced and informed account of their activities. In her chronicle *The Culture of Lies*, which was published in several languages, Dubravka Ugresic explained the 'Yugonostalgia' she was considered guilty of in a very personal way: for her, non-alignment represented memories of her parents' intentions to 'adopt two children from the Congo'; brotherhood and unity was translated into the first kiss with a Serbian boy, made possible by 'a common Yugoslav cultural space' in a 'multinational, multicultural and monoideological community that had a future' (Ugresic 1998: 4-5). Ugresic concludes the book with a reference to the 'Witches from Rio' affair in which she ultimately refutes any collective identification:

Several years ago, my (national) cultural milieu declared me a 'witch' and burned me on a media pyre with undisguised glee ... Today, from the perspective of my nomadic exile, I can only be grateful to my former cultural milieu. I invested my own money in the purchase of my broom. I fly alone.

(1998: 273)

In addition to a strong criticism of communism's and nationalism's 'We' in her novel *Café Europa: Life after Communism* (1999a), Slavenka Drakulic gave a detailed account of the Witches affair and its consequences in *Media Studies Journal* (1999b). In an interview with the Croatian feminist journal *Kruh i ruže (Bread and Roses)* (1998: 41), Rada Ivekovic interpreted the linguistic use of the term 'witches' as a 'symptom of a medieval political program' elements of which could be found in present-day Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia alike.

### **Cyberfeminism, peace and diversification of activities**

In parallel with, as well as in opposition to, the homogenization of nationalist discourse, and despite the fact that the war had made both mail and telephone communication with Serbia and parts of Bosnia practically impossible, a number of Croatia's women groups continued to interact with peace activists across the imposed dividing line. As early as 1992, this was made possible by the introduction of the ZaMir (for peace) electronic mail network,<sup>18</sup> aimed at helping peace-oriented people, humanitarian organizations, NGOs and the independent media in the countries of former Yugoslavia improve their communication options both locally and

internationally. Djurdja Knezevic – a well-known figure in Croatian feminism from its beginnings in the late 1970s – reflects on the importance of electronic mail for women of former Yugoslavia:

Although one cannot solely blame the media for causing the war, it was a powerful tool for mobilizing the masses towards hateful thinking. As a result of the ensuing hostilities, there arose a sudden break in communication between women's groups in Zagreb and Belgrade ... The introduction of electronic mail enabled the groups to come to some consensus as to which ones were eager to continue communicating, and which were not ... An added benefit to the renewed communication was the creation of conferences to be used by women only. After only half a year, there was an enormous rise in the number of messages.

(1997: 14)

Considering the crucial role of e-mail in the establishment of independent, peace-oriented networks across former Yugoslavia, it comes as no surprise that a majority of Croatian feminists would today subscribe to Faith Wilding's (1998) optimistic contention that 'cyberfeminism could be instrumental in helping to resist the claustrophobic nationalism of Eastern European countries'. Representatives from Croatia participate in cyberfeminist international gatherings;<sup>19</sup> texts devoted to cyberfeminism are translated and published;<sup>20</sup> the Internet is interpreted as a powerful political weapon for women's activism (Jankovic 1999: 11).

Ethno-nationalism in present-day Croatia eventually lost its *raison d'être* in 1995, with the massive exodus of the Serbian minority following the military operations 'Flash' and 'Storm' in May and August respectively. Lacking cohabitation with the Other – either in the form of the majority population in a multi-ethnic federation or of a significant ethnic minority within its own national boundaries – ethno-nationalist discourse gradually lost its vigour. Both the Yugoslav socialist period and the time of prevailing ethno-nationalist discourse have made any political organizing of women hard, if not impossible. The first, 'elitist' stage of neo-feminism consisted of intellectuals, mainly Marxist critics and post-structuralists. Their audiences were restricted and their aims limited to theory-building. The second, 'humanitarian' stage, was mainly limited to work with battered women and later with women refugees and victims of organized war rape, which can be seen as fulfilment of the traditional role of women as charity-providers in patriarchal societies. In both stages, women's activities were primarily shaped by their acceptance or refusal of the ruling discourse.

The third stage, beginning in the mid-1990s, is characterized by an apparent lack of a unifying ruling discourse of collective identification. It is not an exaggeration to say that women's activities – however restricted –

have contributed to the subversion of the two totalitarian discourses preventing their constitution into a significant political force in its own right. In the third stage, numerous new groups have been established,<sup>21</sup> both in the national capital, Zagreb, and in a number of provincial or regional centres.<sup>22</sup> Many groups in this stage are 'unproblematic' by Western feminist standards: their political aim is to fight violence against women, defend women's reproductive rights and achieve equal participation of women in different areas of society. For example, the extremely dynamic and well-organized group B.a.B.e. (Be-Active-Be-Emancipated, founded in 1994) specializes mainly in law and politics; the Centre for Women's Studies (founded in 1995) focuses on feminist theory, interdisciplinary research, publishing and higher education; while Zenska Infoteka (founded in 1992) is involved in publishing, computer education and archival of materials relevant for women's projects. These three groups are publishers of feminist journals *CROW*, *Treća* and *Kruh i rize* respectively. Lesbian women are active within the group Project Contra (*Kontra projekt*), the publishing initiative Because Press, and the lesbian magazine *Just a girl*.

