

Interview

Entangled Histories of Women's Movements and Feminisms: An Interview with Francisca de Haan

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INTRODUCTION

Francisca de Haan (PhD, DHabil) is a Professor of History and Gender Studies at the Central European University (Budapest and Vienna). She is the founding editor of *ASPASIA. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* (Berghahn Books, since 2007). Together with Krassimira Daskalova and Anna Loutfi, Francisca de Haan edited *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms. Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (2006), a work which has stimulated the research in women's biographies and networks from the region and beyond. Prof. De Haan has published extensively on the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century international women's movements and feminisms. Her second book, co-authored with Annemieke van Drenth, focused on Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845) and Josephine Butler (1828–1906) and their role in Britain and the Netherlands – with an emphasis on their impact in shaping the women's movement and feminism in the Netherlands (Van Drenth and De Haan, 1999). Her interest then moved to the history of the main international women's organisations. Initially, she focused on the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (which became the International Alliance of Women), then the International Council of Women, and subsequently also the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) – which she has termed the 'Big Three' international women's organisations of the post-1945 world.

For several years, Francisca de Haan has been preparing a book on the 'Big Three' and their role in advancing women's rights globally after 1945. However, she decided that a monograph on the WIDF should take priority, and this is what she is currently working on. In addition, she is editing a volume on communist women activists from around the world, which will come out with Palgrave Macmillan in 2021.

In the wide and still expanding field of women's and gender history, the historical developments of the modern women's movements and feminisms have a central place. Some early publications on the field even equated gender history with that of women's movements and feminisms. While in the first decades of this scholarly field (1960s–1980s) research had been directed mostly towards the national frameworks of women's activities, since the 1990s and especially after the beginning of the new millennium, their international and global aspects started to attract more attention from the historical guild. Before we start talking about women's movements and feminisms, would you briefly define both terms? What is your understanding of these two concepts?

I think it's very useful for us to keep reflecting on these concepts, to distinguish between them, and to use them in the plural. There is often the assumption that women's movements and feminism are by definition 'progressive', but that is not the case, or rather, it is not so simple. Women's movements can take all sorts of political colours, as we have seen in the past and see in our contemporary world, with, for example, the right-wing and nationalist Hindu women's organisation in India, or with the ways in which 'feminism' (or forms of it) has been co-opted by capitalism. As to the distinction between women's movements and feminisms, a women's movement also does not have to be feminist, in the sense in which Valerie Sperling, Myra Marx Ferree and Barbara Risman have defined it. In their words, feminist action is:

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that in which the participants explicitly place value on challenging gender hierarchy and changing women's social status, whether they adopt or reject the feminist label. (Sperling, Marx Ferree and Risman, 2001: 1158)

Another reason why it is useful to distinguish between women's movements and feminism is the complex history of the term 'feminism', also hinted at in the definition just given. To start with, the term 'feminism' only emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century in France and came into use in the United States only in the 1910s, as Nancy Cott has shown in her 1987 book *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Cott, 1997). Would anyone then argue that there were no 'feminists' in the nineteenth-century U.S.? Likely not.

I find it important to speak about women's movements and feminisms in the plural, to emphasise the different strands that have always existed within them, with forms of overlap, cooperation, and contestation between them. The plural is therefore a way to indicate that there was and is no *one* feminism. This, despite the Western understanding of 'feminism' as this Western phenomenon, as if we all know what that means and all agree on it.

Instead, it is very important to be specific about the strand of feminism one is referring to. In terms of cooperation and contestation, there is a long and complex history of liberal and socialist feminisms, co-existing and competing with each other in different times and places. Early feminist and socialist movements developed together in England and France in the years between the French revolution of 1879 and the revolutions of 1848, but socialist women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century began to reject the label of 'feminism', because at the time this largely meant 'bourgeois feminism' – a political movement that did not include the interests of working-class women on a par with those of middle-class women, or simply prioritised bourgeois women's interests (Sowerwine, 1998: 356–387). Therefore, while a number of male and female socialist thinkers wrote about and strongly advocated for women's rights, from the late-nineteenth century socialist women began to argue for separate working women's organisations, which fought for women's economic and political rights, but not under the label of 'feminism'. Early socialists' rejection of the label 'feminist' has raised the eternal question of how to label them. There are numerous publications about Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai calling them feminist or Bolshevik feminist, even though they themselves rejected that label. So, can we or can't we call them (or women like them) feminists? Erik S. McDuffie has written a book about Black communist women in the United States. I agree with his argument that:

naming them as feminists *makes analytical sense*. They can be called [left] 'feminists' because they understood gender, race, and class in intersectional terms and as interlocking systems of oppression. (McDuffie, 2011: 5, emphasis added)

From the mid-twentieth century through the mid-1970s, it was quite clear to many people around the world that women in socialist countries had more rights and a better social status than women in many capitalist or Third World countries. However, the very ideas that women in Second or Third World countries may have been advancing in their social, economic, and political rights, *and* that socialist women have played a significant role in advancing these rights globally, have disappeared with the collapse of European state socialism. In the subsequent climate of Western triumphalism feminism has (re-)gained its connotation of being quintessentially Western. This to the extent that other parts of the world, whether former socialist states or Third World countries, almost by definition are being seen as having been 'behind' regarding women's rights, and as following the Western lead. In this way, a more global and entangled history of women's movements in different parts of the world, and one that acknowledges the historical role of socialist women, until recently was buried under the debris of the Cold War.

