

THE SPOILS OF FREEDOM: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND FEMINISM AFTER THE FALL OF SOCIALISM

Renata Salecl. London and New York:
Routledge, 1994.

by *Eva C. Karpinski*

Renata Salecl's study appears in the "Opening Out: Feminism for Today" series which, according to its editor Teresa Brennan, is committed to crossing disciplinary boundaries and returning feminist theory to current political questions. Salecl, a Slovenian philosopher and sociologist, introduces herself as "a feminist intellectual from Eastern Europe," a position she further problematizes by recognizing the conflicting claims on her by Western intellectuals, expecting her to be a kind of "privileged informer," and her own desire to address some fundamental issues in contemporary Western critical theory without being determined by her cultural background.

In fact, there is a constant tension in the book between these two perspectives: Salecl's political experience (her involvement in the opposition movement in Slovenia that led to the collapse of socialism and her participation in the struggle against nationalism and sexism in the post-socialist era) is coupled with her professional interest in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and feminism. The originality of her approach lies precisely in the reciprocity of these two perspectives. She gives a "new" theoretical reading to the political realities of Eastern Europe while offering new and often surprising insights into Western theory confronted with recent developments in Eastern Europe. In particular, she shows how the supposedly universal notions of democracy, human rights, or the capitalist society become incorporated into new political discourses in sometimes disturbing ways.

Salecl refers to her own East Euro-

pean "otherness" to illustrate how similarities and differences are constructed around power, how "sameness" of the Other often gets repressed and cultural differences are forcefully implemented. Since the questions of alterity are central to her argument, it is not surprising that she uses the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore the mechanism of ideological identification in the context of libidinal economy. Crucial here is the concept of fantasy understood as the way the subject organizes its enjoyment, which can explain why people are complicit with certain political discourses. According to Salecl, this Lacanian concept provides an important corrective to liberal theories of democracy that exclude fantasy and are thus unable to account for the fact that people will not always identify with the position that is ostensibly "good" for them.

The book is divided into two parts, moving from the particular ("the fall of socialism") to the universal ("its implications for theory"). I find the first part to be much stronger than the more speculative Part II, perhaps because the former successfully integrates theory and practice while the latter completely ignores the historical and material realities of people's lives. In Part I, Salecl offers a good analysis of such problems in today's post-socialist societies as ethnic tensions, neo-racism, nationalism, anti-feminism, and the emergence of the post-socialist moral majority, making constant cross-references between East European and Western countries. Particularly illuminating is her reading of the discourse of abortion in relation to the discourse of nationalism, as well as her two case studies of the working of fantasy behind the socialist enforcement of "normalization" after the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia and the struggle for hegemony in the former Yugoslavia.

In Part II, devoted to such theoretical issues as the liberal theory of justice, the self-binding of power in democracy, the subject's transgression of the law in socialism, and the problem of human rights and feminism,

Salecl makes several controversial and provocative claims, revealing her "democratic bias" *vis-à-vis* socialism (which to her seems to have been totally discredited by East European regimes). Salecl's "metaphysical" approach to human rights and her attempt to salvage the concept of "cogito" seem to me rather problematic and dangerous to the feminist project. The Marxist, feminist, or Foucauldian critiques of liberal democracy are either dismissed or given lip service while she firmly rests on orthodox Lacanian grounds. In this context, the weakness of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a "universal" explanatory scheme becomes apparent in that it disregards the historical and material differences, complexities, individual trajectories, and heterogeneity in the functioning of the two antagonists of Salecl's study, of what she calls the "socialist system" and "democracy" respectively.

BETWEEN THE FIELDS AND THE CITY: WOMEN, WORK AND FAMILY IN RUSSIA, 1861-1914.

