

University College London

**A feminist fable: the cautionary tale of XIX. century German
women's movements**

Lili Eszter Zajác

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Introduction

Before my trip to Leipzig and Berlin and the vast number of sources that I came across while researching, I was convinced of the aim of the essay. To rewrite a fairly comprehensive account of the movements created, nurtured and led by German women in the XIX. century. I wished to reintroduce the parts of history that were left out – for reasons of length or biased judgement - to do justice to those women that, because of their gender, did not make the cut for centuries. However, I have to admit, I was short-sided. I have not realised that the topic of German women's movements in the era of great revolutions and social change has something far more significant to teach us. It tells the story of marginalisation and fractionalisation within social justice movements while it also reflects on the age-old dilemma of meaningful structural change. Furthermore, I have recognised that instead of merely tokenising women's stories during XIX. century revolutions, one must concentrate on the bigger picture. Thus, in this essay, I argue that we must rewrite history so that it includes and respects the stories of marginalised groups – in this case, women -, however, we must not stop there as that would be solely mean capitalisation on a topic that is relatively popular in the current political zeitgeist.

Why did XIX. century German women's movements remain isolated examples of social and political potential? Can we generalise and say "German women's movements", or should we focus on different sections within the organisations? What was the reason why such movements never developed into institutional and structural change – or at least not directly after their appearance? These queries may sound familiar in the XXI. century, for instance, if we consider today's controversy about how intersectional is feminism.

In the first section of the essay, I talk about individual stories and achievements of German nineteenth-century women. Then, I further elaborate on how nineteenth-century German women's movements contributed to wide-ranging social, structural change taking place in the contemporary society. Moreover, I also discuss the shortcomings of the movements and their potential elitist aspects.

I. Writing herstory: essential but not final goal

As I argued before, individual stories of women and women's movements are essential new tools of historians in understanding historical events – such as the 1848-1849 revolution in Germany. However, when writing about feminist history, one has to be caseous not to equate

past events with contemporary standards of “true” feminism – an idea referring to twenty-first-century feminism, which is mainly interested in the issue of equal rights and women’s right to vote. On the contrary, nineteenth-century women’s movements found that they could reach their goals, emancipation and equality – most effectively – through motherly activities and education – instead of directly fighting for universal suffrage. No matter how moderate their self-emancipation was by contemporary standards, it enabled them to leave the patriarchal household and reach some level of autonomy. As Stanley Zucker writes, they were ‘unintentional feminists [...] carrying propaganda by deed’ (1980, 254). This section discusses some of the most relevant examples of women’s movements and revolutionary women in the mid-nineteenth century.

a. Frauen-Zeitung

One of the outlets that furthered the cause of women in German-speaking territories was the *Frauen-Zeitung* – published between 1849 and 1852 -, edited by Louise Otto-Peters, an activist, writer and proto-, or conservative-feminist. She was a politically active poet long before the revolution; however, she usually published her poems under pseudo names (Boetcher Joeres 1982, 591). In 1848 came a significant shift in possibilities: new, emerging liberal ideas and the novel popularity of the press, which inspired her to establish her own journal. Additionally, the courageous and entrepreneurial decision can be linked to nineteenth-century ‘developments in the printing industry, on the literary markets and in public reading behaviour’ (McNicholl 1989, 228). The *Frauen-Zeitung* mainly published articles by women for women. It lifted female readers out of their isolated, male-dominated households, putting them in touch with like-minded individuals.

Additionally, the paper assisted in the self-realisation of German women while creating a platform for female writers to flourish, which was one of the most influential gifts Louise Otto could have ever given to her readers. According to Cathrine M. Prelinger, across Silesia and in the capital, women formed their own literary groups to read the *Frauen-Zeitung* and its enlightening articles on issues they were all passionate about (1987, 112). The strong connection between readers and the journal became evident in 1850 when a press law in Saxony had almost suspended the *Frauen Zeitung* for good. However, due to the overwhelming number of requests and proposals, Lousie Otto could continue publishing the journal for several months (Prelinger 1987, 112).

Nevertheless, one has to mention that even if the *Frauen-Zeitung* was a revolutionary project, it mainly affected women's ideas of their own potential and opportunities on a theoretical level - primarily influencing the thinking of middle-class women. It showed them the place they could and should occupy in social and political life. However, it did not create tangible political and structural change.

b. Kindergarten movement

Similarly to the *Frauen-Zeitung* the Friedrich Froebel's Kindergarten movement originally sprung from the shift in culture in the early nineteenth century. The Froebelian - and Pestalozzi - model moved the emphasis away from the traditional family model - based on paternal discipline - to one that focused on maternal love. This change was also evident on a national level, as ideas about a 'state based on the unity of feeling rather than authority' became increasingly popular (Allen 1991, 59). In the case of the Kindergarten initiative, they stressed the importance of liberal child-bearing and the conscious, systematic training of the future generations - both being common trends of the early-nineteenth-century culture. Furthermore, such aspect of the liberal movements 'enlisted the frustrated energies of middle-class women', who - much like their male counterparts - longed for a more meaningful and responsible role in society (Allen 1982, 320).

