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Gender Identity in a Democratic Europe

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between gender identity, feminism and democracy in the context of the European Union. In the first part of the paper, Schleicher examines the concept of gender and pose the question: under which circumstances can and should the term 'gender' replace the term 'woman'. In the second part, versions of Wollstonecraft's Dilemma are considered. Should women fight for the recognition of their equality, for the recognition of their difference, or for the deconstruction of the term 'woman'? Next, Schleicher looks at the consequences of the above dilemmas for the relationship between gender and democracy. How can traditional, liberal democracy based on universal principles and the commonality of all human beings accommodate to women? In participatory democracy can and should women stand for other women? Are there interests common to all women? Who should represent these interests? Does deliberative democracy offer a way out of these dilemmas? What is the role of communication in deliberative democracy? Are there specific masculine and feminine styles that effect the outcome of the decision making process in deliberative arenas? Finally, Schleicher considers the diversity of gender identities within the European Union. This diversity is illustrated by presenting different approaches to feminism, different feminist identities within the EU. Scandinavian 'state-feminism' and post-socialist 'shy feminism' are looked at in more detail. The paper concludes that we cannot understand the relationship between gender and democracy within the EU without taking into account the existing diversity in terms of the relationship towards democratic institutions, the state and the private sphere, and the meanings attached to the term 'woman'. Without an understanding of the historical context leading to the above-mentioned differences the differential effects of the EU's common gender policies is difficult to comprehend.

Keywords

Deliberative Democracy - Diversity/Homogeneity - Gender Policy - Identity - Political Representation - Post-Communism

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between gender identity, feminism and democracy in the context of the European Union. I will not attempt to give a comprehensive overview of this extensive issue.¹ Instead, I would like to examine the concepts themselves. By looking closely at the meaning of these words, I would like to problematise their relationship to each other, and raise some questions concerning the possibilities of empirical research in the field. By identifying and mapping potential problem areas, we can get a step closer to understand the relationship between gender identity, feminism and democracy.

In the first part of the paper I examine the concept of gender. After a short historical overview I pose the question: under which circumstances can and should the term 'gender' replace the term 'woman'. In the second part I consider versions of Wollstonecraft's Dilemma (Pateman 1989). Should women fight for the recognition of their equality, for the recognition of their difference, or for the deconstruction of the term 'woman'? If they want to be included in the public sphere on an equal footing with men, they risk being masculinised in the process of acquiring the masculine norms of the sphere. If they fight for the recognition and appraisal of their difference, e.g. as mothers and caregivers, they risk being closed in an undervalued private sphere. If they are successful in deconstructing the term woman, they risk losing the legitimacy of their claims as a group. The last problem is the one examined in detail in this paper for which I present different solutions.

Next, I look at the consequences of the above dilemmas for the relationship between gender and democracy. How can traditional, liberal democracy based on universal principles and the commonality of all human beings be accommodated to women? In participatory democracy can and should women stand for other women? Are there interests common to all women? Who should represent these interests? Does deliberative democracy offer a way out of these dilemmas? What is the role of communication in deliberative democracy? Are there specific masculine and feminine styles that effect the outcome of the decision making process in deliberative arenas? These are some of the issues that are addressed in the second part of the paper.

Finally, I look at the diversity of gender identities within the European Union. This diversity is illustrated by presenting different approaches to feminism, different feminist identities within the EU. Scandinavian 'state-feminism' and post-socialist 'shy feminism' are looked at in more detail. The paper concludes that we cannot understand the relationship between gender and democracy within the EU without taking into account the existing diversity in terms of the relationship towards democratic institutions, the state and the private sphere, and the meanings attached to the term 'woman'. Without an understanding of the historical context leading to the above mentioned differences the differential effects of the EU's common gender policies is difficult to comprehend.

¹ For a thorough overview of the literature of the topic see Galligan and Clavero 2008.

Gender or women?

Feminist activists, as well as feminist researchers, have defined their aims in terms of fighting for the rights of women. However, in the late 1970s researchers started to use the term 'gender' to replace the term 'woman' or 'women' in feminist discourse (Unger 1979, quoted by DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007: 10). By the 1990s academic courses, formerly called 'women's studies', were renamed 'gender studies', and nowadays the term gender, and its compounds, such as gender mainstreaming, appear with increasing frequency in mainstream discourses on women, equal opportunities and gender equality.