Barbara Alpern Engel. Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1994.

by *Jacqueline M. Portuguese*

In her book, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work and Family in Russia, 1861-1914*, Alpern Engel sets out to analyze how the socio-economic changes which took place between the end of serfdom and the onset of the First World War affected the lives of Russian peasant women. While she ultimately leans toward the conclusion that peasant women were probably better off before the changes, Alpern Engel's main thesis is that the effects were ambiguous and contradictory, depending upon a woman's age, kin network, marital status, place of residence, and line of work. The changes which she refers to are those which accompanied the rise of industrialization and urbanization at the

end of the nineteenth century.

In order to support her thesis, Alpern Engel draws heavily upon archival sources—specifically, cantonal and village court cases, petitions to state and village authorities, and transcripts of divorce testimonies. She begins with a description of the patriarchal structure of peasant life before the rise of industrialization. She notes how men, particularly the eldest, had absolute authority in the family, the peasant assemblies, and the cantonal courts. Women could not own land and their only access to it was through a male relative. Marriage was patrilocal and a sexual double standard was in practice. Wife assault was accepted as a means of asserting male authority, provided that it was not “excessive.” This patriarchal authority was reinforced by the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church and by the laws of the Tsarist state.

Despite these horrible conditions, Alpern Engel refuses to portray peasant women as totally powerless victims of male oppression. Instead, she highlights women’s informal, as opposed to formal, avenues of power and resistance. For instance, she notes that a woman’s authority within the extended family increased with each child she bore and as she aged. She reached the height of her power as a mother-in-law when she gained the right to issue commands to her son’s wives. Besides this oppressive display of power, peasant women also exercised their agency in a positive way. One example of this was their resistance to wife assault which took various forms including appealing to the authorities, petitioning for divorce, and fleeing the village. The theme of agency versus victimization and the refusal to portray peasant women as either powerful or powerless appears throughout the book.

The remainder of the book consists of a discussion of the contradictory effects of industrialization and migration on the lives of Russian peasant women. On the negative side, for instance, wives who remained in the village after their husbands migrated found themselves

more economically dependent on them than before. In the agriculturally-based peasant economy, the family had been the unit both of production and of consumption. Although marriage was characterized by a sexual division of labour, it was an economic partnership in which the roles of men and women were complementary and interdependent. With industrialization, the family became less of a unit of production as women became more dependent on their husbands’ and sons’ wages to purchase goods which they had previously produced at home.

On the positive side, the wages that migrant husbands sent home helped to improve the health and standard of living of their wives and their children. Moreover, it soon became apparent that the wives of migrant workers would need to learn how to read and write in order to correspond with their husbands and to deal with all

the business that they would normally have taken care of. This led to increased literacy rates among women as families increasingly came to see the benefits of educating them. The same contradictory effects of migration can be seen in the lives of women who left the village to take up work in the factories and in other urban jobs such as domestics, nurses, tailors, cooks, and craftswomen. For instance, while living away from the village gave a woman an independent wage and a chance to escape the constant scrutiny of her male kinsmen, it also exposed her to all sorts of economic and sexual exploitation in addition to abuse and rape. Moreover, like her male relatives, she had to send a portion of her wages back to her family. Economic and social vulnerability combined with a lack of education and adequate birth control methods often resulted in illegitimate child-birth which left many unmarried



UNIVERSITE
YORK
UNIVERSITY

Toronto, Canada

Faculty of Arts

Department of Political Science

Applications are invited for a tenure-track appointment at the assistant professor level in **International Relations** with a specialization in Southeast Asia. Candidates are expected to have a strong record in teaching and publication in multi-lateralism and regional security. Of particular interest are candidates with additional areas of expertise in issues such as sustainable development, gender, and international relations theory. Appointment to commence July 1, 1996.

Requirements: PhD or equivalent. *Salary:* Commensurate with qualifications.

Applicants should send a curriculum vitae, appropriate samples of their scholarship, teaching evaluations, and arrange to have three letters of reference sent to: Prof. Harvey G. Simmons, Chair, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, S669 Ross, York University, 4700 Keele St., North York, Ont. M3J 1P3. Deadline for applications is Mar. 1, 1996.