### Conclusion

The retrospective of gender-conscious women's activity in Croatia and former Yugoslavia since WWII reinforces the complexity of the interplay between gendered and national identities. First, it problematizes the idea of women's natural disinclination to nationalistic exclusivity; second, it emphasizes the strong correlation between gender and nation or other available collective identifications; third, it harmonizes with arguments put forward by scholars such as Nira Yuval-Davis (1997; 1998) and Judith Butler (1992), that the homogeneous 'identity politics' cannot account for women's choices.

According to Judith Butler, the content of the identity category of 'women' is never stable or fixed. It operates 'performatively', that is, it establishes itself as a category at the point at which it is 'named'. Its content is 'negotiable', which guarantees its 'democratizing' potential. It is, for Butler, 'an empty sign' (1993: 191), a category open to a continual process of transformation and resignification. In other words, it will mean different things at different times and in different contexts. Thus, Croatian feminists may now express their willingness to cooperate with conservative women's groups on the opposite side of the political spectrum, confirming that feminism – as a movement which has specifically sought to represent 'women' and 'their concerns' – cannot in fact rightfully prescribe a fixed content or meaning to these categories.



## Notes

- 1 My approach is loosely based on Benedict Anderson's view of a nation as an imagined political community. 'A nation is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their community' (Anderson 1991: 6).
- 2 Resolutions adopted by AFW at the conference in Bosanski Petrovac, quoted in *Zena* 6 (1972), p. 6.
- 3 According to *Zenax*

*Zene se bore danas rame uz rame sa svim narodima Jugoslavije ... [Zene] se bore za slobodu i nezavisnost svojih naroda, one se bore protiv fašističkog sistema ... a to je sastavni dio jedne velike borbe za njihovu ravnopravnost, koju su nasim ženama, u granicama Jugoslavije, osporavali ne dajući im ni pravo odlučivanja po pitanjima društvenog života ... Nasim boricima treba odijela, treba carapa – zima je – treba rukavica, hrane i još mnogo čega drugog. To najviše zavisi od vas, drugarice.*

(6 (1972), pp. 3–4)

- 4 This magazine was a continuation of the wartime magazine *Woman in the Resistance* (*Zena u borbi*) established in 1943 and a later publication called *Woman Today* (*Zena danas*).
- 5 For a comprehensive overview of these developments, see Antić (1992: 155–79).
- 6 In 1977, women constituted 23.3 per cent of party membership, 26.3 per cent of the delegates electing delegates to the communal assemblies, 33.6 per cent of delegates elected by basic organizations of associated labour, 18 per cent of delegates in the communal assemblies, 19.5 per cent of deputies in the assemblies of the republics and autonomous provinces, and 17.2 per cent of the deputies in the Federal Assembly. It is obvious from the above statistics that the percentage of women's participation was proportional.
- 7 In Croatia, the Serbs comprised about 12 per cent of the population, but about 60 or 70 per cent of the police force and about 40 per cent of the party membership. Under the system of self-management, enterprises were allowed to 'self-manage', but they could keep only 10 per cent of their profits, while the rest went to Belgrade and was pooled between the less developed republics (Tanner 1997: 1991).
- 8 According to Iveković:
 

Mi smo trebali biti garancija ... sreće, preslikana iz ur-vremena, njihovog vremena, vremena Revolucije koje je bilo model, a mi smo trebali na osnovu toga biti jamstvo da će se to prenijeti u nekakvu budućnost ... Za nasu generaciju je vrijeme bilo potpuno spljosteno – nase je vrijeme vriedilo samo toliko koliko je skandiralo prošlo vrijeme, tj. Revoluciju.
- 9 Extracts from an interview with Tito, *Zena* 1 (1976), p. 5.
- 10 This Alliance is the legal heir of the former Conference for the Social Activity of Women, which formed part of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Croatia.
- 11 Members of the Independent Alliance of Women are predominantly the former members of the first feminist group in Croatia, Woman and Society.
- 12 Petar Vucic in *Vjesnik*, August 1997, as quoted in Ugresic (1998: 126).
- 13 A charitable women's organization founded in 1921 with clearly ethno-nationalist orientation. It was dissolved in 1943, but its branch in the United



- States continued with activities throughout the post-WWII period. Significantly, it provided financial help for the late President Franjo Tudjman and his party in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its Zagreb branch was resurrected in October 1990.
- 14 For example, events organized by the Wall of Love, such as the Peace Congress in June 1998 in Zagreb, were sponsored by the late President Tudjman.
  - 15 In 1995, it had around forty full-time and five part-time staff.
  - 16 I discussed these issues with Tolle in a telephone interview in May 2000.
  - 17 The term 'witches' was first used in relation to the five women by a female journalist, Branka Kamenski, in the government-run newspaper *Vecernji List*.
  - 18 ZaMir is now a member of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). It has received generous funding from the Soros Humanitarian Foundations and other donors from Western Europe and the United States.
  - 19 For example, the first Cyberfeminist International in Kassel in September 1997.
  - 20 An anthology of texts on cyberfeminism as the 'theory of resistance, desire, freedom and experience' was published in 1999 by Centre for Women's Studies, Zagreb (Markovic 1999).
  - 21 My database includes sixty-one entries of individual women's groups. With different relatively autonomous branches and sections of larger organizations, the number could be closer to 100.
  - 22 In addition to the numerous Zagreb-based groups, there are independent women's groups in Dubrovnik, Knin, Mali Losinj, Osijek, Pakrac, Ploce, Porec, Pula, Rijeka, Samobor, Sibenik, Split, Velika Gorica, Vinkovci, Vojnic and Zadar.