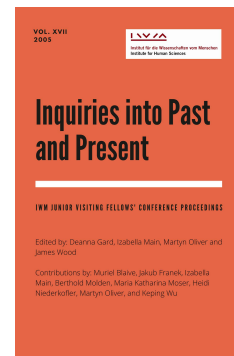


The “Women’s Movement”: Raising Questions about Meaning and Terminology [1]

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What does the “women’s movement” mean? What can be defined as a “women’s movement”? Which connotations accompany the term “women’s movement”? Questions like these are crucial in dealing with the phenomena called women’s movements. In my dissertation project I was confronted with issues of denominating and categorizing women’s organizations within political parties in Austria,[2] as well as the *Bund Österreichischer Frauenvereine*[3] after 1945. The term “women’s movement” is significant for my project in two different ways: First, the term constitutes an important reference to the sources I am analyzing. As I argue, the women’s movement is an important symbol to which these partisan organizations relate themselves. These references are significant for the self-conception of these organizations; and not by accident, they constitute a popular narrative in them. Secondly, the term plays an important role in how I denominate women’s groups in my own work.

Before giving an overview of the historiography of Austrian women’s movements, I would like to discuss a problem which has arisen while working on my dissertation. After this brief overview I would like to present some preliminary thoughts about the term “movement” itself. Finally, I would like to introduce three models that deal with the question of continuity and disruption within women’s movements.

In my dissertation, one particular organization, the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs* caused some fundamental difficulties. It is difficult to put the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs* in just one category – should it be classified as a women’s movement organization or as a women’s organization within a political party? At first I understood the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs* as the latter, since it is part of the Austrian Communist Party. From this point of view, its history began in 1948, according to the official party chronology. The terminology I used was “women’s organization of the Communist Party.” Getting deeper into the subject, however, I discovered that the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs* never called itself an

organization of the Communist Party. On the contrary, it emphasized its strong ties to women's movements. Therefore, my own categorization of the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreich* as a party organization became more and more questionable. But there was a second and even more disturbing point: Apparently the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs* had existed before the official founding date in 1948. It was actually founded in 1946[4] as a so-called independent organization. For both these reasons, I decided to speak of it as a "women's organization associated with the Communist Party." Rather than using the terms "women's movement" and "women's organization of political parties," I introduced a third term that would not bear misleading connotations.

However, this strategy was not satisfying in the end. One major problem is that this denomination is not able to visualize the differences within the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs* prior to, as well as after, 1948. To ignore this distinction would very much support the image of overwhelming importance traditionally given to political parties. Therefore I decided to use the term "women's organization of political party" for the *Bund* after 1948. I decided to use this term according to the following criteria, which in my opinion are characteristic for party organizations: They are financed or at least partly financed by the political party, they are required to report at party assemblies or conferences about their work, and their top management is close to the political party or engaged in the political party. All three of these points correspond to the structure of the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs*; the term "women's organization of a political party" therefore can be seen as the appropriate analytical category. Nevertheless, the question concerning their self-definition as a "women's movement" organization has remained, as well as the questions regarding the meaning of the term "women's movement."

During these different attempts to deal with terms, categories, and their meanings, questions concerning the process of defining came up: What happens within the process of defining? Which marginalized meanings are left out in using certain definitions? What is meant by those persons, organizations, and institutions that use the term "women's movement"? How have they used it? And regarding my own practice as a historian, by what is my own use of the term informed?

Historiography of Women's Movements in Austria

When one perceives history as a process of re-constructing the past from a position in present time, it becomes a constant re-formulation and re-definition of what has happened. In following this rather constructivist approach, the writing of a women's movement's history is affected, among other things, by the actual notion of women's movements. In this regard, there is a strong connection between the historiography of women's movements and the movements themselves. Consequently, writing women's movement's history is an intervention in an ongoing process of defining the past of the movement itself.[5] Furthermore, this also means that in re-constructing the past I am heavily involved in constructing and defining the present, in the task of making sense of it.

Now I would like to give a short sketch of the historiography of women's movements in Austria, an overview of research that has been done, and therefore a synopsis of what has been considered "women's movements." In general, there is only a little research being done on women's movements in Austria. I would like to mention some monographs briefly. (There are a number of articles dealing with the women's movement, but I am focusing exclusively on the monographs.) One is the study of Harriet Anderson, who deals with the so-called first women's movement at the beginning of the 20th century. She focuses mainly on the bourgeois women's movement and leaves out the women's organizations close to political parties as well as the religious and labor union organizations. A doctoral thesis with a comparative approach on women suffrage written by Brigitta Zaar deals with different women's organizations which were involved in claiming the right to vote; she analyses partisan as well as so-called independent organizations. Irene Schöffmann wrote a monograph on the *Bund Österreichischer Frauenvereine* and on the *Katholische Reichsfrauenorganisation der Diözese Wien* during the period of Austro-fascism. The former was one of the biggest independent bourgeois women's organizations at that time, which was founded in 1902 and still exists today. Concerning the so-called second women's movement there is only one monograph: Brigitte Geiger and Hanna Hacker analyze this women's movement from its beginning in 1971 until the late Eighties. They focus solely on so-called independent organizations, which were not part of institutions like political parties, trade unions, or religious institutions.[6]

