

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

**'European Feminism's Engagement With Its Own Past:
The Utility Of Historical Narratives In Constructing
Gender-Based Identities'**

University of Lincoln, UK, 8-11 September 2009

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

1. Executive summary

The ESF Exploratory Workshop ‘European Feminism’s Engagement With its Own Past: The Utility of Historical Narratives in Constructing Gender-Based Identities’ took place at the University of Lincoln, UK between 8 – 11 September 2009, convened by Professor Krista Cowman with Dr Jirina Smejkalova.

There were 17 invited participants, of whom 16 attended along with the representative of the European Science Foundation, Dr Algis Krupavicius. (One delegate from Austria was unfortunately prevented from attending due to a last-minute illness, but kindly sent her paper for pre-circulation and discussion allowing experiences of women in the Southern Austro-Hungarian Empire to be considered). Participants came from eleven separate ESF member countries as well as Russia and the United States of America. The workshop offered broad representation from countries with different experiences of both feminist movements and of historical engagement with these movements. Unfortunately it was not possible to invite any male scholars as the field still remains one which is heavily dominated by women and it was not possible to identify any male participants with appropriate scientific knowledge. Scholars represented a range of disciplines, history (including social, political and cultural history), sociology and political science. In addition, many of the participants who are now historian by departmental affiliation also had multi-disciplinary backgrounds gained through working in women’s studies or gender studies departments. As a key part of the workshop involved considering the interface between the production of history as a site of political activism and the presence of history within the academy the participants also included some activists and independent scholars.

The aim of the workshop was to explore the possibility of a longer-term research network which would consider how previous generations of European feminists had engaged with the history of their own movement(s) as a means of constructing a distinct, gendered political identity for women and how such engagement continues into the present day. From the mid-nineteenth century up to the First World War autonomous women’s organisations emerged throughout Europe, often transcending national boundaries in joint campaigns and shared strategies. A pattern of historicising ongoing feminist activity was one common strategy as activists sought

and shared historical precedents as a means of legitimizing their current demands. This continued in inter-war Europe but proceeded unevenly during the Cold War era when European articulations of gender identity were replaced by more nationally-specific examples whilst a desire to “recover” previous feminist examples in the West was not seen until more recently in the East. The network would integrate the new knowledge and findings of these recent projects with Western narratives of the history of European feminism, re-establishing shared interests in the history of European feminism fractured by the Cold War. Participants discussed different projects which might be undertaken by such a network, and different ways of financing and supporting its meetings and work.

The majority of the workshop sessions began with short presentations by individual participants which were then followed by open, free-ranging ‘brain-storming’ discussions involving all participants. The short presentations were based on pre-circulated abstracts which had been distributed to all of the participants in advance of their attendance. This removed any need to waste valuable workshop time in providing unnecessary background or context and led to informed and extremely high-quality discussion.

The workshop kept firmly to the pre-circulated preliminary programme with the one exception of a slightly later start on the first morning, facilitated by completing the registration formalities for most of the participants on the preceding evening. Following an introduction by the convenor, Professor Krista Cowman, participants heard the presentation from Algis Krupavicius on behalf of the European Science Foundation which offered some useful information on future funding schemes which might be applicable to this project. The remaining sessions covered three main areas: The first day was devoted to discussion of presentations which sketched out the ‘state of the art’ regarding historical knowledge of feminism in particular countries or regions (including trans-national approaches) whilst the second day focussed on different methodologies and current projects. The afternoon of the second day was devoted to smaller break-out sessions with three working groups which discussed themes for future work. This meant that the small number of participants who unfortunately had to leave early on the final day (due to complex transport arrangements) were able to feed into the final planning session.

Although the workshop was extremely intense there was ample opportunity for socialising and more informal discussion and network-building during the three convivial evening meals which kept participants together and focussed. Themes raised during the sessions thus continued to form the basis of conversations late into both evenings. The conference dinner on the final evening was held in the city centre offering participants the opportunity to see some of the sights of the historic city of Lincoln.

2. Scientific content.

The first day focussed on outlining the different historical narratives of feminism which currently exist in a number of European countries. These sessions contextualised feminist movements' past and present uses of history within different national settings, delineating specific nationally-determined chronologies. Presentations spanned the origins of feminist movements in the 19th century but also considered more recent events (post 1960s) which are becoming the object of historical scholarship. Obviously not every participant was able to present on this theme, but the examples (from Britain, Austria, Germany, Poland and Hungary) offered a wide spread of experience between East and West whilst the format of open discussion and the tactic of pre-circulating abstracts allowed for further different comparisons to be made. It quickly became clear that although the names and specific aims of women's organisations had differed between the countries represented the nineteenth century witnessed the establishment and growth of groups in each which aimed to promote women's rights and emancipation in the fields of employment, education and politics. Many of these groups presented versions of their own histories as they went along, with similar international overviews appearing in different national contexts. Several differences emerged which would need to be given careful consideration in attempting any European-wide analysis. Some countries could point to organisations forming in the 1840s whilst others came decades later. The current level of historical knowledge differs with Western countries often being able to draw on four decades of scholarship whilst much of the work on early feminist movements in Eastern Europe is at an earlier stage. There are also differences in identifying what sort of organisations might be described as

feminist and in selecting which organisations to include or exclude in further study. Finally there was the question of retaining a strong distinction between a general history of European feminist movements and a focus on the historical content of such movements, considering, for example, how 19th century feminists wrote the history of their own activism whilst it was in progress.