How would you describe the state of the art in the field of global history of women's movements and feminisms? What is missing, what needs to be done? Why and how did you decide to work on the inter/transnational dimensions of the history of feminisms? What provoked and kept your research interest, what led you to the decision to write such a book?

Well, this situation of Western hegemony – of understanding feminism as Western, of 'Western women' as being more advanced and leading others – also dominates the scholarship. So, although a lot of work has been done, what is largely missing is a solid body of research and popular books about the crucial role of socialist and communist women – whether we call them socialist feminists, Bolshevik feminists, left feminists, communist feminists or whatever – in the struggle for women's rights during the twentieth century. Missing as well is an understanding that a global women's movement (in the sense of actively including many 'grassroots' women) existed from 1945 onward, not just since the 1970s. The dominant narrative of the history of women's movements and feminisms is still that of the first feminist wave, decades of 'nothing', and then a second feminist wave. In the words of historian Dorothy Sue Cobble, the Western first and second feminist waves metaphor problematically 'assume a half-century that was devoid of waves, which flies in the face of the now voluminous literature documenting activism during this fifty-year trough' (Laughlin, Gallagher, Cobble, et al., 2010: 87, also cited in

Bonfiglioli, 2020). In fact, far from there having been decades of ‘nothing’, there *was* a global women’s movement, in the form of the WIDF and active left-feminist women’s organisations in all parts of the world. The fact that we are now only in the early stages of uncovering this huge history is largely due to the Western dominance in the historiography and the ongoing impact of the Cold War (De Haan, 2010). The WIDF members and leaders were women on the political left, including left liberal, socialist, and communist women. After the fall of European state socialism, in many former European socialist countries self-identified liberal feminist women initially strongly rejected their countries’ communist past and with it the contributions of communist women to improving women’s status and rights. Some of them still do, as, for instance, the Polish feminist Agnieszka Graff, who in 2014 wrote:

[i]t is interesting to me as a piece of Polish history, a piece of women’s history, but it is completely unconvincing as an identity tale of contemporary feminism, let alone my own. These are not my roots. [...] I am completely unconvincing by the slogan that the people who created the regime, women’s annexes to the Polish United Workers’ Party, are my ancestors. Are not! (Graff, 2014: 189–190)¹

I am not so much interested in ‘identity tales’. But what needs to be done, from my perspective, is a rethinking of the history of women’s movements and feminisms in Europe and beyond, in such a way as to include the history and contributions of socialist women and their organisations, and, crucially, if they were located in European state socialist countries, to understand that the history of these women’s organisations is *not separate from* what happened in other countries or parts of the world. An example of an innovative book doing exactly that is Kristen Ghodsee’s *Second World Second Sex* (Ghodsee, 2019). We also need to acknowledge socialist women’s role in advancing women’s rights on the global level: it was socialist women and the WIDF who initiated and made crucial contributions to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (DEDAW, 1967), and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the most important UN document on women’s rights (De Haan, 2018). But while a lot of the WIDF’s work focused on the United Nations, they did a lot more for women around the world. I have just finished a chapter about the WIDFnd activism against the French and the American Wars in Vietnam and the ways in which they supported the Vietnam Womenli Unions in their decades of struggle for national independence and women’s equality, and for me this truly remains impressive.

What is the time frame of the book and why? What are the major ideas, organisations, and activities you discuss in the book? How would you situate your own research and perspective within the field?

For all these reasons, the continuing impact of Cold War thinking and the resulting lack of historical knowledge about the role of socialist women, I am writing a monograph about the WIDF. The WIDF was established in Paris in 1945 and temporarily collapsed in 1991, to be re-established in 1994. The WIDF’s main foci were peace and women’s rights, strongly and fundamentally understood as interrelated. My work is showing that the WIDF was not only the largest but also the most influential international women’s organisation of the post-1945 world. I plan to return to the book about the Big Three after my book on the WIDF is finished, because that will allow me to provide a balanced understanding of the history of all three, what they stood for, how they cooperated, and how they competed with each other.

You are not only one of the most widely cited authors working in the field but also a university professor who has been teaching the history of women and gender at the Central European University in Budapest for almost two decades. How do you see the field some twenty years later? Although of course this is a huge question: Would you outline some similarities and differences in the developments of the various world regions: Europe, United States, South America, Asia and Australia?

In Central and Eastern Europe, a huge amount of work has been done in the last twenty years by scholars and colleagues across and about the region, as well as many of our own (former) students. These scholars include yourself [Krassimira Daskalova], Susan Zimmermann, Andrea Petó, Maria Bucur, Denisa Nečasová, Magdalena Grabowska, and many, many others. The journal *Aspasia* alone gives a sense of this rich work through its articles and the dozens of books that have been reviewed there since 2007. So, there is a whole emerging field.