The change of term from 'woman' (women) to 'gender' has strong theoretical underpinnings. It is meant to signal a move away from essentialist notions of the feminine towards a constructivist approach to analysing the situation of women vis-à-vis men. The first step in this direction was the acknowledgment that feminine and masculine behaviour is not something we are born with, but something that is learned in the socialisation process². Thus the need to differentiate between biological, anatomical sex and social gender was born, and with it the recognition that anatomical sex does not necessarily determine gender identity.³ It was meant to be a move away from generalizing 'woman', but the resulting notions of 'feminine' and 'masculine' identities acquired during socialisation were still relatively fixed and stereotypical, and considered mostly universal.

The second, more radical step originated from the revolutionary work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993), who, starting out from results of speech act theory (cf. Austin 1962), claimed that gender is not something we have, but something we do, something we continuously perform. According to the performative notion of gender, femininity and masculinity are constructed through a series of everyday activities. '[...] acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body' (Butler 2003: 208). There is no 'woman' behind the feminine surface, claims Butler, while she also acknowledges that the performance of gender is not completely free:

One does not have the fantasies, and neither is there a one who lives them, but the fantasies condition and construct the specificity of the gendered subject with the enormously important qualification that these fantasies are themselves disciplinary productions of grounding cultural sanctions and taboos.

(Butler 2003: 207)

Gender and language scholars examine how gender is being performed in everyday interaction, in dialogue with others (cf. Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002; Bucholtz et al. 1999; Bergvall et al. 1996). The results call attention to the context-sensitive nature of this performance⁴, to the plurality of femininities and masculinities constructed

² Theories ranging from psychoanalytical to social learning and cognitive development try to explain the process. Their detailed presentation would not be possible within the framework of this paper.

³ In fact, a rather complex relationship of biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, desire emerged resulting in an increased interest in the case of inter-, or transsexual, transgendered people, where this complex relationship becomes more visible.

⁴ The theory of communities of practice proved to be a heuristic tool to be applied to these settings. (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992).

locally, and often for strategic purposes. Thus, we can differentiate between *sex*, that is the biological male or female, *gender identity*, that is, the learned, but relatively fixed and universal feminine and masculine characteristics that we have, and *gender performance*, that is, the locally and often strategically constructed femininities and masculinities that we do.

However, in parallel with (and, to some extent, also as a consequence of) studies in gender as constructed and performed, identity theories have also undergone significant change. Identities – racial, ethnical, national, and religious along with gender – formerly considered fixed and stable, are discovered to be social and historical, fluid, often contradictory, and negotiated in conversation with others. The following quotes serve to illustrate this change and emphasize similarities between conceptualizing gender and other aspects of identity.

Slowly even the mainstream begins to suspect that identities are plural, multiple, and fluid, merging into one another rather than facing each other as if from separate corners of the ring. [...] [T]he characteristics of identities themselves are argued to be made, not found [...].

(Alcoff 2003: 7)

Identity emerges in the process of repeatedly performing behaviours culturally recognised as feminine, white, heterosexual, educated, and so on.

(DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007: 61)

It seems to be useful to conceptualise identity not as ‘being’, but as ‘becoming’, as a process of construction, as activity in the direction of building a collective image in a dialogue and negotiation with others. Identity seen from this perspective is a dynamic process of construction, something one does, rather than what one has.

(Mach and Pozarlik 2008: 6)

For many scholars identity no longer means the fixed and stable core of the person. Thus the term ‘gender-identity’ can also – depending on context – mean either the acquired and relatively fixed or the socially constructed, fluid, performed identity of the individual, be it anatomical male or female.

If, however, we examine the occurrences of the term ‘gender’ in intellectual and popular discourses, we find that in the majority of cases the authors are really referring to anatomical males and females, that is men and women as they appear ‘on the surface of the body’ and not of gender identity (as acquired) and even less of gender performance (or gender identity as constructed). The blurring of sex and gender happens regularly. In empirical research researchers very rarely examine the self-identities of their subjects: they simply label them male or female based on their biological characteristics. (DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007: 9). Research on gender and politics is no exception. When, for example, we measure gender equality by examining the gendered compound of national parliaments, we simply count the number of biological male and female representatives.

By resisting the temptation to use the fashionable term ‘gender’ when we really mean (biological) woman or women, and reserve the term for occasions when we really examine or talk about gender identity or gender performance (a distinction I would

also consider useful to keep), we would help to maintain the important distinction between the terms and highlight the limits of our research.

'Woman' for women?

Feminism defines itself in terms of fighting for the interest of women. But is there a common interest of all women that can be identified? In other words: can 'woman' stand for women? Psychoanalytical theories that trace commonality among women back to early childhood development claim to be universal. Materialist feminists claim that it is the common experience of women as an oppressed group which creates the common ground for action.