The final session of the first day built on the comparative discussions prompted by the earlier sessions to consider some of the advantages and problems in adopting transnational approaches to the history of European feminism. Comparative approaches have uncovered the extent of European networks between feminist organisations particularly prior to the Cold War which could offer useful frameworks for comparing their use of history. The session also pointed up some of the issues to be confronted when considering feminist movements Eastern Europe under Communism when different identities and definitions predominated. It was noted that, twenty years after the end of the Cold War, we are in a different position in European feminist relations with key names and events from Eastern European feminist history available for integration into new histories. This would seem to be an apposite time to begin such a project.

The first sessions on the second day discussed the feminist concept of producing history as a form of activism with examples from the 19th century and the more recent, post-1960s feminist movement. It quickly became clear that history had continued to be used as a tool, but not always unselectively. This was further complicated when deploying the methodology of oral history in studies concerned with collecting activists' experiences which was explored in depth in the afternoon session. The complex relationship between feminist history within and beyond the academy was discussed in great depth whilst the sessions also described some large-scale oral history projects currently underway in a number of different European countries. The remaining session was aimed at interrogating the familiar 'wave' metaphor. This is commonly used to differentiate early, 19th century feminist movements from those which emerged in the 1960s (often referred to as 'Women's Liberation Movements' in the Anglo-American context). Eastern European scholars have been strongly critical of the widespread use of this metaphor which fails to capture the experience of feminist movements beyond North America and Western

Europe. It has also been criticised by Western European scholars for its implication that little or no feminist activity occurred between the waves. Other terms such as eruption, defined by Karen Offen's work, were considered. On the other hand, it was noted that many Western feminists had used the term 'second-wave' as a means of both identifying themselves with, and distinguishing themselves from an earlier generation.

The remainder of the second day was spent in three smaller working groups which each considered different approaches and methodologies which might be taken in a longer-scale comparative project. Under 'approaches' participants were also asked to identify questions for further investigation (including geographical areas not currently represented) as well as considering possible sections for an edited volume summarising the substantive content of the workshop. The working groups reported during the final morning in a session which also considered other funding schemes which might be appropriate to the project. Again the input of the ESF observer was most helpful at this stage. We were also able to draw on the expertise of Dr David Young from the Research Office at the University of Lincoln who gave a short presentation on the final day which provided participants with further information, particularly in regard to Framework funding opportunities.

3. Assessment of the workshop

The workshop brought to light many of the historic connections between feminist movements in Europe which emphasized the paradox of the lack of European-wide histories compared with nationally-focussed studies. It was clear from the presentations and subsequent discussions that the production of history was a common feature to feminist organisations across Europe in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that it remains part of the activity of many feminist groups today. It was thought that the concept of 'travelling feminist heritages' offered several ways of exploring the key question of how European feminism has created and used history. A number of themes emerged from discussions which were associated with this concept and which could be used to give a sharper focus to a collaborative project. These included:

- Heroines or icons. Many papers discussed the process through which feminists have identified, constructed and deployed historical heroines. Figures such as Jeanne d'Arc appear in different national contexts, and across different historical periods, often put to differing uses.
- The spread, reception and impact of feminist texts including which texts became 'key texts', mapping the translation, spread and popularity of authors such as Mill, Ibsen, de Beauvoir etc. Mapping this in the later chronological period would provide a useful way to open up East/West divisions.
- Connections between feminist production of history and European integration. Whilst we are familiar as historians with notions of the connection between national identity and nation state formation, what does the creation of feminist histories (particularly but not exclusively in the post-cold war era) suggest about women's identity as political citizens?
- Connections between feminists across Europe at different times; early 20th century feminists celebrated significant female 'firsts' (first medical doctor; first MP); how this information was promulgated.
- How feminism interacted with or against differing political regimes within Europe, including its relation to Empire, fascism and communism.

The workshop also identified several challenges to the project. Whilst participants were critical of the wave metaphor both for its western-centeredness and for its implication that there were periods of inactivity in the troughs between the peaks of the two waves, it was also noted that many later feminists used the metaphor as a means of identifying with and distinguishing themselves from earlier movements. This will make it quite difficult to jettison although it clearly needs to be approached with caution.

Participants also noted some geographical gaps in the current composition of the network. Although the project cannot hope to achieve full coverage it was felt that Greece and Spain were notable exclusions within the current composition of the network, and that the trajectory of feminist historiography in these countries would need to be integrated into the project if it were to offer a genuinely European perspective. The Balkan region and former Yugoslavia were also currently absent.

It is hoped that the first short-term outcome from the project will be a collaborative book elaborating on some of the themes covered in the conference to be edited by Professor Cowman and Professor Mieke Aerts. Possible sources of funding to host a small symposium of contributors at a later stage in the writing process were discussed.

