

**“SAME PEOPLE, SAME SYSTEM”:
CHANGE AND GENDER IN A MORAVIAN TOY FACTORY**
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Introduction

In the Czech Republic, they have an old saying, “St. Martin arrives on a white horse.” It was November 11th, St. Martin’s Day, and it had in fact arrived on a white horse in the form of half a foot of wet snow. Lucka, my research assistant, and I had trudged through it after a twenty-minute ride on a tram full of quiet commuters that morning. We were due at “Moravian Toys,” a small toy company in the Brno suburb of Bohunice, at 7:30 in the morning. When we entered the front door of the company we were greeted by the usual empty lobby and dark corridors heading off into the factory. The “receptionist,” a man in his fifties, was hidden away in a small unobvious room off of the lobby. From earlier visits, we knew to lean our head in and let him know that we had arrived. Some days this was greeted with a grunt of recognition and nothing more; today he decided to phone our department destination and make them come and escort us in. He had nothing further to say to us after the call and we waited only a few minutes for a woman from the design department to arrive and lead us into the company.

The design department could not have provided a greater contrast to the dark empty spaces we had already passed through. The room we were ushered into was smaller and occupied by several women working hard on the projects being rushed to completion before Christmas. It was brightly lit and after our outside experience, remarkably warm and dry. An electric kettle was sitting in one corner next to an unmarked bottle

which, as we knew from earlier experience, contained strong homemade *slivovice*. We settled in and began an interview after warm greetings all around, comments on the weather and coffee for the two of us.

This interview began in this little corner of the company which buzzed with activity — unlike much of the company, which seemed empty and quiet even at the peak of their busiest season. The activity was, as one of the designers put it, “the same, the same as we did before, the job has not changed,” but she also wanted to make it clear that society had changed radically since the 1989 “Velvet Revolution.” How this was possible — how work could remain the same as the rest of society was turned on its head — was not a question to which those I interviewed had immediate answers. They suggested that their company was just different and maybe better than many, that their leaders had found ways to make it work in the new country. This intrigued and troubled me. Had I, in fact, traveled thousands of miles (the last several through the snow in leaky boots) to somehow arrive at the only company where things had not changed after 1989? Or worse still, were my understandings of Czech society simply wrong: had change been less dramatic than I had understood?

This paper has several purposes. It will describe some of the general changes that have impacted women in Czech society. It will describe some of the dynamics occurring in the workplace and how these impact women. Finally, it will try to answer this question of how and why things could

seem to remain the same, or more accurately, why women in this company would argue that they were the same.

Fieldwork and Factory

This article is the result of ethnographic fieldwork that took place in 2002 and 2003 in the city of Brno in the Czech Republic, and specifically at a company that I will refer to as Moravian Toys. The material discussed here is a subset of the material collected during the fieldwork. Forty employees were interviewed at Moravian Toys and most of the material in this article is drawn from those interviews. In addition, survey and additional interview data from other portions of the project are included, as is a variety of government and other reference material.

Moravian Toys is a company that produces lines of plush toys, puppets, and some clothing. It is and has been among the largest manufacturers of these products in the Czech Republic. Founded in 1909, the company is organized as a cooperative and currently employs approximately 400 people. The cooperative organization is typical of the smallest businesses in the Czech Republic. The Union of Czech and Moravian Cooperatives (*Svaz Českých a Moravských Výrobních Družstev*) reports that of their approximately 350 members only 20 employ more than 250 workers. The cooperative organization in the Czech Republic is a pattern that dates to the late nineteenth century, and apparently has been viewed with some suspicion in both the communist period and during the post-communist period. One informant suggested that they were viewed as too private for the communists and are viewed as a bit too socialist for the era of private enterprise. This company, however, operates in essentially the same fashion as a joint stock company with four individuals holding the majority of shares and 73 other employees as members of the cooperative. The current management has been with the company for many years, including the production manager with over 22 years at the company

and the general director who headed the company for a period in the 1980s as well.