Thus it is our historical task, and only ours, to define what we call oppression in materialist terms, to make it evident that women are a class, which is to say that the category 'woman' as well as the category 'man' are political and economic categories not eternal ones.

(Wittig 2003: 160)

In similar vein, Young discovers commonality among women in a 'shared perspective' resulting from their historical oppression. (Young 2000, quoted by Galligan and Clavero 2008: 13). On the other hand, third wave, black and postcolonial feminist thinkers call attention to the difference among women, to the exclusionary practice of taking white, heterosexual, western women's experience as representing the experience of 'woman'. These scholars point to the danger of essentializing 'the feminine'. Simone de Beauvoir already denied the existence of the 'eternal feminine'. Later Butler emphatically called attention to the danger of using the category of 'woman'.

For the most part, feminist theory has taken the category of women to be foundational to any further political claims without realising that the category effects a political closure on the kinds of experiences articulable as part of a feminist discourse. When the category is understood as representing a set of values or dispositions, it becomes normative in character, and hence, exclusionary in principle.

(Butler 2003:201)

However, a presumed lack of commonality among all women creates a legitimacy crisis in feminism by removing the foundation it is based on. If there is no feminine essence behind the feminine surface, then there is no feminine subject who can fight for the rights of women and for whose rights feminism can fight for. With Butler's words again: 'If it is not a female subject who provides the normative model for a feminist emancipatory politics, then what does' (Butler 2003: 203)? On the one hand, Butler claims that:

The fixity of gender identification, its presumed cultural invariance, its status as an interior and hidden cause may well serve the goals of the feminist project to establish a transhistorical commonality between us, but the 'us' who gets joined through such a narration is a construction built upon the denial of a decidedly more complex cultural identity – or non-identity, as the case may be.

(Butler 2003: 210)

While on the other hand, Rosaldo states that:

One must consider categories that are visibly inscribed on the body, such as gender and race, and their consequences for full democratic participation. The moment a woman or a person of color enters the public square both difference and inequality come to the surface.

(Rosaldo 2003:337)

Although I agree with both views, there is an apparent contradiction between the two approaches. One calls attention to the essentializing nature of talking about woman in general, and the other, which argues for the unavoidability of the category of woman (and race). This problem is also framed as a trap of identity politics which conflates social position with political opinion (Verloo 2006); as the challenge of finding an alternative to the universalism versus cultural relativism dichotomy (McEwan 2001), or as the false choice between an exclusionary and repressive identity and a fragmented non-identity (Allen 1999: 99).

A number of solutions are suggested to this problem. Amy Allen turns to the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, and especially to her concept of solidarity, for a solution. Solidarity among people can be achieved, she argues, not on the basis of a pre-existing sameness, but as a result of common political action. Identities are not social but political facts. Allen illustrates this with Arendt's relationship to her Jewishness. Arendt claims: 'I am a Jew' as, in her opinion, it is the only thing to do when others, her potential prosecutors among them, claim that she is a Jew.

Thus Arendt insists that one can affirm that one *is* a Jew without implying that *being* a Jew involves partaking of some fixed essence that all Jew share. Affirming membership in an identity group is a recognition of a political fact: as a fact it is undeniable, and to attempt to deny it is dangerous and deluded; but as political, it is resistible and, ultimately, changeable.

(Allen 1999: 109)

In fact, one does not have to be a 'real' Jew to claim to be one and to 'act in concert' with others against the prosecutors. The analogy can be productively applied to gender. It offers a good way out of the essentializing trap. I'm a woman, not because I share some essential characteristics with other women but because others label me so, and with this label they put me in a disadvantaged position. It is not a social but a political fact. The theory is also useful as it helps to understand how men too can participate in feminist struggles for women's emancipation.

But we should also understand why some women, on the other hand, do not want to participate in this emancipatory struggle. Sa'ar's concept, 'the liberal bargain' helps to answer this question.

Some members of the marginalized groups internalize liberal epistemology to maximize security and optimize their life options. They strategize to materialize whatever limited benefits they may extract from their disadvantaged position in the liberal order. Like patriarchal and ethnic bargains, liberal bargains may have many variations, and they include different levels of commitment, namely, action, discourse, and meaning-making. Accordingly, attitudes and behaviors tend to range from internalizing and actively promoting liberal authority, to

working with it for short-term gains while avoiding conflictive emotional investments, to passive and active forms of resistance.

(Sa'ar 2005: 681)

Sa'ar promotes a 'politics of identification' instead of a 'politics of identity' and with it puts the emphasis on women's agency instead of an essentialist determinism.

