



'SEPARATIST' FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

Somewhere during the early years of the last century, the word 'feminism' came to be seen as a battle cry of the women's movement for a 'separate' identity – separate from men, that is – and, naturally, it raised the hackles of the rising fascist and communist nations of the period. Even today, especially in Europe, this 'separatist' label stuck on feminism still colours, although, obliquely, most of the debates on human right (which, by definition, includes women's rights). Interestingly, a number of women activists in the last century themselves came to abhor the term 'feminism', among the Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

INTRODUCTION

Citizenship in the nation-state and workplace became a reality in most (though not all) European societies in the period that spanned the years from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second World War. During this period, the goals and aims of feminism were reformulated and new meanings elaborated in response to new challenges. No longer was women's legal and material subordination to men the most obvious centrepiece of feminist activity; indeed, after 1918, in a mostly post-suffrage Europe (the glaring exception being France, Italy, Belgium and Switzerland), 'feminism' did not seem, in the view of some women's movement activists, nearly encompassing enough. Margery I. Corbett Ashby, the English President of the International Alliance of Women (IAW), had summed up this new view in 1928 when she argued:

"It is a fact which cannot be ignored that women are not only feminists in a perpetual state of protest against restrictions and disabilities, they are also to

DR. CHHAYA R. SUCHAK

1Page



an increasing extent, keen citizens, peace workers, reformers and educators. The greatest freedom won by women is surely precisely this equal right with men to effect interest in the whole of life.”

Such a view had been developing for some time, mainly among the post suffrage English-speaking feminists, and despite the resurgent backlashes against women’s emancipation, it blossomed in post-suffrage contexts. In 1913, Helena Swanwick had suggested, in her preface to *The Future of Women’s movements*, that ‘humanist’ was a better word than ‘feminist’ for the emancipatory goals she and her associates envisioned. Conversely, the term ‘feminist’ might be extended to encompass all human rights. Such chords had been struck repeatedly during the English controversies over feminism in the 1920s and as women were pulled increasingly into the political and economic life of their respective nations, it carried over into debated among supporters of the international women’s organisations in the late 1920s and 1930s, when they considered the controversial issue of protective labour legislation for women.

In France as well, feminism seemed to critics such as academician Henri Joly to be but a derivative of humanism. The idea of humanism had, among other advantages, that it did not postulate any separation between the interests of man and those of women. This Frenchman viewed feminism as being all too exclusively about women’s ‘separate’ interests, rather than about the joint interests of men and women (or class interests). Such a statement would have been familiar to anyone who has confronted socialist views on the subject since the founding of the Second International in 1889, but it takes on an even more intriguing meaning in a context in which women constituted more than half the population and were feared as a potential political majority.

The questionable view it encapsulates – that feminism is ‘separatist’ – remains alive and well in France today, even impeding the growth of women’s history and women’s studies in French university settings. The fact that ‘men’s separate interests’ had dominated European societies for so many centuries went unnoticed by the Henri Jolys of Europe; they were taken to represent everyone’s interests. Only women’s interests could be construed as exclusive, divisive and threatening.

In the late 1920s, following the schematic developments of its 1926 Congress in Paris (over protective legislation for women workers) and an ensuing 1927 study conference in Amsterdam, adherents of the newly renamed International Alliance of Women heatedly debated the meaning and scope of the concept ‘feminism’. Setting off a series of exchanges in their journal *Jus Suffragii* that continued through most of 1928, one disenchanted activist, C. Nina Boyle, voiced her alarm about the Alliance’s embrace of pacifists and social reformers, whom she viewed as ‘the two most dangerous rivals and foes of Feminism’. Rather than



joining in the clamour for peace and endorsing protective legislation for women workers, Boyle thought the Alliance should remain focused specifically on abusive marriage customs and laws and on violence against women – or what she subsequently underscored as ‘desperate conditions under which women suffer hideous personal and sexual coercion.’