Moravian Toys was restored to the heirs of the 1948 owners as restitution for seizure by the communists. The members of the cooperative pooled their resources and were able to purchase the company from the heirs, although shares in the company became concentrated in fewer hands than had previously been the case. Following 1989, Toys saw demand for their products in the Czechoslovakian, and later the Czech market, virtually disappear. They were fortunate because they had, by virtue of their status as a cooperative company, a set of established contacts in Germany and Austria which were not mediated by the ČSR export agency. They established their renewed business through these contacts and the Czech market eventually recovered to some extent. They are currently running three production lines of toys and clothing with the majority going for export markets.

As is typical of garment and other textile related companies in the region, Moravian Toys' workforce is almost entirely made up of women. Most line-workers have what is referred to as an "*odborná škola*" (Technical/Vocational High School) diploma with managers and professional staff universally having college degrees. The estimated average age of employees working at the main factory site is over 40, and the majority are either married or divorced. In this setting, it is, perhaps, not surprising that the discussion often turned to the nature of gender relations in the late transition Czech Republic.

Women Problems

Women have borne the brunt of the negative changes that have happened (in the workplace) since 1989.

Women have clung to outdated privileges which the communists gave them and some of them use them to take advantage of the current workplace.

These quotes are drawn from one Czech couple's (hours-long) argument begun over dinner one evening. It was a typical reaction to what turned out to be a question that aroused great passion. The opinions also captured what seemed to be the typical range of opinion on changes in the Czech workplace as seen through the lens of traditional gender conceptions. Despite forty years of concerted effort by the communists to improve the position of women, these ideas seem to have had a minimal effect. Although legal protections and work rules are strong, they do not appear to be effectively enforced in most cases and are circumvented relatively easily in others. In some instances, the rules designed to protect women were manipulated to disadvantage them. A number of women to whom I spoke discussed failures to achieve promotions or even find a position because their employers feared they would become pregnant and cost the company time, production, and money while on maternity leave. One younger woman stated:

If you apply for the job you have fewer chances if you are "just married" because the employers are expecting you to have babies soon. That is why my cousin had not the wedding and her graduation party at the same day as she planned. She is still single, living with her boyfriend, earning silly money as a medical assistant at the university and trying to put some money by for the time they decide to have a family.

Maternity leave in the Czech Republic is generous and jobs are guaranteed upon the end of the leave. The argument was made by one human resources manager that the rules were simply unrealistic today, that companies were hanging on by a very thin margin and they could not temporarily replace important positions.

There is some reason to believe that this is merely one small part of a broader trend to reassert the primacy of men in Czech

society. In part, this is simply a recognition that women had not advanced to a position equal to men as the communists might have claimed. Although they had achieved an improved economic position and many benefits such as maternity leave, that are frequently used as a yardstick of change, these benefits had been imposed by a system now generally viewed as illegitimate and they were not accompanied by ideological change. This theme, the erosion of women's position, has been a common one in post-communist societies particularly in such areas as reproductive rights (Gal and Kligman 2000, Verdery 1997) or job security (Scott et al. 1997).

Other evidence suggests this broader theme. The female half of the couple quoted at the start of this section complained of her failure to receive a promotion at work. She had been with the company for several years and was passed over for promotion in favor of a junior male colleague. The explanation she was given was that after 3 years of marriage she would certainly be pregnant soon. She stated with exasperation, "I don't want to get pregnant; we are not going to have children."

Her employer stated simply that he did not believe her, that all women wanted children, but that she could retain her current position. She argued to me that he was simply discriminating against her because she was a woman.

Another woman spoke bitterly about being forced to stay on maternity leave despite wanting to return to work. Her husband was not allowed by his employer to take his legally available leave to take his turn at childcare. His boss was reported to have said that the wife should take of the children and he would be fired if he tried to take leave.

An indication that this attitude is widespread came in the summer of 2004 when Hana Marvanova, a Freedom Union deputy in Parliament, resigned because she had just given birth and the Parliament has no child care center. Czech commentators argued about what message this was delivering to

the society, some arguing she was doing the right thing and others that she had sent a strong message to average women that they should not return to work (*Prague Post* 2003).

The maternity leave issue was not the only one raised although most seemed to concern children and childcare. For example, women were generally allowed to leave somewhat earlier from work than their male counterparts. This was basically to fill the need to provide after-school care for the children. Male informants, including the male half of the couple quoted at the beginning of this section, argued that this was routinely taken advantage of by women. This assertion outraged female informants.