I agree with the authors quoted above that the way out of the trap of identity politics lies in exploring diversity, recognizing the importance of meaning, and acknowledging women's agency. We simply have to remember that difference is not the result of inherent characteristics, but of outside expectations. Thus commonality might or might not exist among women, but, when they appear in public, in female bodies, there exists a common, and potentially discriminatory and oppressive expectation towards them to behave according to the ideologically constructed requirements of their gender. They can choose their relationship to this expectation and this relation can move on a scale from total acceptance to total resistance.

Women and democracy

The fight for women's suffrage was one of the first steps towards the birth of the feminist movement. Since then, the relationship between women and democracy has been on the agenda of feminist activism and research. 'Women's exclusion from democratic structures of representation and participation has generated a vast amount of empirical research, though gender inequalities in parliamentary representation represent one of the most identifiable areas of scholarship in this field' (Galligan and Clavero 2008: 5).

Modern democracies are representative democracies. The claim for a higher number of women representatives in parliaments suggests that it would result in a higher representation of women citizens. But is it so? To repeat our previous question: can 'woman' stand for women? Is there a common interest of all women that can be represented? If there is, can this interest be articulated and fought for only by women? Are there specific feminine issues? Should they be put on the agenda by women representatives? Do female representatives want to deal with feminine issues? Do women want to be represented by women? These are questions that need to be posed if we do not want to return to the trap of essentializing women.

The traditional conception of liberal democracy is based on universal principles, on the equality of all human beings. Its logic is based on the commonality of all humans, not on differences among them. Liberal feminists call attention to the fact that all are not equal, women citizens are denied many of the rights men possess. They believe, though, that by gaining the same rights, difference between men and women will disappear, we will all just be humans, citizens equal before the law and equal agents of democracy. Liberal democracy can function well, we only need to 'add women'.

Radical feminists, on the other hand, call attention to the difference between men and women, to the specific feminine values that stand in opposition to the negatively valued male characteristics. They demand recognition of this difference on which feminine identity – they claim – is based. But in a democracy '[p]olitical and moral rights are based on what all persons share in common; differences are considered

merely contingent and therefore either politically irrelevant or actual obstruction' (Alcoff 2003: 6). A call for the recognition and acknowledgment of difference in the form of identity politics can thus be seen as a threat to classical democracy.

From another point of view women's fight for recognition as a specific group with specific needs and interests can also backfire. If we recognise that difference among men and women exists (if at all) not as a result of biological difference between the sexes, but as a result of common experience due to being a historically oppressed group (see, e.g. Wittig 2003), then, clearly, an emancipatory identity should not be based on this difference. We have to agree with the following question:

Why are so many of those who have been oppressed by their identity, especially racial and gender identity, demanding respect and recognition for these identities rather than deconstruction or an escape from them?

(Alcoff 2003: 3)

It seems that we face two alternatives: demanding recognition of difference on which the category 'woman' is based or deconstructing this difference and with it the category of 'woman'. In the first case, we risk creating a category which is narrow, constraining and potentially oppressive for many women. In the second case, by deconstructing our subject we lose the ground of feminist politics. To repeat Butler's question: 'If it is not a female subject who provides the normative model for a feminist emancipatory politics, then what does' (2003: 203)?

Deliberative democracy: a way out?

Independent of problems relating to the representation of women, criticisms of representative democracy – or de Tocqueville's 'tyranny of the majority' – are extensive. The functioning of the European Union, for example, is often depicted as suffering from a democratic deficit referring, among other things, to the fact that decisions are taken several steps away from the citizens who are bound by it, often by expert-bureaucratic bodies not democratically elected. (For debates on the issue see among others Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2004; Eriksen and Fossum 2000) In recent years, a new form of democracy based primarily on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, and termed deliberative democracy, has been propagated as an alternative to representative democracy. (cf. Bohman and Rehg 1997; Elster 1998, among others)

According to deliberative democracy theory, what makes a political decision democratically legitimate is not that it has majoritarian support, but rather that it has been critically examined by 'qualified and affected members of the community' through a reason-giving practice. In other words, a legitimate decision is one that can be consented to after withstanding scrutiny by those who are bound by it.

(Habermas 1998, quoted in Galligan and Clavero 2008: 11)

Galligan and Clavero (2008), referring to the work of Iris Marion Young (2000), argue that deliberative democracy is a preferable alternative from a gender point of view, and offers a way out of the essentializing trap described above. First, because '*deliberative* approaches do not tie the concept of democracy to a particular territory, or to a value-based community based on a common ethnicity or nationality, but regard

the existence of diversity and difference as being conducive to democracy rather than an obstacle to it.' (Galligan and Clavero 2008: 12). Second, because it considers interests, thus women's interests, not as fixed and pregiven, but found in rational debate through collective argumentation. (ibid.: 13.)