It is remarkable that the subject of these analyses, the women's movement, is not defined, but taken as given in most of the investigations of women's movements in Austria. It is even more striking that some scholars do not differentiate between so-called independent women's movements and the organizations which are close to political parties. It is interesting that these historians used the term "women's movement" in a wider meaning in the period up to Austro-fascism or National Socialism than in the time period after 1945. From those studies one would assume that it is clear what the term "women's movement" is about.

Regarding research on the period of the last decades of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy in general, one can say there is a focus on bourgeois women's organizations. These organizations are meant to be part of the so-called first women's movement. A concentration can be noted also on socialist women's organizations and Catholic women's organizations. As the historian Edith Saurer points out, correlations between the relevance these organizations had in their historic period are partly responsible for the outlined research development.[7] Within this research field radical branches and also religious women's movements like the evangelical and the Jewish are marginalized. The focus on socialist women's organizations mentioned above increases in the research on the period of the First and Second Republics. Of course, there is a relation to the impact the socialist women's organizations had on the women's cause, but there is also a notable distortion within research development: The socialist women's organizations were often considered central, while others like the German nationalists or the Catholics were marginalized.[8] The predominant position of the socialist women's organization became even stronger in the historiography dealing with the Second Republic. Only in the late

Seventies and Eighties did some scholars begin to work on so-called independent women's organizations, although in the first years after the end of World War II some dissertations had dealt with the so-called first women's movement.[9]

Terminology of 'Movement'

The question of tradition and heritage is crucial when looking at social movements. According to general assumptions of social movements theory, social movements constitute themselves by rejecting established political actors. In doing so they establish themselves as new and break openly with certain traditions; tradition for them is of no great worth. To put it in another way, social movements stand for change. This is a very difficult point for new generations entering social movements: They accept "the inheritance of change," to use the words of Christine Thon.[10]

Etymologically, the term *Bewegung* [movement] has a double meaning: *sich bewegen* [to move], an action that is motivated through the person itself, and *machen, dass etwas sich bewegt* [to make something move]; here the initiative comes from a point outside, and there is no specified actor. Because the reason for movement is sometimes intangible, it easily gets the status of something hard to influence. This intangibility is an important consideration in the discussion on movements: What really lets people come together, to what extent do they move themselves, and to what extent are they being moved? These are the questions that surround the investigations of social movements. And furthermore, these are questions that need to be looked at in order to analyze historically the foundations of movements.

According to the linguist Josef Klein, social and cultural changes that came along with the Enlightenment were a precondition for the establishment of the term "movement." [11] Two main changes are characteristic of this period: One is the shift from a static or cyclical to a linear idea of history. Intertwined with this shift is the idea of progress, which evolved at that time as well. This concept is characterized by the belief in constant advancement, and gets more and more the status of a political catchword. With the passage of time, progress also gets the status of a law of nature, which cannot and must not be questioned anymore.

The term "movement" was a wide spread term for political groups from the 19 th century onwards. There was the worker's movement, the peace movement, and the youth movement, just to mention the most common groups. According to Richard J. Evans, the term "movement" was used by the labor movement and then adopted by the women's movement.[12] From the 1920s on, "movement" was also the term for the National Socialist party: At least in Germany and Austria, they became synonymous. In this period (and afterwards) the term "movement" was used to emphasize the connection to common people, to accentuate the arising of the National Socialist movement out of the needs and wishes of the people. A second important aim was to distinguish the movement from established political parties and their structures.

The term “movement” has the connotation of an unstructured organization, and it also suggests a short-term organization. It is interesting that this lack of structure in some cases enhances the importance of leader figures; this also can be seen in so-called traditional social movements (as movements before the 1960s are called), and especially in populist contexts. A relatively short duration is denoted by the word “movement” itself; a continued existence is therefore problematic and ambiguous in itself. After a certain period of existence social movements either get more and more institutionalized or they disappear. The constitution of a movement is defined by its critical distance from institutionalized practices. This characteristic is a crucial point, which comes up when new generations enter the movement.