Beyond the broader issue of overall gender equity in Czech work, several smaller issues emerged. There was a growing awareness and a hearty skepticism about the issue of sexual harassment. Although information about this problem was widely available and the government had made a concerted push in recent years to raise public awareness, the general attitude of both men and women was that it is not a problem. In fact, I was asked a number of times to confirm that American women had simply invented the idea for their own benefit (which I did not, of course, do). This attitude is promoted in the tabloid press which routinely ran stories of sexual harassment, generally focusing on the abuse of claims.

Czech law regarding the rights of women, sexual harassment and crimes primarily perpetrated against women is still evolving rapidly. Sexual harassment has been recognized since 2000, when it was added to the legal code. Prior to 2004, no specific definition was available to allow enforcement in any but the most egregious of cases. In March of 2004, the Chamber of Deputies passed an amendment to the code which defined sexual harassment in both direct and indirect forms. For the first time, this created a legal basis for challenging such practices as refusal to hire or promote women of child-bearing age. However, one

should not forget that despite these advances the belief that one can secure any sort of effective remedy through the Czech courts remains very low in many segments of Czech culture (United Nations 2003, O'Connor 2004, Griger 2004).

These issues suggest the perceived appropriate relationships between men and women in the workplace. A number of times informants replied that this job or that job were simply men's work or women's work. When challenged on the issue, the reply often made reference to the perceived greater aptitude of men at, for example, mechanical tasks or women for sewing. In other instances, it was simply stated that men and women were just right for certain positions. One informant for example stated that, of course, a receptionist is always a woman; "who wants to see a man do that job?"

The issue of men's and women's work also gave rise to a discussion of women's and men's workplaces. Women's workplaces were described as being less coarse than men's but routinely more intrusive. The women in the workplace, it was asserted, were likely to involve themselves in each other's lives regardless of the wishes of those involved. Men's workplaces were described as being typified by horseplay, crude humor, and (even today) a tendency to drink in the workplace. Interestingly, and perhaps tellingly for the validity of these stereotypes, the only worksite drinking that I did was exclusively with groups of women workers (including a 7:30 a.m. shot of potent plum brandy *slivovice* with our tea).

In a broad sense, the changing economic arrangements in Czech society have worked against women in the workplace. This is in part because of the costs of child care, maternity leave, and other benefits now at least partially fall on struggling companies, but more significantly because attitudes and ideology have not changed significantly over time. In short, gender equity has ceased to be a priority in Czech society. Gendered spaces are common within enterprises and

prevailing beliefs about the nature of these spaces serves to maintain a level of segregation. Women are allowed to advance in areas where they are perceived to have aptitude, but are effectively restricted in others.

Segmentation of the Labor Market

One of the most striking changes to workforces during the nineties, impacting men and women alike, was the dramatic change in the size and nature of workforces at individual enterprises. This was the case at Moravian Toys. With a major reduction in the mid-1990s and continuing smaller scale reductions to the present, Toys has reduced its staff considerably, from over 1,500 to 400 today. They also reduced the proportion of workers who work in the actual central production facilities, a change that has had particular impact in the textile industry.

The loss of these jobs during the nineties was also accompanied by an increasing segmentation of the existing workforce at the turn of the 21st century. These shifts mirror changes that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the First World moved from so-called “Fordist” production to “Flexible Production” regimes (see Harvey 1989 and Vallas 1993 for discussion). The economies of the developed capitalist world eliminated large numbers of manufacturing positions and workers found themselves in increasing numbers in the service sector. The labor market divided into primary and secondary sectors, which both damaged the position of labor in the First World and created a powerful “pull” for immigration into these societies. The surge in positions in the secondary labor market in advanced capitalist societies created a demand for low status individuals who would fill positions that confer little in the way of social status or hope of wage increases over time. Employers were restricted in their ability to raise wages in order to avoid upsetting social relationships defined by position within the primary labor market. For much the same reason, these positions have little

social prestige associated with them and are generally regarded as the least desirable employment available (Piore 1973). This process is now underway within the labor market of the Czech Republic and the impact is evident at Moravian Toys.