On closer examination, however, a number of problems can be identified. Firstly, the definition of deliberative democracy requires that all 'affected members' of the community be present at the decision making process. In most cases this is clearly not possible. Thus, some form of representation is unavoidable. The process of representation then takes us back to the problems discussed in the previous paragraphs.

Second, according to the definition, affected members should also be 'qualified'. This is a problem articulated already in connection with representative democracy. Ideally, it would require well-informed citizens, who have a clear understanding of the increasingly complex issues political decision makings are about. The problem increases if decisions are made not by elected - and presumably qualified - representatives, but by affected, but most probably not qualified, citizens themselves.

Thirdly, we have to pose the question: who decides who is 'affected and qualified'? In other words: who are the gatekeepers of the public sphere where deliberation takes place? We know that the birthplace of democracy, the 'Agora' of ancient Greece, was a place restricted for free, male citizens. The 18th century public sphere, as described in a highly idealised way by Habermas (1965), also excluded (among other groups) women. Women have been prevented from entry into spaces of deliberation on many different grounds. In 1900s women's brain size was used to assert 'that women were incapable of engaging in the "rational deliberation required in politics and business"' (Campbell 1989, quoted by DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007: 34).

Today, when legal and institutional obstacles have been mostly removed, we still find that the number of women in deliberative spaces, be it a national parliament or deliberative bodies like the Convention on the Future of Europe (cf. Galligan and Clavero 2008: 16) do not equal that of men.

These findings signal to the persistence of gender inequalities in politics, independently of whether the system is underpinned by aggregative or deliberative principles or ideals and reveal how deliberative institutions and processes can also give rise to a significant gender democratic deficit
(Galligan and Clavero 2008: 17).

But, even if they are present at the process of deliberation, there remains the question: will they be listened to, will their arguments be heard and taken into account? Do they possess sufficient 'epistemological authority' for that? These questions are especially unavoidable as deliberative democracy calls attention to the importance of communication in democratic procedures. The quality of this communication must therefore be a major index of the quality of democracy itself.

The process of deliberation is defined as based on rational debate. One of the most frequent stereotypical opposition used to differentiate males and females is the 'rational male' versus 'emotional female' stereotype. Based on this prejudice women's

rational participation in these debates are often questioned. But is there really a difference between the communication styles of men and women?

One line of research argues for the existence of a specific feminine style⁵ often characterised as 'relational', 'rapport building', or based on 'transformational values'. It is detected historically in public speeches of women, named 'invitational rhetoric' and described by Campbell as 'affirmation of the affective, of the validity of personal experience, of the necessity for self-exposure and self-criticism, of the value of dialogue, and the goal of autonomous, individual decision-making.' (Campbell 1973: 79, quoted by DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007: 50). Elsewhere it is characterised as 'personal in tone', relying 'on personal experience, anecdotes, and other examples', 'structuring speeches inductively', 'invit[ing] audience participation', 'addressing the audience as peers', 'having as their goal empowerment' (Campbell 1989, quoted by DeFrancisco and Palczewski 2007: 42).

Characteristics of this, supposedly feminine, style compare interestingly and show some parallels with the normative requirements of deliberation, where participants do not just bargain following their own interests in seeking to maximize their gains, and minimize their losses but - following argumentative rationality (cf. Habermas 1985) - come into the process with an open mind aiming to arrive at a common understanding of the situation.

The question, in my opinion, is this: how does this normative model compare to empirical reality? Do deliberative spaces really work differently from other public spaces? Research shows that women are generally disadvantaged in public debate: they speak less, they are interrupted more often, the issues they raise are less often taken up for discussion, their arguments are less often listened to (cf. Edelsky 1993; Holmes 1995; Shaw 2000) Would this work differently in a deliberative arena in patriarchal societies, where male norms dominate every aspect of life? It is highly questionable that deliberative spaces would be an exception to the rule.

Proponents of deliberative democracy are rightly criticised for neglecting power relations in their analysis. If a society - and from this point of view there is no difference between national societies and international conglomerates such as the European Union - is characterised by power differences, it is unlikely that this would not have an effect on the process and outcome of deliberation when participants come from both advantaged and disadvantaged groups. As Nancy Fraser puts it in her critique of Habermas:

As Habermas understands it, the citizen is centrally a participant in political debate and public opinion formation. This means that citizenship, in his view, depends crucially on the capacities that are connected with masculinity in male-dominated, classical capitalism; they are capacities that are in myriad ways denied to women and deemed at odds with femininity [...]. Thus, there is conceptual dissonance between femininity and the dialogical capacities central to Habermas's conception of citizenship.