The following are important factors for the research on women’s movements: the progress-metaphor inscribed in the term “movement,” the ambivalent meaning of the term “movement” regarding the avant-garde as well as the emerging from the ordinary people, and the implied short-term duration. Concerning the latter, the women’s movement claims for itself a certain persistence, even though the movement consists of different traditions including several generations of feminist thinking. Thus, following the pluralist approach taken by Gender Studies in the last decade we can speak of various different women’s movements instead of one uniform movement. It should be kept in mind that activists and researchers themselves take part in (re-)creating women’s movement solely by speaking and/or writing about it. Therefore, speaking of a homogeneous movement implies a political component: While the invocation of women’s movement re-produces the movement, varieties and inconsistencies are widely ignored and might get lost.

Continuity and disruption

A central question in my handling of the term women’s movement is the question around continuity and disruption. In choosing the period from 1945 until approximately 1955, I have had to deal with this question constantly. As some historians point out – and I agree with them – the period after 1945 can be seen as an important link between the so-called first and the second women’s movement.[13] However, this period is rarely mentioned and mostly left out in the usual historiography on the women’s movement.

In the denomination of the movement itself / movements themselves as well as in the research practice similarity, differences, disruptions, and continuities are given much space within the historical discussion. Some historians of the women’s movement developed models to cope with the question of continuity or discontinuity, of which I chose three to present.

First there is the model of *lange Wellen* [long waves] developed by Ute Gerhard, a German historian. This term has a semantic similarity with the denomination first and second wave; this two-wave concept is widely used in the Anglo-American context. Within the model of the long waves, lines of tradition (*Traditionslinien*) and lines of connection between different periods of time can be subsumed, without pretending that there was a

unique and consistent movement. As Gerhard points out, specific periods can be seen as the high peak of the wave, while others, as for example the period after 1945, can be seen as the trough of the sea.[14]

Another historian, Karen Offen, argues against the two-wave approach and develops a geological model, derived from the study of volcanic phenomena. She suggests thinking about feminism as geological processes, which in specific historical periods get the strength to break through, to produce eruptions and to change the patriarchal surface. “I will therefore speak about feminism in terms of eruptions, flows, fissures, molten lava (magma), looking at feminism as a threatening and rather fluid form of discontent that repeatedly presses against (and, when the pressure is sufficiently intense, bursts through) weak spots in the sediment layers of a patriarchal crust, the institutional veneer of organized societies.”[15]

The third concept I would like to mention is Joan Scott’s model of reverberations. She defines them as “seismic shock waves moving out from dispersed epicenters, leaving shifted geological formations in their wake. The word reverberation carries with it a sense both of causes of infinite regression – reverberations are re-echoes, successions of echoes – and of effect – reverberations are also repercussions.”[16] This model enables the historian to grasp shifts and changes within the feminist movement, according to Scott.

There are some striking points of similarity among these models. First, all three of them emphasize continuity over disruption. This seems rather surprising to me, since in women’s history following Judith Bennett[17], history is perceived as change rather than as continuity; this emphasis thus seems not to correspond with the theoretical assumptions on how to comprehend women’s movements. A second point that is interesting to me is that they all work with nature metaphors: long waves, eruptions, and reverberations. These metaphors make the traced lines of tradition and succession appear as laws of nature. The repeated appearance of the phenomenon feminism or women’s movement has something irreversible and inevitable about it; and the factors that lead to its appearance are rather difficult to affect, and are more or less incomprehensible. The third thing I would like to mention is that it seems to me rather difficult – in using these models – to conceive continuities and traditions as constructed and invented, as Eric Hobsbawm states, and not as essential.[18] In perceiving traditions and lines of tradition in terms of nature metaphors the invented and constructed character of them cannot be conceived.

What conclusions can I make out of this? After pondering these three models it has become obvious to me that the writing on women’s movements is strongly connected with the motivations and interests in contemporary women’s movements. It follows that I would have to take into account my own position toward the women’s movement in writing on it. In my dissertation I should not only consider historical analyses of women’s movements, but also my specific point of view as a feminist who is committed to today’s women’s movements. Therefore I have to reflect on women’s movements on different levels. But on the other side, I can benefit from both an historian’s and an activist’s approach.

Notes:

1. I would like to thank the Austrian Academy of Sciences for granting me a two year scholarship for my dissertation project (DOC-Programm).

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2. The political parties I analyze in my thesis are the *Sozialistische Partei Österreichs*, the *Österreichische Volkspartei*, the *Kommunistische Partei Österreichs*, and the *Verband der Unabhängigen*. Apart from the last one, which was founded in 1949, the others were founded in 1945.