Moreover, in a period when male professions gained prestige through the formalisation of educational requirements, thinking about the maternal role as a profession offered middle-class women the same status as their male counterparts had. Like Louise Otto-Peters, the Jewish women's activist Henriette Goldschmidt promoted Froebel's Kindergarten models. She argued that women's work in educational institutions was a 'culture(d) profession of women' (*'Kulturberuf der Frau'*) (Fassmann 1992, 147). Additionally, Meike Sophia Baader points out that the increasing interest of revolutionaries, democrats and liberals in the Kindergarten movement was closely linked to the 'Froebelian principle of being open to all social classes and religions' (2015, 220).

In particular, the Hamburg Women's College is an excellent example of women's role and participation in education. The College was founded by the network linking free-thinkers (*Freidenker*), democrats and followers of the women's and Froebelian Kindergarten movement. The school, among other subjects, offered professional vocational training for future Kindergärtnerinnen (Baader 2015, 221). For instance, in the *Frauen Zeitung*, children's

education was posited as a female contribution to the revolution by Froebelian principles. In a broader sense, Baader concludes that ‘not only was the Froebelian movement directly linked to the first bourgeois women’s movement, it was also the forerunner of progressive education more broadly’ (2015, 224). However, precisely this argument sheds light on the elitist and exclusionary nature of nineteenth-century women’s movements. In other words, one has to distinguish between the novel ‘freedoms’ of working-class women and the new ‘freedoms’ of middle-, upper-class women during the revolutionary years. This argument is further elaborated on in the following sections of the essay.

As Baader suggests that ‘for the bourgeois women’s movement, the construction of the field of social work as a female sphere was connected with hopes for influence and power’ (2015, 223). The maternal ethic and the concept of public motherhood served as a bridge between public and private life, thus providing the ‘basis of a claim to female power’ (Allen 1991, 3). In addition, German women – fighting for the emancipation of their gender - believed that family should not be placed outside politics. Therefore, making a case for active female participation in the political sphere.

In short, the final goal of the Froebelian Kindergarten movement and Kindergärtnerinnen was not only to win recognition as professionals of child-nurture and child-education – equal to the status of the professions of their male counterparts – but to utilise the insights and lessons gained from their ‘distinctively female experience to the more general task of liberal reform’ (Allen 1982, 320). Therefore, the Kindergarten movement and the integration of women into the educational sphere – as educators and pupils - achieved broader social change. Namely, shifts in the traditional, patriarchal family model and the realisation of women’s new, emancipated and self-sufficient lifestyle.

Structural change and shortcomings

As the many examples of the first section show, the 1848 revolution created an environment in which a more comprehensive range of society could organise itself and act in its own interest. However, the opportunities of self-realisation differed by gender, class and socio-economic background. As Jonathan Sperber suggests, women asserted their role in public life, although ‘in terms of their private role in the household and family’ (2005, 118). Even future women’s rights activists, such as Mathilde Franziska and Otto-Peters, understood their political activities during revolutionary years ‘in terms of a supportive, auxiliary role’ – besides Anneke’s military

activities and both women's positions as editors of newspapers (Sperber 2005, 188). Otto-Peters, in 1849, commemorates the feelings of her compatriots as follows:

‘We have learned how we should really make a revolution, not by building barricades and through a few days of fighting in the street – not through a fit of enthusiasm which can last only a few hours, but through the peaceful conversation of the entire population to democratic values’ (Otto-Peters 1849, as cited in Gerhard, Hannover-Druck and Schnitter).

This quote sheds light on that many activists - including Otto-Peters - had their eyes on the grander price. Although the *Frauen-Zeitung* never categorically mentioned ‘women's suffrage’, they strived for equal political rights and more remarkable structural, institutional change. For example, Otto-Peters vocally demanded equal citizenship with men by spreading democratic values among the entire population. Most Kindergärtnerinnen agreed with her arguments - critical of many aspects of women's legal and social status -, however, they never made similar public political claims (Allen 1991, 76).

Another crucial aspect of the German women's movements' structure is its inherent elitism and liberal theoretical background. The movements, especially the Froebelian Kindergarten groups and associations, enlisted the energies of middle-class women in the service of the liberal vision of society. Ann Taylor Allen suggests that these women aimed to resolve class conflict ‘not through the economic reforms [...] but through common ideals transmitted through education’ (1982, 324). Kindergärtnerinnen advocated for the acceptance of pupils from all social classes. However, they felt that the ‘educated race’ should take up the roles of teachers, referring to the middle-, upper-classes (Allen 1982, 327). Allen summarises the connection between the much-celebrated liberal values and different philanthropic Kindergarten projects as follows:

‘Such philanthropic condescension reflected the generally elitist tendency of liberal thought at mid-century, which increasingly viewed political participation as the right of an educated elite into which the "rough masses" could only climb through suitable education’ (1982, 327)

As the quote shows, the tendency of nineteenth-century liberals to see economic and social problems in exclusively cultural terms was a broader issue – it ultimately led to fractionalisation

within liberal, feminist lines. However, this does not mean that the efforts of the white and middle-class proto-feminist insurgencies should be fully condemned. For instance, one must consider the social, economic and political realities of the nineteenth century when analysing the decisions and convictions of middle-class activists. In addition, however, we must mention the shortcomings of elitist female activism. A lesson from which modern-day intersectional feminism could, nonetheless, learn.

