

Days that shook a women's world

FOUR WEEKS ago I left England somewhat apprehensively, intending to combine an international conference where I was to present a paper and a holiday in Denmark. I little suspected that I was going to be involved in probably the most momentous event of my academic life, if not my life in general.

The conference, entitled "Women in a Changing Europe", was jointly organised by the Danish Council for Research Policy's committee of feminist research and the European Network for Women's Studies. Some 320 women attended and at least the same number had to be turned away. Women came from all over Europe, including about 60 women from various countries in eastern Europe. The Scandinavian countries were well represented, inevitably, but many came from Italy, Holland, France, Germany and Austria. The smallest group was probably that from the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The conference began excitingly and exhilaratingly on a Sunday morning with the women packed into the main lecture hall of the University of Aalborg – and not one man in sight. The organisers all introduced themselves, followed by representatives of all the various delegations – and all, without exception, in impeccable English. There was an amazing feeling of intellectual challenge, in anticipation of our trying to forge new perspectives and ideas about a future Europe and women's place within it. Whatever differences were to emerge were minute compared to the excitement we all



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felt about the prospects of attempting to develop new intellectual and academic relationships and notions.

Drude Dahlerup from Denmark, in presenting the first plenary session, set the tone of mature negotiation and development, arguing how important it was now, at least from the perspective of the Nordic countries, for women to learn to live with and negotiate about the state, especially the welfare state. She pinpointed anxieties about entry into a broader European Economic Community, with less good social policies, especially for women.

Workshops followed in which papers were presented from a variety of perspectives and from different countries. I was involved in a large, lively group discussing the implications of changing families for women's future lives. What

was particularly surprising was the extent to which all the scholars were interested in the impact and effects of educational changes and developments on women's lives both inside and outside families. The evening ended on a high and invigorating note.

The next morning, at breakfast, this exhilaration was rudely shattered by the news of the coup in the Soviet Union. By some curious quirk of fate, the first plenary session of the day – at 9am – was given by a woman from Russia. Olga Lipovskaya presented an extremely eloquent and articulate paper about differing perspectives between feminists in the east and west of Europe. With amazing presence, she did not refer to or deal with the contemporaneous situation in her country. It was a superbly polished presentation.

Try as we all did to avoid detailed discussion of the situation and continue with the organised programme of the conference, this was punctuated with attendance at mass viewings of Sky Television to keep up-to-date with the news. Indeed, the veneer of respectful silence was quickly broken and, although the workshops and plenary sessions continued, we could not help but get into detailed and painful discussions about future prospects. We also began to discuss how to develop and maintain the links and relationships with the women from the USSR.

The ending of the coup was perhaps as dramatic and eventful as its beginning, with a "messenger" running from workshop to workshop to inform of the

latest news, just as we at least were in the middle of an intensive discussion about future living styles, comparing Nordic and eastern European developments.

This was followed by a reception and huge conference dinner, in the 21st century style townhall in the centre of Aalborg. Of course, despite the continuing lack of clarity and anxiety about the future in the Soviet Union, this event was turned into a major celebration. There was a mix of speeches and entertainments and much indulgent eating of a range of exotic foods.

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What was most stirring and striking, with the benefit of hindsight, were the similarities rather than differences in our concerns and issues for serious academic discussion and evaluation and also the extremely high level of education of all the women at the conference. For the native English speakers perhaps the most demonstrable evidence of this was the ability of all conference participants to debate in English. This was particularly evident in the women from eastern Europe, who were also telling us how

impoverished they all were by comparison with their Western counterparts. Clearly their countries' priorities have been entirely different from those at least in Britain. Education and foreign language teaching has been a priority in eastern Europe, if the evidence of this conference is anything to go on. This priority of educational developments, especially for women, was also cited by women in my own workshop.

Briefly reflecting on why this was not the case in England, I was suddenly struck by the fact that four of my senior colleagues at South Bank have been women not brought up in English but have come from Sweden, Italy, Spain and Hungary.

Returning to England after my holiday to attend a conference on quality and equality in higher education, where I presented a workshop on equal opportunities in higher education, I was forcibly struck by the contrasts. The setting was the luxurious Madingley Hall, home of the extra-mural department of the University of Cambridge. The ambience was of a very traditional approach to learning and where it might almost seem vulgar to consider questions of women's opportunities for equal treatment within the higher education system and beyond. A far cry indeed for those three momentous days in Denmark, which for me at least were as important as John Reed's *Ten Days that shook the World*

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