(Fraser 1989: 126)

⁵ Its origins are explained, alternatively, by the experience of being a member of an oppressed group, or different socialisation of boys and girls in the family or in peer groups.

This line of thought presupposes the existence of feminine characteristics, a feminine style of communication. It thus cannot avoid generalisations potentially harmful to, and in contradiction with, the emancipatory purposes of feminist research.

Another line of research – usually within the context of post-modern, post-structuralist theories – aims at deconstructing femininity and masculinity and with it feminine and masculine styles of behaviour and communication. Their qualitative and highly context-sensitive research shows that there are no uniform feminine and masculine styles, there is big variety among women, as well as among men, and members of both groups use language varieties – that could be termed stereotypically feminine or masculine – for strategic purposes (e.g. Mills 2002; Stubbe et.al. 2000; Swann 2002). Results from this research too, must be treated with some caution as, in their extreme form, they would deny all community among women, thus undermining, even denying, the articulation of their disadvantaged position. With de Beauvoir's words:

To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today – this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality.

(Beauvoir 2003:150)

Baxter's research of British business leaders showed that both men and women leaders use transactional (stereotypically more masculine, competitive) and transformational (stereotypically more feminine, cooperative) discourses. However, while men can move with relative freedom between the different discourses, women, who also use both types of discourses, have to police their speech much more carefully, as expectations towards them and reactions to their behaviour have a much more constraining effect on their discourses (Baxter 2008).

These results confirm our previous argument that the cause of difference in styles lies not in inherent difference between men and women, but in society's different expectations towards them and women's (and men's) different reactions to these expectations. This finding has serious theoretical and methodological consequences. If it is not the difference between males and females that is the cause of women's disadvantaged position, then it is not their behaviour that should be studied. The real cause of women's continued oppression, their absence from high positions in industry and politics, even within the context of formal equality, lies in the meaning of gender, that is, in the different meanings attached to masculinity and femininity, that results in different expectations towards men and women, thus disadvantaging women (and, in certain situations, men as well). As a consequence, our task is the study and deconstruction of these meanings.

Gender identities in the European Union

In the previous paragraphs I called attention to some of the problematic aspects of the relationship between gender and democracy. Now I would like to narrow down my inquiry to the context of the European Union. Here I do not want to deal with all aspects of gender and democracy within the EU. I will only call attention to the

theoretical and methodological consequences of the problematic nature of gender identity within this context.

An overview of research done in this area is given by Galligan and Clavero (2008). They acknowledge the relative success of the EU in fostering gender equality policies within the member states, but call attention to the expert-bureaucratic nature of this venture, and women's continued exclusion from democratic structures of participation and representation. What is more, they point to the actual contradiction between the success of gender equality policies and the restrictions on democratic input in the EU in the framing of these policies.

[...] the effectiveness of the EU in developing a body of equality legislation and other policy measures aimed at the eradication of gender inequalities has been made possible precisely because it is an entity which has been protected from 'input democracy'.

(Galligan and Clavero 2008: 3)

However, the question, once again, is this: can we study women in general in the EU? The EU is undoubtedly a bearer of numerous feminine experiences. On the most obvious level national identities intersect with gender identities. The historical experience of East and West, North and South-European women are very different. The increasing feminisation of migration within and into the EU results in an even more complex picture with regard to race, ethnicity, religion. (cf. Andall 2003) Age, class, education, sexual orientation – to mention just the most obvious ones – are further, in themselves also problematic, identity categories that intersect with gender in various, diverse and often contradictory ways.

Is there a common feminine identity within the EU which could substantiate our statements about the situation of women? Is there such a thing as a European woman? Is there such a thing as European feminism? Verloo (2006) calls attention to the fact that multiple inequalities existing within the EU are treated as being of the same type. Structural and political intersections⁶ among them are not taken into account. She compares some of the social categories (gender, race/ethnicity; class; sexual orientation) connected to inequalities, and concludes that they are different from each other in many aspects. She suggests diversity main-streaming instead of simple gender mainstreaming as a solution.

[...] strategies addressing differentiated inequalities at the structural level cannot be 'the same', and [...] an individualistic anti-discrimination policy is insufficient. What is needed is the development of complex methods and tools informed by intersectionality theory, an increase of resources, but also further development of intersectionality theory and a rethinking of the representation and participation of citizens in an era of post-identity politics.