This appointment is subject to budgetary approval. York University is implementing a policy of employment equity, including affirmative action for women faculty. In accordance with Canadian immigration requirements, this advertisement is directed to Canadian citizens and permanent residents.

migrant women in dire straits.

Alpern Engel's book is a helpful tool for those interested in deciphering the history of Russian women in particular and of peasant women in general. Its value lies in its use of peasant women's own voices to tell the story of their lives. By using this method, Alpern Engel is able to avoid the essentialist trap and to convey the rich diversity of peasant women's experiences of migration and industrialization. She shows that while all members of the peasantry suffered from the upheavals caused by industrialization, women suffered more than men. Moreover, some women suffered more than others. Through it all, women were not completely powerless. Many managed to find ways to resist both the institutional and individual forms of oppressions arising out of socio-economic transformation. Finally, some women were able to navigate their way through the maze of change and to come out ahead of where they had been before the rise of industrialization.

THE ANT HEAP

Margit Kaffka. Trans. Charlotte Franklin. London: Marion Boyers, 1995.

by J. Rochon

This novel, *Hangyaboly* (The Ant Heap) was written by Kaffka in 1917. It is her last novel and has just now been translated into English. Within these pages she relays six months of life in a convent in Hungary. Her work is somewhat autobiographical; her own schooling as a child took her into a convent and later as an adult she returned for a teaching diploma. This novel speaks more kindly and gently of her convent experiences than her earlier works such as, *Triumph*, and the short story, "Letters from a Convent." The tale she weaves is not, however, without its critical factors. She alludes to the hypocrisy of the priests and nuns and explores

earthly love through many of her characters who are expected to be above this human emotion. The Order of the Sisters of Mercy is portrayed in a convincingly realistic way; so faithful is her rendering that the Order would not forgive Kaffka for writing this novel.

Her prose is graceful yet strong, with description that is vivid and hypnotic. Kaffka's style of writing is most effective in setting scenes and creating events. The rhythms and rituals of convent life are conveyed in the style and flow of her writing; smooth, measured, and without waste. In her telling she clearly portrays the frustration of segregation from all worldly things through the characters of the young women. There is a desperate urge to feel grown up and experienced in the world, the very thing that convent life strictly prohibits. The events of the outside world, a supper engagement with a local

respected Catholic woman, a recital of religious poetry and hymns in town, are described in an enthusiastic way. Kaffka uses her craft most effectively in this way to present on the page the inner feelings of her characters.

The rigidly disciplined life of the convent is displayed most clearly in the nuns who are older and more traditional in their thinking. Their devotion is unalterable and unquestioned. Kaffka is careful however to not hold these women up as the true representation of the Sisters of Mercy. There is a diversity among the women of the Order which supercedes their commonalities and provides conflict within the novel. There is a great desire in the younger sisters for a liberalization within the walls of the convent, a relaxing of the rules for a more breathable space within their faith. When the Reverend Mother dies and a new head of the convent must be elected there is a



Toronto, Canada

Faculty of Arts Department of Political Science

Applications are invited for a contractually limited position at the lecturer or assistant professor level in **International Relations**. Of particular interest are candidates with specializations in some combination of the following areas: international relations theory, conflict and security, international political economy, multilateralism, global order, Canadian foreign and defence policy, U.S. foreign policy, and global issues. Appointment for a one year contract to commence July 1, 1996.

Requirements: PhD or equivalent. *Salary:* Commensurate with qualifications.

Applicants should send a curriculum vitae, appropriate samples of their scholarship, teaching evaluations, and arrange to have three letters of reference sent to: Prof. Harvey G. Simmons, Chair, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, S669 Ross, York University, 4700 Keele St., North York, Ont. M3J 1P3. *Deadline for applications* is Feb. 1, 1996.

This appointment is subject to budgetary approval. York University is implementing a policy of employment equity, including affirmative action for women faculty. In accordance with Canadian immigration requirements, this advertisement is directed to Canadian citizens and permanent residents.