In the end, unfortunately, structural change does not come easy. After having defeated the revolutions, states quickly reinstated their previous absolutistic and oppressive regimes. The police promptly shut down Kindergartens and Women's Colleges – linked to Froebel and his followers. Due to their atheistic nature and openness to all classes, they were seen as threats to the nation's integrity. As a result, permits were frequently withheld, and associations were banned from legal recognition (Prelinger 1987, 161). For instance, in 1850, Prussia was one of the first states to 'impose acts that signalled the restoration of absolutism' (Prelinger 1987, 160). One of such exclusionary laws prohibited the party membership of two categories of persons: women and minors (or other dependents). The *Frauen-Zeitung* stood against the discrimination and the specific term used in the law, '*Frauenperson*' (Prelinger 1987:160). Such a legal decision illustrates the reaction's primary weapons: misrepresentation and distortion – although the initial impact of the law was slight as few women participated in political clubs. The novel of Claire von Glümer *Fata Morgana* channels a somewhat similar frustration, in connection to the missing, post-revolutionary structural change. The plot presumably refers to revolutionary events as *Fata Morgana*, suggesting that the various political struggles were rather illusionary. Behind the scenes, other higher powers – in the novel, the church and the clergy - pulled the strings (McNicholl 1989, 232).

Conclusion

As the previous chapters highlight, one should not neglect the stories, experiences and contributions of nineteenth-century German women's movements in the 1848 revolution and era of great social change. However, one has to be alert not to romanticise such organisational activities and give them the courtesy of an objective analysis – as much as possible. Women's rights activists in the nineteenth century were not as inclusive as current-day intersectional feminism expects its followers to be – not to mention the different objectives of activists then and now. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to compare and contrast the achievements and

righteousness of such movements. As Bonnie S. Anderson argues, the women involved in the nineteenth-century women's movements were not consciously feminist. Instead, they were 'reluctant feminists or unintentional feminists' (1998, 3). They carried the message by deed. Thus, for example, Otto-Peters, even as a determined activist of women's civil equality, suggested that the participation of women in the public sphere should assume 'a different character and [occupy] a different realm' from that of the other sex (*Frauen-Zeitung* 1849, 4). Moreover, she distanced herself from so-called emancipated women and radical feminist thinkers like Luise Aston or George Sand. Still, the *Frauen-Zeitung* elicited a wide range of female voices – even if contrary to the personal convictions of its editor (Prelinger 1987, 106).

Nonetheless, if one wishes to learn from the past, we must come back to the concept of structural change. Although, as the first section details, the *Frauen-Zeitung* was more of soft power - a great incentive of liberal and proto-feminist discourse -, it was a source mainly written by middle-class women to middle-class women. Intellectually, it liberated women and showed them a new, more emancipated way of life. However, after the revolutionary years, it fell prey to the reactions' restricting actions. One can also mention the Kindergarten movement and the institutionalisation and professionalisation of maternal ethics. Such developments had a broader effect on women's lives, like the prestige that came with the formalisation of educational requirements which granted women access to the public sphere. The formalisation of education led to structural change in society, family and the household. Sadly, the hard-won improvements were paralyzed for years by the regulations of re-absolutized states.

Furthermore, the lack of inclusivity and the *naïveté* of middle-class, liberal women have also played a critical and role in the future of such women's movements. First of all, it is more convenient to accept the liberal *laissez-faire* attitude of nineteenth-century thinkers if one is in a somewhat privileged social situation. Women were undoubtedly disadvantaged – socially, politically, economically - as a group. However, middle- and upper-class women still enjoyed some privileges – financial stability, social status – that separated them from their less-fortunate fellow activists. Arguably, the difference between poorer and middle-class women was just as grave as the contrast between the rights of men and women in the nineteenth century. Therefore, lower-class women had to fight their battles on different fronts. First, they contested the sexist status quo – upheld by society itself - and protested against the elitist convictions of the women's movements and Kindergärtnerinnen. Second, middle- and upper-class women neglected and looked down upon the ideas and needs of their lower-class comrades, which

produced a less diverse and, therefore, less viable movement. It was an organisation that advocated for the rights of all on paper but, in action, only represented a privileged few. The less fortunate were used more as a token of diversity and inclusion rather than respected as active participants with new and influential points of view.

Equal and continuous representation, in my opinion, is the most important lesson of the nineteenth-century German women's movements. The importance of inclusiveness and diversity. How could have the post-revolutionary years turned out if the women's movement had meaningfully included all social classes? Maybe, with the more active participation of lower-class women, the movement could have found a way to survive more effectively under the absolutist regimes. All in all, the – imperfect - achievements of German women's movements were just as revolutionary and historical as the events and barricades of the 1848-49 revolution.

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