More generally, it is certainly the case that there is a stronger interest in transnational and global women’s history everywhere, and now we have books such as Maria Bucur’s both well researched and accessible *Century of Women* (2018). Some new scholarship is applying a transnational perspective to the women’s history of the region as well, for example the work of Isidora Grubački. Another welcome development across the board is a stronger

¹ The original Polish text reads: “Mnie to ciekawi jako kawałek historii Polski, kawałek historii kobiet, ale zupełnie nie przekonuje jako opowieść tożsamościowa współczesnego feminizmu, a tym bardziej moja własna. To nie są moje korzenie. [...] Mnie zupełnie, ale to zupełnie nie przekonuje hasło, że osoby, które tworzyły reżimowe, kobiece przybudówki do PZPR, są moimi przodkiniami. Nie są!”

understanding of the need for an intersectional perspective. Here obviously, an issue for feminist historians to think about is the name of our field, our professional journals, and our own main international organisation, the International Federation for Research in Women's History. The question is to what extent are we, by using these names, reiterating an understanding of 'women' and of 'gender' as the main and homogenous categories? For me, feminist or intersectional history would be labels that cover better what I am trying to do, but how to move forward into possibly changing the name by which a whole field is known is not an easy thing to do. And of course, introducing gender as a concept on a par with class and race *was* a crucial step in the history of our field.

You are the founding editor of *ASPASIA. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, published since 2007 by Berghahn Books in New York. What was your motivation to start such a periodical and how do you see its role now, almost fifteen years later?

I wanted to achieve two things. One was to stimulate the field of women's and gender history in the region by creating a publication venue that has a certain standing, so as to help the field emerge and get recognition as a serious domain of historical scholarship. And let's emphasise here that in this undertaking I worked together with you [Krassimira Daskalova] and Maria Bucur from the very beginning. It would not have been possible, nor would I have wanted to do it otherwise. The other reason to establish *Aspasia* was to create a bridge between the work done on women's and gender history in the region and that in the dominant Anglophone world of historical scholarship. To make all that work done in and about the region better known. And to work toward an understanding of European women's history that would be more inclusive and more European rather than Western European. *Aspasia's* role is still important, in my view.

As our special issue of *Feminist Encounters* deals with the history of women's movements and feminisms in Eastern Europe, how would you characterise the state of the art in Eastern Europe? How does the work done in and on Eastern European feminisms and women's movements help you (or does not) in the work on your very much awaited book?

I would characterise the state of the art in Eastern Europe on this topic, again, as emerging, but in a relatively early stage. It helps enormously! I realised the importance of the WIDF first through the *Biographical Dictionary* and the work of my then PhD student Raluca Maria Popa. In the last few years, feminist historians (both in the region and beyond) have published on aspects of the WIDF's history as related to the region. The WIDF's history is definitely global, but obviously has a very important regional component, and the work of scholars such as Magdalena Grabowska on the Polish women's organisation, your work on Tsola Dragoicheva, that of Chiara Bonfiglioli on Vida Tomšič, and Kristen Ghodsee on the Committee of the Bulgarian women's movement, are just a few, though important, examples. In fact, so much work has already been done that it is impossible to list all.

Are there topics and perspectives regarding the past of women and gender relations which need more attention on the part of the scholars working on Eastern European feminisms and women's movements?

Yes, for example, something we already noticed when working on the *Biographical Dictionary*: peasant women, poor women, working-class women, women from ethnic minorities, all those non-elite and non-urban women who left behind much less written evidence. Therefore, it is very good news that Susan Zimmermann has this big project ZARAH on women's labor activism in the region and transnationally, in which a number of younger scholars from the region are involved.²

Although I am well aware of the risks of generalising great entities of territorial and ideological spaces, I would take the risk to ask you the following: a great deal of the contemporary self-reflexivity and self-criticism of the 'Western' feminist epistemology has developed thanks to the critical work done by Afro-American and Third-World feminists. Do you see some critical developments within the research done on the East European women's movements and feminisms which could help restructure/change the dominant Western paradigm about what feminism was or is?

I am convinced that the work that all of us in the region have been doing over the last two to three decades is building up a certain weight and momentum in that direction. Twenty years ago, books about women in European history could still limit themselves to Western Europe. I think no serious scholar or publisher would accept that nowadays. As I see it, the work on socialist women and their organisations is similarly leading to a situation in which it can no longer simply be ignored, and which spark new debates. These debates can be based on a strong rejection of the new insights, as was the case with Nanette Funk, or on genuine intellectual interest, as was the case

² <https://gender.ceu.edu/zarah-womens-labour-activism> (Accessed 30 May 2020).

with the 2018 Radcliffe seminar at Harvard University ‘Two Socialist Feminisms in Conversation: Soviet Bloc Women’s Organizations and US Socialist Feminism’, initiated by Linda Gordon and yourself. Clearly, things are happening.

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