It was in this context that Corbett Ashby defended the Alliance’s position of multiple interests in a world in which some women had arrived at full citizenship. She went on to insist that ‘a feminist is no less a feminist because she has reached a point at which she dare develop every side of her human nature and natural interests.... all our work must be done from a feminist angle and by feminist inspiration.’ The following month, the ageing German activist, Marie Stritt, joined the debate, arguing for the intimate connection between feminism and pacifism, and for a broad understanding of feminism. ‘Feminism....means nothing else than the struggle against violence in every form – means nothing else than the struggle against violence in every form - means right and justice instead of violence and injustice.’ This was a breathtakingly encompassing agenda, but it also threatened to neutralise or diffuse continuing campaigns on behalf of issues specific to women.

In the course of this 1920s debate, one point was clarified, and it was that at least for the IAW, working at the international or transnational level, issues concerning free love, birth control and ‘marriage slavery’ were ruled out of bounds on grounds that they had religious, national and cultural implications, which the IAW leaders considered to lie beyond their association’s international mandate. “It must advise and aid very gently, but wait for the women themselves of each nation to move effectively,” cautioned the former president of the Alliance, the American suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt. The ‘great problems’ of the world were within its mandate: “peace is a proper work for feminists”, Catt argued. But another point was also clarified by Chapman Catt, and that was the exclusive identification (historically erroneous, but nonetheless solidly embedded in the popular mind) of feminism with the suffrage cause. “I feel that I have personally moved on and become a humanist since the vote came to me.... I have not ceased to be a feminist nor to be less sympathetic with protests against women’s wrongs.”

In the June 1928 issue, the British egalitarian feminist, Helen A. Archdale, who sympathised with Nina Boyle’s concerns, criticised the “admission, of both Corbett Ashby and Chapman Catt that they had moved on the ‘humanism’.”

“A humanist is.... one who cares for joys and sorrows of all humanity and works directly on their cure. A feminist is one who works for the advancement of women’s intellectual and social status.... Peace, for which nearly all our hearts are full of longing, is the business of humanity, of men and women; co-operation, not separation, should be its strength. Equality, defined as we all

DR. CHHAYA R. SUCHAK

3Page



know as feminism, is the special business of women, the burden of acquiring it must be mainly theirs.” I share cordially the deep regret expressed by your correspondents that the I.S.W.A. has deserted feminism for humanism, knowing that each such extravert to humanism is rejecting feminism.”

By December, Archdale (who, along with Lady Rhondda, funded the Open Door Council in 1926 and became of force in the new group, (Equal Rights International) was arguing that there could only be one kind of feminist – “feminists believe in equality [for women] and will accept nothing less....”

When the IAW met in Berlin in 1929, its members ratified an ‘Restatement of Policy after 25 Years’ which reaffirmed its commitment to suffrage work and peace work, and emphasised equal rights in economic, moral and legal rights. Significantly, neither this ‘Restatement’ nor the History compiled and published by Regine Deutsch for the IAW anniversary celebration included the word ‘feminism’.

By the 1930s, many whom we might view historically as feminists disagreed on what ‘equality’ meant and whether ‘women’ should be considered distinct from ‘men’ on account of their physiology or reproductive roles, or should such ‘difference’ be disavowed in pursuit of ‘rights equal to those of men?’ Particularly in the English-speaking world, older notions and ‘equality-in-difference’ faded from view before the polarisation that would increasingly oppose absolute legal ‘equality’ for individuals to sex-specific needs perceived to rest on women’s distinctive ‘difference’.

In consequence of these agreements, the term ‘feminist’ became identified more exclusively in the public mind with campaigners for an unqualified, all – encompassing understanding of ‘equal rights’ (this faction led by the Americans, Alice Paul and Doris Stevens, and their British counterparts from the Six Point Group in the new grouping known as Equal Rights International). They opposed protective legislation for women on principle, pressing instead throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s for endorsement of an international equal rights treaty. Despite the efforts of Eleanor Rathbone and others to delineate a ‘new feminism’ that took women’s differences and their distinctive contributions and functions as mothers into account, the term ‘feminism’ migrated and stuck to the more adamantly egalitarian faction.