(Verloo 2006: 224)

In this 'era of post-identity politics' the different approaches towards feminism within the EU countries clearly illustrates the existence of different conceptions of both

⁶ Verloo (2006) turns to Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality. Structural intersections refer to the relationship of different inequalities, eg. race and gender, to each other as they affect people's lives. Political intersectionality indicates how intersections are relevant to political strategies.

gender and democracy in these countries. A study of gender democracy cannot be complete without taking into account these differences and possibly offering an explanation for their existence.

At least three different approaches can be identified. The most well-known, which can be termed the mainstream version, is a feminism of Anglo-Saxon origin with strong American influence. The second, a Scandinavian version, the so-called 'state feminism'. The third, which I term – borrowing one of Fábíán's (2002) categories – 'shy feminism', characterizes the post-socialist member states. A brief examination of the last two vis-à-vis the first one might help understand the existing gender diversity within the EU.

Scandinavian countries are often depicted as the most advanced ones from a feminist perspective, countries where gender equality was attained, and which thus should be looked at for best practices. The Scandinavian model is based on women's economic independence – a dominance of the dual bread-winner model combined with high-quality child care and generous care-giver allowances – as well as a high presence of women in political decision making bodies.

There is a favourable attitude towards feminism, proved by the fact that in Sweden, for example, the majority of the parties call themselves feminist (Borchorst and Siim 2008: 211). Gender equality policies are highly institutionalized offering positive treatment for women through a variety of quota systems. The positive treatment of women is generally seen as compatible with the conception of justice.

Based on these achievements Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes talked about the possibility of the existence of a truly woman-friendly society, and termed the institutional make-up which makes it possible 'state feminism'. According to her definition, state feminism is the result of a combination of 'feminism from above' in the form of gender equality policies and 'feminism from below', women's mobilization in political activities (Hernes 1987).

While feminist movements of Anglo-Saxon origin usually defined themselves in opposition to the state, which they saw as both the maintainer and beneficiary of the patriarchal system, the Scandinavian version – as the above description of the conception of state feminism shows – has a friendlier relationship with the welfare state. Here, feminist movements, critical of the patriarchal practices of the political decision making bodies, did not refuse participation in the traditional political system, but demanded inclusion instead (Skjeie and Siim 2000: 352). This specific development of the Scandinavian version of feminism and its success is usually explained by the history of the Scandinavian countries. It was characterised by the existence of strong social movements and participatory traditions combined with traditions of corporatism. These traditions resulted in confident citizenship, but also a pursuit of agreement, a high value of consensus, a striving for win-win situations (Skjeie and Siim 2000).

However, the Scandinavian model faces criticism, as it struggles with challenges of globalisation and multiculturalism. The model seems somewhat less accommodating to new, intersectional gender identities resulting from increased migration and the growing number of minority communities within these countries. The intersection of minority religion (primarily Islam), ethnicity, and national identity with majority

citizenship poses new theoretical and practical challenges to the increasingly fragmented Scandinavian feminist movements. While representation and participation of majority women in decision making bodies achieved an unprecedented high level, the presence of minority women in these institutions is very low compared to their presence in these societies (Siim and Skjeie 2008)

Ongoing debates on issues like the wearing of hijabs, or the measures taken against forced marriages bring into light theoretical and practical problems resulting from the emergence of new, intersectional gender identities, and calls attention to the difference of approaches towards these issues in the three Scandinavian countries (Siim and Skjeie 2008; Borchorst and Siim 2008). Gender and ethnicity/religion are played out against each other when, for example, stricter immigration laws are legitimized by reference to women's autonomy⁷ or the wearing of the hijab is banned claiming that is oppressive to women.⁸

Debates on the sustainability of the Scandinavian style welfare state, especially in light of the present financial and economic crisis, might also affect gender policies in these countries. While the European Commission with reference to research by Esping-Andersen et. al. (2002) came to the conclusion that woman-friendly policies actually increase economic competitiveness (through their positive effect on the labour force), the Danish Welfare Commission concluded that the maintenance of the existing welfare system with its generous gender equality policies, poses serious financial problems for the future (Borchorst and Siim 2008)

The problems faced by Scandinavian feminism are often envied and considered problems of luxury from the point of view of the post-socialist countries of East Central Europe. Due to different historical developments, citizens' relationship to gender and democracy is very different in this part of Europe. This is by and large the result of the legacy of state socialism, characterised by an almost complete employment of the female workforce combined with a widely available, though poor quality child care service, and a state feminist ideology that brought a high number of token women in politics combined with a general denial of human rights and democratic freedoms. As a result, feminism in this region was thought to be just one of the many deceiving ideologies of those in positions of power. Steps, that in western feminist thinking would have been considered advantageous for women, were taken as oppressive actions forcing women into work, taking away from them the opportunity of staying at home with their children, and the ridiculous propaganda of the tractor-driving girl was unveiled as the crude reality of women being forced by necessity to do hard and unhealthy physical labour. Twenty years after the transition feminism is still very weak in these countries and gender constructions are still affected by memories of the past.

