

Women's and Feminist Activism in Western Europe

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Different generations of Western European feminists struggled to realize full access to citizenship and the creation of a participatory democracy that ensured social solidarity for all citizens. As a direct result of the struggles of twentieth-century activists, twenty-first-century women in Western Europe have the right to vote, retain control over property and capital, combine motherhood and work, receive equal wages for equal work, pay taxes, and access higher education, and to enjoy reproductive rights and gender-specific care. However, it is important to realize that the majority of these rights, accessible now for three or four generations of Western European women, still prove elusive in some contexts.

In some countries, specific so-called *first-wave* goals were generally implemented only a few decades ago. Most Western European countries passed laws to give the full right to vote for women between 1913 (Norway) and 1944 (France). Remarkably, women in Switzerland accessed suffrage as late as 1971 owing to a persistent ideology linking women to the realms of children, church, and kitchen. These private-sphere realms could presumably be dealt with through municipalities and cantons that included women's votes. The belief was that parliament should occupy itself with issues that lay beyond the "legitimate" sphere of women's influence such as questions of war and peace, the maintenance of the army and the navy, and the

administration of the nation. Surprisingly, it was not only men, but also certain groups of conservative women, collectively gathered into the Federation of Swiss Women Against the Right to Vote, who embraced this separation of the private and the public spheres. So, while second-wave feminism started to challenge the patriarchal foundations of post-World War II Western Europe's welfare states, some countries were still in the process of implementing essentially first-wave goals. The Swiss example is just one of many illustrating the tenacious force of gendered, social, and cultural structures.

First- and second-wave (or pre- and post-war) feminist activists therefore stressed the fact that next to attaining legal rights, women also had symbolical hurdles to jump, such as contesting dominant images of womanhood. Virginia Woolf's famous reference in 1931 to the "Angel in the House," borrowed from Coventry Patmore's poem celebrating domestic bliss, is a case in point (Woolf 1993). This image of a selfless sacrificial woman of the nineteenth century, whose sole purpose in life was to soothe, flatter, and comfort men, resonates in the contemporary moment, capturing ongoing struggles of feminist activism. In order to be able to participate effectively in the public sphere, women and minority groups must engage with an inner struggle with these "Angels in the House" – these icons of invisibility and submission. Such consciousness-raising initiatives are usually seen as specific to second-wave feminism. However, as Woolf's essays show, they were also relevant to the first wave.

Building on the first wave, second-wave feminists made this issue one of their explicit goals, raising awareness about the feminist mantra that the personal is political. Feminists of the time argued that it was not by

nature that women in mid-twentieth-century Western Europe were locked in the private sphere or took care of the reproduction of male citizens without fully sharing in their civil rights. Personal experiences of marginalization and unequal power balances, second-wave feminists argue, are nearly always the result of interacting political and societal structures. Second-wave feminism revealed that Western European women's personal experiences of marginalization and submission were shared by women in comparable geopolitical situations and positions. They challenged the idea that women in general enjoyed being voiceless or rendered a mere visual spectacle in the public sphere. Rather, second-wave feminism posited that this division of gendered positions between the private and the public was the result of a history of societal conventions and geopolitics funded by patriarchal systems – the law, the church, the class system, and so on.

Institutionalized gender roles were assigned to the female body and, as Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 famously claimed, “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 1989, 301). Feminists contended that the structure of the private sphere was entangled with and embedded in the organization of the public sphere and equally governed by sexual politics. Therefore, Western European feminist activists continuously demonstrated how the personal and the political, the private and the public, were not neatly separated but inevitably intersecting.

Following this line of thought, second-wave feminists argued that the house as the patriarchal metaphor of seclusion, intimacy, and nourishment was not necessarily a safe space for women and did not protect them from gendered power differences, violence, and rape. Additionally, women of color pointed out that although power and the possibility of rape and violence are always present in the private sphere, the house

simultaneously can function as a shelter from racism. Black feminism was thereby claiming an explicitly race-specific manifestation of feminist activism *within* feminist activism, by focusing on the complex intersection of sexual and racial politics (Carby 1982).

While politicizing and complicating the fixed connotations of the private sphere, second-wave feminists also directed their actions toward the gendered politics of the public sphere. One of the activist groups gaining international attention in this respect was the Dutch Mad Mina (“Dolle Mina” in Dutch, named after the famous first-wave suffragette Wilhelmina Drucker (1847–1925)). One of Mad Mina's early actions consisted of the public burning of bras in front of the statue of Drucker in Amsterdam, paying homage to the burning of corsets by first-generation feminists. Such feminist protests against patriarchal conventions and gender divisions were radical and political but always characterized by humor and, therefore, easily garnered international media attention (Buikema and van der Tuin 2014). Mad Mina would pinch men's bottoms in public, close down Amsterdam public toilets for men only, and occupy newsrooms and the remaining male-only educational institutions.

Other famous second-wave feminist actions involved pro-abortion politics. The United Kingdom legalized abortion in 1967 whereas the Dutch only did so in 1981. For example, Dutch feminist activists interrupted a conference of gynecologists in 1970 by showing their naked bellies painted with the slogan “boss in own belly.” Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, the streets and other public spaces were claimed as sites to demonstrate the presence and the agency of women. These kinds of actions determined, to a certain extent, the public image of second-wave feminists as bra-burning men haters and, some might suggest, may have added to the

alleged generation gap between second- and third-wave activism in the West today.