Debates in the IAW’s Jus Suffragii and publications by other international women’s groups continued to delineate varied understandings of ‘feminism’, broadly extending the meaning of feminism to encompass the struggle for all human rights and social justice. This line of thinking would be articulated more vigorously in the 1930s as the menace of fascism to human rights became increasingly pronounced. With the roll back in opportunities for women imposed by fascist regimes, and particularly in Nazi Germany where assaults on the civil



liberties of Jews and other ‘undesirable’ minorities, including gypsies and the handicapped, were already well known to the international League for Peace and Freedom would broaden their mission to encompass ‘the inauguration of a new system under which would be realised social, economic and political equality for all without distinction of sex, race and opinion.’

Developments in world politics during the late 1930s brought the confusion and contentiousness over feminism – and the polarisation of positions to a head. These can be studied in the rhetoric of the IAW president, Margery Corbett Ashby. In late 1936, Corbett Ashby had insisted that feminism should not be set aside, as had been done in 1914, in the face of ‘more than medieval savagery in Abyssinia, Palestine and Spain.’ But she offered a broad definition of feminism, which she declared, ‘is the faith of women who believe in individual freedom and responsibility.’

“It is but the women’s side to the great doctrine of freedom of thought and speech, or ordered self-discipline, of self-government, of free loyalty to the community, of equal opportunity and mutual assistance which in the last century effected a worldwide change from medieval to modern conceptions and produced the most amazing progress in science, health, standard of living and amenities of any century known to us. Because our material power has outgrown our spiritual conceptions we are allowing our inventions to bring torture and death, poverty and tyranny instead of happiness, health, riches and freedom, If we insist on our rights as human beings we are fighting the battle of every man who suffers for his race, his creed or his opinions.”

It is this interpretation which would become increasingly the standard in IAW rhetoric, women’s rights were human rights, the one stood for the other. Was ‘humanism’ en route to becoming ‘the feminism that dare speak its name’, in Pauline Johnson’s recent confrontation ?

Hitler’s invasion of neighbouring Czechoslovakia in 1938 and the looming threat to Poland sealed a definitive shift in IAW rhetoric from feminism to humanism. By June 1939, humanism had taken the high ground. In speaking of the dramatic changes that had ensued for women since the early 20th century, and the ways in which women had entered the work for social reform and peace as well as seeking equality, Margery Corbett Ashby underscored that the aims of feminism had seemed relatively straightforward when democracy was in the ascendant. But with the recent political developments and particularly the precarious economic situation created by the great depression, democracy was besieged. “The equal status and equal benefits of women must be seen as more than ever necessary, but we cannot, we dare not be only feminists, we must be humanists as well in order to preserve in society the very rights in which we would share.”

DR. CHHAYA R. SUCHAK

5P a g e



Corbett Ashby's French colleague and IAW vice-president Germaine Malaterre-Sellier seconded the argument: equal rights for women were no longer the main point. "True feminism imperiously requires, as a vital necessity, that women, fraternally united beyond all questions of nationality, political party or religious beliefs, come to the rescue of democracy wherever it is threatened –and, alas, this is in a growing number of countries." Saving women's rights were equated, in Malaterre-Sellier's view with saving civilisation itself. 'The Copenhagen Congress must organise women's action for the defence of human values in order to save Peace and Civilisation.'

On the eve of the storm about to be unleashed throughout Europe by the neighbouring Nazi Government in Germany, IAW delegates gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark in July 1939. There, the IAW bravely re-stated its understanding of feminism in measured yet stirring language, re-casting the challenge in terms of 'the fundamental principles concerning the relations between individual and state, and between states.' Its 'Declaration of Principles', subsequently published in English and French, concluded with a heartfelt statement:

"The women's battle is that of all mankind. There can be no freedom for women when freedom is no longer a recognised right of every individual. There can be no justice nor economic freedom for women when all justice is dependent on the will of an oligarchy.