The second outcome will be a European network which will study histories of European feminism. A variety of different funding mechanisms were discussed including concentrating on symposia which could draw on a broader range of sources depending on their location. In the medium term it was thought that the best source of funding for resourcing a longer-term academic network would be the European Science Foundation's Research Networking Programme (RNP).

4. Final programme

Tuesday, 8th September 2009

Afternoon *Arrival & Hotel Check-in*

18.00 – 21.00 *Welcome reception and buffet supper, Vice-Chancellor's Boardroom, Second Floor, Main Building, University of Lincoln*

Wednesday, 9th September 2009

09.30-10.30 **Registration followed by Introduction by Convenor (Room MB1104)**
Krista Cowman (University of Lincoln, UK) Introduction and Outline of the Workshop: Expectations.

10.30-11.00 *Coffee / Tea Break (Room MB1003)*

11.00-12.30 **Morning Session: 'Recovery and Approaches: European Feminism c. 1890-1920' (Room MB1104)**
June Hannam (University of the West of England, UK)
Maria Mesner (University of Vienna, Austria)

12.30-13.30 *Lunch (Room MB1003) e-mails can be checked next door in MB1004*

13.30-16.00 **Afternoon Session (1): 'Recovery and Approaches: European Feminism c. 1890-1920' (Room MB1104)**
Angelika Schaser (University of Hamburg, Germany)
Magda Gawin (Polish Academy of Science, Poland)

Coffee / tea break (Room MB1003)

Judit Acsády (Sociology Research Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest)

16.30- 19.00 **Afternoon Session (2): ‘Progressing Transnational Approaches to Historiography of European Feminism’ (Room MB1104)**

Karen Offen (Independent Scholar, USA)

Anne Cova (University of Lisbon, Portugal)

Natascha Vittorelli (University of Vienna, Austria) (paper pre-circulated).

19.30 *Dinner in local Italian restaurant Ask! (table for 15 booked, name of Williams)*

Thursday, 10th September 2009

09.00-11.00 **Morning Session (1): ‘Feminist History as Feminist Activism’ (Room MB1104)**

Tiina Kinnunen (University of Joensuu, Finland)

Sylvie Chaperon (University of Toulouse, France)

Pat Thane (Institute of Historical Research, UK)

11.00-11.30 *Coffee / Tea Break (Room MB1003)*

11.30-13.30 **Morning Session (2): ‘Periodization and the ‘Wave’ metaphor’ (Room MB1104)**

Julie Carlier (University of Ghent, Belgium)

Olga Shnyrova (Ivanovo State University, Russia)

Elisabeth Lønnä (Independent Scholar, Norway)

13.30-14.30 *Lunch (room MB1003) e-mails can be checked next door in MB1004*

14.30-16.30 **Afternoon Session: ‘Oral History Projects and Collecting Activists’ Experiences’ (Room MB1104)**

Jirina Smejkalova (University of Lincoln, UK)

Mieke Aerts (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)

- 16.30 – 16:45 *Coffee / tea break (room MB1003)*
- 16.45 – 18.00 **Approaches and Methodologies Working Groups (Rooms MB1104, MB1003, MB 1101 and MB 1102)**
- 19.30 for 20.00 *Conference Dinner in local restaurant (Thailand No. 1, Bailgate) (table for 14 booked in the name of Williams)*

Friday, 11th September 2009

- 09.00-10.30 **Looking Ahead: Working Groups report: Discussion of Future Projects (Room MB1104)**
Chair: Jirina Smejkalova (University of Lincoln, UK)
- 10.30-11.00 *Coffee / Tea Break (room MB1003)*
- 11.00-13.00 **Looking Ahead continued. Network Proposal (Room MB1104)**
Chair: Krista Cowman (University of Lincoln, UK)
- 13:00 *Lunch and Departure (room MB1003)*

5. Final list of participants

Judit Acsády, Hungarian Academy of Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary.

Mieke Aerts, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Julie Carlier, University of Ghent, Belgium.

Krista Cowman, University of Lincoln, UK.

Sylvie Chaperon, Université de Toulouse II, France.

Anne Cova, University of Lisbon, Portugal.

Magdalena Gawin, Instytut Historii Poskiej, Warszawa, Poland.

June Hannam, University of the West of England, UK.

Tiina Kinnunen, University of Joensuu, Finland.

Elisabeth Lønnå, Independent Scholar, Norway.

Maria Mesner, Universität Wien, Austria.

Karen Offen, Independent Scholar, United States.

Angelika Schaser, Universität Hamburg, Germany.

Olga Shynrover, Ivano State University, Russia.

Jirina Smejkalova, University of Lincoln, UK.

Pat Thane, Institute of Historical Research, London, UK.

6. Statistical breakdown of participants

6.1 By country of Employment

- Austria 1
- Belgium 1
- Finland 1
- France 1
- Germany 1
- Hungary 1
- Netherlands 1
- Norway 1
- Poland 1
- Portugal 1
- Russia 1

- UK 4
- USA 1
- Total 16

6.2 By approximate age

- Under 35 3
- 35-50 7
- 51-65 6
- Total 16

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