3. The *Bund Österreichischer Frauenvereine* is a so-called independent women's organization. It was founded in 1902 as a kind of umbrella organization for women's organization in the German speaking parts of the Austrian Hungarian Monarchy. In the First Republic (1918-1933) it was involved in the process of law-making and law-expertise. In contrast to many other organizations, it existed also during the Austrofascist period. In 1935 it was incorporated into the women's unit of the *Vaterländische Front*, the only legal political organization at that time. In 1938, after the so called Anschluss of Austria to the National Socialist German regime, the *Bund Österreichischer Frauenvereine* was dissolved. In 1947 it became active again, and legitimated itself as the biggest women's organization in Austria. It still provided surveys on laws and so on, but with the years it lost more and more of its former importance. The *Bund Österreichischer Frauenvereine* still exists.

4. Founding files of the *Bund Demokratischer Frauen Österreichs* from July 3, 1946, Bundespolizeidirektion Wien, Vereinsbüro.

5. Antoinette Burton, "'History' is Now: feminist theory and the production of historical feminisms," *Women's History Review* 1/1992, 25-38; Maria Grever, "The Pantheon of Feminist Culture: Women's Movements and the Organization of Memory," *Gender & History* 2/1997, 364-374.

6. Harriet Anderson, *Vision und Leidenschaft. Die Frauenbewegung im Fin de Siècle Wiens*, Wien 1994; Brigitta Zaar, *Vergleichende Aspekte der Geschichte des Frauenstimmrechts in Großbritannien, den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, Österreich, Deutschland und Belgien, 1860-1920*, Diss. Wien 1994; Irene Schöffmann, *Die bürgerliche Frauenbewegung im Austrofascismus. Eine Studie zur Krise des Geschlechterverhältnisses am Beispiel des Bundes österreichischer Frauenvereine und der Katholischen Frauenorganisation für die Erzdiözese Wien*, Wien 1986; Brigitte Geiger / Hanna Hacker, *Donauwalzer Damenwahl. Frauenbewegte Zusammenhänge in Österreich*, Wien 1989.

7. Edith Saurer, "Skizze einer Geschichte der historischen Frauenforschung in Österreich," in Barbara Hey (ed.), *Innovationen: Standpunkte feministischer Forschung und Lehre (Materialien zur Förderung von Frauen in der Wissenschaft Band 9)*, Wien 1999, 319-377.
8. Johanna Gehmacher, "Nachfolgeansprüche. Deutschnationale und nationalsozialistische Politik und die bürgerliche Frauenbewegung. Österreich 1918-1938," in Ute Gerhard (ed.), *Feminismus und Demokratie. Europäische Frauenbewegungen der 1920er Jahre*, Königsstein / Taunus 2001, 159-175, 160.
9. Emma Kancler, *Die Österreichische Frauenbewegung und ihre Presse. Von ihren Anfängen bis zum Ende des 1. Weltkrieges*, Diss. Wien 1947; Hildegard Laessig, *Marianne Hainisch und die österreichische Frauenbewegung*, Diss. Wien 1949.
10. Christine Thon, "Frauenbewegung – Bewegungsgeneration – Generationenbruch? Generationenkonzepte in Diskursen der Frauenbewegung," in *Feministische Studien* 1/2003, 111-122, hier 119.
11. Josef Klein, "Weg und Bewegung. Metaphorische Konzepte im politischen Sprachgebrauch und ein frame-theoretischer Repräsentationsvorschlag," in Oswald Panagl / Horst Stürmer (eds.), *Politische Konzepte und verbale Strategien: brisante Wörter – Begriffsfelder – Sprachbilder*, Frankfurt / Main u. a. 2002, 220-235.
12. Richard J. Evans, "The Concept of Feminism. Notes for Practicing Historians," in Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres / Mary Jo Maynes (eds.), *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. A Social and Literary History*, Bloomington 1986, 247-258.
13. Sara M. Evans, "The Women's Movement in the United States in the 1960s," in Constance Backhouse / David H. Flaherty (eds.), *Challenging Times. The Women's Movement in Canada and the United States*, Montreal, London, Buffalo 1992, 61-71; Leila J. Rupp / Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: the American women's rights movement, 1945 to the 1960s*, Oxford 1987.
14. Ute Gerhard, *Atempause. Feminismus als demokratisches Projekt*, Frankfurt / Main 1999, 12-38.
15. Karen Offen, *European Feminisms 1700- 1950. A Political History*, Stanford, California 2000, 25.
16. Joan Wallach Scott, "Feminist Reverberations," in *Differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3/2002, 1-23, 11.
17. Judith M. Bennett, "Theoretical Issues. Confronting Continuity," in *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 9, 3/1997, 73-94.
18. Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm / Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge – New York – Melbourne 1989, 1-14.

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