This segmentation was recognized as a long-term trend by management, if not always in clear terms, and became a major focus of their pre-EU planning. This was also the case at a number of other enterprises where directors spoke of the need to find labor that conformed to the basic characteristics of the secondary labor market. In each case, a supply of labor had to be located which could be defined as being other than part of the primary labor market. In the U.S. and Western Europe, these low status jobs are filled by three categories of individuals: immigrants, adolescents, and, to a lesser extent, women. Each of these groups could safely be established as laboring outside the mainstream system of social reward. Within the Czech Republic’s private sector, business leaders argued that the solution to this has been to employ part-time, immigrant or young employees. Many companies in the Brno area have successfully begun using immigrant Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish labor in its manufacturing positions. Moravian Toys has established the practice of using female workers who remain at home and do what is essentially “piecework.”

As an example, one General Director explained the growth of immigrant labor at his company in the following way,

It is difficult to find on the market good people even with high unemployment in Brno... We have sixty percent foreign workers (in blue collar positions) because it is hard to find people who are willing to work in an intensive working process ... and sometimes they (the foreign worker) are willing to work for money that a Czech doesn’t want to work for.

He believes this problem has arisen because,

In the communist time, before 1990, the working class was the only power in society. And the intelligentsia, the educated (they) took as half-enemies. This tendency, which was on this side, turned to the other side and it needs to be somewhere in between...everyone sees the problem that training high schools ... are not sufficiently on the market and moreover there is not interest to put children in these schools. It is a social problem.

In this we see the essential elements of the secondary labor market: immigrant labor, lower wages, and reduced social status of a type of labor. The status of this type of work is further reduced through its association with Russian and Ukrainian immigrants, who are often associated with criminality in Czech society.

Where many companies have had to create avenues for accessing low-prestige workers, Moravian Toys has built upon an existing system dating from the socialist period but redefined to meet the challenges of the current economic scene. The system relies on the discursive return to the traditional status of women in Czech society. During the communist period, the company was in the practice of hiring large numbers of women recently graduated from technical training programs and schools. These workers would then either work in their own homes or in the factory complex assembling pre-cut cloth into finished toys, clothing, and other products. This was, and remains, the most labor-intensive part of the company's production process. It was not uncommon for many of these young women to marry and have children within a few years of beginning work at the company. After their maternity leave was completed, some returned to work at the factory but many became more or less permanently "home sewers." This home-based option allowed these mothers to maintain their legally required employment but with essentially unlimited time for child care. They were also a pool of available labor for the stop

and start rhythms of state socialist productions. The standard career path at Moravian Toys included some time working from home. Over 90% of the women interviewed at Moravian Toys had worked for a time as "home sewers," including the current Director of Human Resources.

Today, this pattern persists in an outwardly similar form, but with some important differences. New employees are now usually hired to do work in the home before they have any opportunity to move to the factory. Indeed, the numbers of opportunities to do so are extremely limited, with most positions occupied by older employees who began with Moravian Toys in the eighties or early nineties. Of the more than forty workers interviewed at the factory only two were under the age of 35. Of these two, one began work in 1993 and one in 1999. Both had worked at home for some time before moving to the factory and both expressed considerable happiness at working in the factory. This is despite arduous daily commutes from locations considerably outside Brno. Over 200 women currently work at home in this fashion assembling pre-cut goods. This suggests that it is no longer an effective route to more career oriented and higher paying positions in the company.

Organization of payment for work has also changed for these women. Workers now only work when needed and as production demands. Although technically paid an hourly wage, they are in fact doing so-called "piecework." For example, a woman may receive an assignment of 15 large toys that must be assembled. For this she is paid for the number of hours that the company standard indicates it will take to assemble these toys. In this case, it might be 3 paid hours at 5 toys per hour. This does not typically amount to a salary that is competitive with workers at the factory, but as many home sewers live in villages outside of Brno (where it is considerably less expensive than in the city) it is considered adequate by management and the factory workers.

This source of secondary market labor is characterized here by the redefinition of an existing system. It retains the appearance of the old system, but marginalizes the participants. They are a key part of the production but enjoy considerably reduced prestige and opportunity than did their predecessors. However, this is obscured to some extent by the continued linkage of this system with the perceived traditional gender roles suitable for women.