In spite of this polarizing stereotypicalization, second-wave feminist activism playfully performed and embodied the dethronement of Virginia Woolf's "Angel in the House." One aspect continually exposed by feminist activism is that attaining any semblance of first-class citizenship is obstructed by many more factors than legislation alone. Further work is needed to investigate the ways in which womanhood and the female body are imaged and also how female bodies and other systems of stratification such as class, race, religion, and sexuality are entangled. Completing women's access to full citizenship, becoming an integral part of the democratic system of representation, is a complex and longitudinal process involving simultaneous change on many different levels. As first- and second-wave feminist activism illustrates, the intersection of the personal and the political can only ever be successfully realized if it includes the cultural analysis of the intersection of the empirical and the symbolic. As Gayatri Spivak also explained in her agenda-setting article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 1988), this is where global feminism and Western European feminist activism meet, be it by means of rebellious humor, political radicalism, theoretical analysis, or the struggle for other emancipatory measures.

Contemporary discussions about the effects of the two feminist waves in Western Europe invariably involve key indicators and focus on questions such as: (1) what is the proportion of women in full-time employment?; (2) what are their career opportunities for leading positions?; (3) what is the glass ceiling in Western European society?; (4) what childcare facilities are available?; (5) what is the male participation rate in care and domestic work?; and (6) what are the pay differences between men and women?. The tension between equality and difference, the

ties – as well as tensions – between the law and feminist ethics, the inseparability of the private and the public, the personal and the political, the empirical and the symbolical, are all still feminist concerns.

That notwithstanding, a major concern of twenty-first-century feminist activism in Western Europe is that the achievements of the movement for women's liberation threaten to become disconnected from their initial manifestations of equality for all, understood as transnational solidarity. Instead, the outcome of the two feminist waves seems mainly to serve neoliberal capitalism and the concomitant individualization of the process of emancipation and social participation (Scott 2011). As Nancy Fraser's timely summary in *The Guardian* (Fraser 2013) suggests, this risk of female empowerment becoming the handmaiden of global neoliberal capitalism might have been implicated in the movement from the start. Western European second-wave feminist goals and strategies in the end seem to have been ambivalent and thus susceptible for two different elaborations. The initial deeply political commitment to participatory democracy and social justice included goals which, with hindsight, simultaneously served the neoliberal vocabulary of autonomy, choice, and meritocratic advancement. Contrary to the feminist postcolonial and postsocialist project which situates the female subject as subjected to patriarchal, racist, and capitalist structures – the very same structures that produced the image of women as the "Angels in the House" – neoliberal feminisms seem to promote participation in capitalism and patriarchy.

The feminist struggle for paid labor for women, economic independence, and female empowerment, for example, now threatens to serve an increasingly fluid and flexible labor market. Movements such as Facebook's CEO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* encourage women

to develop themselves in the vocabulary of the free market (Sandberg 2013). Proceed and be bold is the mantra. Female autonomy is a brand. Neoliberal feminism is therefore at risk of serving the status quo and, in that process, reducing subjects to economic actors, to servants of capital, encouraged to invest in their own individual liberation and autonomy instead of striving for social justice for all. To paraphrase Wendy Brown (2013), neoliberal feminism seriously risks the gradual replacement of the homo politicus for the homo economicus. Additionally, the rightful second-wave feminist emphasis on differences within possible manifestations of feminine identities (black, white, colored, queer, trans, hetero, etc.) threatens to replace analysis of political economic developments and circumstances and instead takes the patriarchal capitalist vocabulary of the free market for granted. Third-wave feminism became so concerned with stressing the differences within the category of woman as such that the feminist enterprise of analysis on the level of the productivity of societal structures and transnational solidarity became undertheorized.

The challenge for twenty-first-century third-wave feminists is to develop and practice an activism that continues truly to connect the local and the global, the private and the public, the personal and the political, the empirical and the symbolical. Third-wave feminism should therefore embark on a return to the history of feminism and a relocation of the definitions of emancipation, liberation, and solidarity (Buikema and van der Tuin 2014). Inspirational texts of first- and second-wave feminism, most notably Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir 1989), for example, already theorized liberation as a concept that not only referred to the individual but also to the simultaneous desire for a freedom for the other(s). This ethical-political second-wave nuance – one geared toward justice for all

rather than merely towards equality and emancipation – needs to be reactivated in the context of twenty-first-century feminist activism; a return to the envisioned futures of the past. This implies, for example, that actions to question the glass ceiling for women in business, culture, and politics are accompanied by critical reflections concerning the ideologies of paid and unpaid work both locally and globally. Actions against the trafficking of women need to be accompanied by critical reflections on the gendered intersections of private and public, personal and political. Western feminist criticisms concerning the alleged Islamophobia of Ukraine feminist activists such as the FEMEN group need to be paired to an analysis of the sexualization of the postsocialist female subject in Eastern European discourses, and so on.

SEE ALSO: Democracy and Democratization; Gender, Politics, and the State in Western Europe

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