"Now we live through difficult times in which life based on our principles is at stake. Therefore, women, with men, true to their fundamental principles, must defend a system which will lead to greater justice, freedom, real peace, general prosperity and more happiness for all."

Ending women's subordination seemed to become inextricably entangled with, or co-terminus with, the broader cause of defending freedom, individual and collective, for women and men alike and of working for democracy. Women and become citizens. But what would be the fate of feminism ?

When the war ended in 1945, the conundrum of feminism and humanism would be revised in a new setting – the United Nations. The shock impact of the Holocaust against the Jews and other atrocities committed during the Second World War had re-focused the attention of world leaders on the issue of 'Human rights.' Despite a paucity of feminists – or indeed even a significant number of women journalists (14 women and 521 men) – at its April 1945 founding meeting in San Francisco (or, for the matter, at the first session of the General Assembly in early 1946), the U.N. Charter of 1945 affirmed and specified 'faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights

DR. CHHAYA R. SUCHAK

6P a g e



of men and women and of nations large and small.’ Behind this choice of words lies John Stuart Mills’ 1867 proposal to change the word ‘man’ to ‘person’ in the British electoral law, but and this is significant – ‘men’ and ‘women’ are explicitly mentioned in the U.N. Charter; no mistake could be made about its intent.

In this new context, the prior work of feminists on women’s issues at the League of Nations in the 1930s found it s reward. The women who were present continued to press the point. A subsequent declaration by women representatives, alternatives and advisers to the first General Assembly presented to the delegates by Eleanor Roosevelt early in 1946, emphasised ‘joint efforts’ by men and women, ‘common ideas of human freedom’, and called on women to take part in the ‘work of peace and reconstructin as they did in war and resistance’.

In the spring of 1946, the Commission of Human Rights, a division of the U.N. Economical and Social Council (ESOSOC) established a commission, but soon bowed to feminist pressure to upgrade it to a full-fledged Commission on the Status of Women, with an extensive mandate to inquire into ‘improvements into political, civil, educational social and economic fields.’ Influential in this development were the Danish feminist and social democrat, Bodil Begtrup, the Commission’s first Chair, Jessie Street from Australia and Latin American feminists. In December 1946, feminist delegates pushed for adoption by the General Assembly of a resolution urging that member states who had not yet done so ‘fulfil the purposes and aims of the Charter.... by granting to women the same political rights as men.; They intended to revive the examination of the worldwide status of women begun by the now-defunct League of Nations and to carry the reforms proposed during the 1930s to fruition.

The U.N. Commission on the Status of Women took up its investigation in January 1947. Its work would eventually provide the model for many national commissions (and even regional and local commissions) on the status of women throughout the world. Many landmark U.N. measures – the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1952 Convention on Women’s Political Rights, the 1967 covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – all have origins in the work of this Commission. Finally in 1975 a resurgent women’s rights’ movement would help bring to fruition what the Commission on the Status of Women had been recommending since 1946-47 an International Women’s Year in 1975 and an International Decade of Women. All of these post Second World War development owe a large debt to the bold initiatives launched during the inter-war period by feminist activists and organisations working on behalf of women’s issues in the League of Nations. The work of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women continues to this day.



Although IAY president Margery Corbett Ashby thought in early 1946 that ‘at this stage it would be dangerous to set up a women only’ committee to deal with sex differentiation, it soon became clear to some (among them the Social Democratic women of the 1930s who had for so long insisted on prioritising class differences rather than sex differences) that even in the United Nations, and despite every principled pronouncement, if feminists did not insist on specifying and making visible women’s rights and women’s representation, nobody else would. The new terminology adopted was that of the status of women and human rights. But the discourse on ‘equal rights’ and ‘women’s rights’ and the language of ‘feminism’ were not forgotten and would be spoken anew.

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