We find that though the tasks remain the same, the nature of the place for these women in these positions has changed dramatically. When probed on this issue, most admit it has changed but all claim that some fundamental core of “sameness” remains. “Same people, same system” was a common refrain. The question remains why maintain this position despite considerable change, most of which has harmed women’s positions?

Legitimacy, Participation and “Honesty”

As I interviewed her, Eva was surrounded by a pack of large stuffed white bears. She was the junior sewing room worker at the age of 24 and her work area was set at the end of a row of more than a dozen more senior co-workers. The bears were her current project and as I sat with her one morning she related their purpose. The bears were part of a project that had come to the factory only a few weeks before. The design had been pushed rapidly through the design department, and the materials had been prepared only the week before in the cutting room on the second floor. The faux bear pelts and stuffing had climbed the stairs to the third floor sewing room and arrived for Eva’s sewing two days earlier. She recounted all of this and then the ultimate destination of the stuffed animal at the Nuremburg Toy Fair where it was to be an important part of a German company (to whom Moravian Toys were a sub-contractor) line of toys. Although Eva was probably the least important worker on the floor (possibly in the building), because of her youth and lack of seniority in the lowest

status work area, she was fully aware of the details and importance of the toy she was assembling. Eva was far from alone; virtually all Toys employees displayed a remarkable grasp of the intricacies of the company’s business. This was striking and raised the question, “Why would this be the case?” The answer lies in the quest by enterprises’ management for legitimacy in the eyes of their workers and the management goal of their engagement within the firm. These two concepts were keys in providing a conceptual framework for the changes that surrounded the initial privatization of enterprises and remain useful for benchmarking how industry is proceeding with continued change.

In this case the patterns of ownership and management are those that arose from the crisis in legitimacy that ended Communist rule in Czechoslovakia. Legitimacy here simply refers to the socially established correctness of a particular idea or process. Little opposition existed to the idea of private ownership in the Czech Republic in the early nineties precisely because the former system’s legitimacy had collapsed (Mareš 1995). However, the specifics of legitimizing privatization and private industry had to be established, and owners and managers who had seen 1989 could not afford to ignore the need to establish the legitimacy of their new positions. The criteria for legitimacy was described during privatization as follows, “privatization means a radical increase in the rationality and effectiveness of society’s economic and social systems” (Mareš 1995:55), and: “All of them – either workers or managers – asked only whether the new employers would be able to manage the company towards prosperity and a growth in wages (improved economic rationality of the enterprise)” (Mareš 1995:55).

This pattern was found to be basically the same in a number of enterprises studied at the time (Mareš and Musil 1994). The criteria of legitimacy were initially established as success and economic prosperity. This belief remains a powerful

one among the managers and workers at Toys.

Participation, which is not synonymous with engagement, was also seen as a key component for successful privatization. It is also rather difficult to define. Clearly, every employee participates in the business of the company. This participation may be limited and adversarial or committed and supportive. The “good worker” in the early nineties had “the duty to work well...to keep and make the most of the working hours...and to obey superiors” (Musil 1995:39), and 90% of the respondents (workers as well as managers) assume that responsibility for the overall stability and prosperity of the enterprise is to be born exclusively or almost exclusively by top management and owners (Musil 1995:35).

At Toys, significant effort has been made to encourage the internalization of the strategic viewpoint of management to achieve something beyond this; “engagement” with the company is the new goal. This has to some extent been successful at Toys. At that company the management has helped to create legitimacy for itself and its programs through raising employee participation to a new level. This new level of participation is full engagement by employees with the enterprise as, at least rhetorically, those responsible for the success or failure of the company. It has also necessitated the agreement by workers and managers on an implicit set of norms that workers feel the right and responsibility to enforce, at least through obvious resistance when they are violated. This has been necessary because of failure by the company owners and managers to achieve the desired levels of wage prosperity and enterprise economic security. Instead, these ultimately legitimating ends have been deferred into the future and an interim normative legitimacy has come into being.

This internalization of norms is largely expressed through the ideals voiced by management with reference to issues seen in the broader society. These ideals can be

summed up in the idea of “honesty” or “fairness.” Managers and workers at every level have expressed a desire for people at all levels within the company to work and behave honestly.

One designer at Toys described her husband’s dishonest boss. He had failed to pay his employees for two months. She reported that her husband and others accepted that this was because the company simply lacked the money to pay them. They then discovered he was building himself a large villa in a suburb of the city. This proved, in her mind and to his employees, that he was fundamentally dishonest. The dishonesty was not directly related to the company’s failure but to the belief that the owner was lying about the success of the business.

A group supervisor at Toys describes a good employee as one who has “honesty to quality” and is “just and fair to others.” The head of human resources at another company described a “good worker” of the early 21st century as,

What you are looking for in an employee is ... (someone) who works fair, who is proactive, who is open-minded and flexible, and also skilled. It is not enough to be skilled .. (one) must also be fair and loyal.

Finally, the need for “honesty with company materials,” that is the elimination of theft and casual destruction, was repeated in virtually every interview. One manager explained how this could be achieved,

It is the management who influences most the employees and management should be ideal in a way. This sets a good example and if this sets a good example, there’s a high probability others will be influenced and follow the good example.

To work “fair” or “honest” incorporates a number of behaviors. First, it means to be a team member and work for the group. The worker should recognize his or her

subordinate position but the manager must treat all of the workers evenhandedly. This was repeatedly contrasted with the communist period when favoritism and political promotion were ubiquitous. Second, it means accepting the basic hardships, whether one is a manager or a worker. If the company has no money, the managers should not be displaying wealth or receiving promotion. This “lead by example” idea is also believed to be a key component in reducing theft.

The argument was advanced that, on the whole, Czech society is not an honest one. During a group interview, the question arose as to whether I knew Czech immigrants and whether they were as honest as other people in the United States. My reply was that they seemed to be. This was greeted with a response that all the honest people must have left the Czech Republic. The individual workers, managers, and owners owe it to each other and the future success of the company to be committed to honesty as a group. Only in this way, they argued, could the enterprise succeed.

Same System, Same People

What does this mean? How have these efforts to pull workers into the system and maintain engagement with them helped the company? What is the linkage between this engagement and broader social shifts in which women face increasing difficulties? The short answer seems to be that the factory has been effectively recreated as a place where it is perceived that a new post-communist moral economy is in operation. The workgroups have become increasingly atomized as “surplus” labor has been lost and this, in combination with the long tenure of the women in these groups, has created extremely tight and potentially exclusive networks. The careful attention to honesty and internal transparency by managers has allowed these managers to access the social capital potential of the networks of women workers in the factory, and use this to reinforce the legitimacy of their leadership and its policies. They have established a

legitimate new organization which, managers and workers argue, can fit into the new Czech Republic and into the new Europe. This has been accomplished by management’s surrendering a certain level of rhetorical control to achieve consent and engagement from their workers. These concessions are almost entirely in the areas of “openness,” internal transparency of operation, and “honesty” in a number of forms. Seemingly small concessions, they are important because of their perceived absence in the broader society and the threat to the economic position of women.

The women workers have consented to a new and typically late-capitalist organization of work, what Burawoy (1979) called a “factory regime,” in exchange for these concessions. More than that, they have actively engaged in this new system, trying to make it work with apparently serious resolve. The conditions women face outside the company — a country perceived to be unjust in general and particularly towards women — have created an environment where the inherent injustices in the new society dwarf the apparently minor injustices in the workplace. This new factory system is economically unequal, but it is an acceptable exchange for being part of something that works economically and morally. Whether this support and engagement continues when the new economic realities begin to tell remains a question for the future.

By any objective measure, the workplace has changed dramatically. The responses to the contrary described in the first section of this article are for this reason puzzling. These answers are explicable through an understanding of the maintenance and adaptation of existing systems to meet new needs. The use of a work system at Toys that had always taken advantage of existing gender roles to mobilize labor was easily adapted to the new circumstance. The perceived declining position of women in the country as a whole is contrasted with the “fair deal” one can expect at the factory. This drives a set of relationships that rely

heavily on the social capital expressed through “trust” and “honesty” discourses that have allowed the company to effectively maintain and adapt its production to the new circumstances of the post-privatization world. The “same system” is not an economic or industrial one, but instead a moral one, which is perceived to have been overlaid over the factory system.

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