Although the number of women's NGOs (representing an articulation of women's common interests in different sectors) grew significantly after the transition, they face a number of problems that weaken their effectiveness. The absence of a stable

⁷ Denmark introduced a 24 year age limit for marrying foreign citizens (citizens of the EU are exceptions) with the explicit goal of combating forced marriages. An ideology of women's rights help to legitimize stricter immigration laws (Siim and Skjeie 2008).

⁸ While in Denmark employers were granted the right to ban the wearing of hijabs to their employees, in Norway such bans were found to violate the gender equality law as well as the ethnic and religious discrimination act and were thus prohibited (Siim and Skjeie 2008).

financial background makes these organisations dependent, on the one hand, on the state, which often uses them to fulfil certain social services, and, on the other hand, on their western partners and donors, who often appear to be insensitive to the specific problems of the region. The lack of money often results in competition among the different organisations for available resources and in the tendency to deal with issues there are available resources for, instead of the ones they consider important (Fábián 2002; Sloat 2005).

The major cause of their ineffectiveness probably lies in the negative attitude towards feminism characterising these countries. Fábián explains anti-feminist sentiments in Hungary by '(1) a desire to dissociate from socialist emancipation; (2) the association of feminism to anti-male attitudes and stereotyped western feminism; (3) the plain threat of westernization; and (4) the level of economic development' (Fábián 2002: 279). Nash claims that the majority of Czech women find feminism 'foreign' and 'repulsive' (2002: 294). Sloat (2005) quotes numerous other studies that confirm the general existence of this anti-feminist attitude in the post-socialist states.

In this atmosphere it is not surprising that women of this region – be they practising politicians, researchers or actors of the civil society – are reluctant to call themselves feminist even if what they stand for would be termed by this label in the 'West'.⁹ This 'shy feminism' characterising the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries has a problematic relationship with mainstream western feminism often manifesting itself in conflicts between feminist researchers and activists of the two regions. CEE feminists often accuse their western sisters of insensitivity, colonizing attitudes, universalising approaches, patronizing and controlling (e.g. Fábián 2002; Nash 2002; Kašić 2004) along the lines familiar from postcolonial and black feminist theories (e.g. McEwan 2001; Sa'ar 2005). Western feminists, on the other hand, detect insensitivity to gender issues in CEE countries which they do not clearly understand. Fábián suggests that these societies are not really insensitive but 'differently sensitive' to gender issues (2002: 278). While they refuse the anti-male attitudes of radical feminist ideologies (cf. Nash 2002, Fábián 2002) and call attention to the dangers of the victim frame especially strong in relation to Balkan women where violence against women, trafficking and prostitution dominated the agenda of western feminists (cf. Kašić 2004), they sometimes successfully unite around certain issues – such as plans to restrict access to abortion – they feel are more relevant to their lives (Sloat 2005; Fábián 2002).

In fact, gender scholars of the region often fight in two different directions. At home they try to convince their fellow citizens about the usefulness of feminist ideas, when writing or talking to a western audience they try to explain the problematic nature of western type feminism when applied to a CEE context (cf. Nash 2002: 294). Thus they are considered too feminist at home and not enough so in the 'West'.

We can arrive at a better understanding of the situation if we look at the different constructions of the public and private spheres – two concepts of outstanding importance from feminist perspectives. The 'private is political' slogan of western

⁹ The popularity of the term 'gender' and 'gender scholar' in these countries might be explained by the fact that it makes it easier to avoid the term feminist with all its negative connotations. However, Kašić calls attention to the fact that the meaning of gender has never been really explored and debated, and it remains a 'free-floating signifier' (Kašić 2004: 480).

feminists has a very different overtone in the post-socialist context. Western feminists fought for the abolition of the artificial division of the two spheres, which, they claimed, closed women into an underestimated private sphere, and kept all decision making power in the public sphere dominated by men. Under socialism the private sphere was, on the contrary, overly politicized. The oppressive, authoritarian regime invaded it in its attempt to control all aspects of its subjects' life. In less harsh periods and locales the private sphere, the small circle of the family remained the only shelter to retreat to, the only space left untouched by the authority, thus gaining high value in the eyes of the people.

As black women often felt solidarity with their men and fought together against racial oppression, CEE women also stood by their men, and the family was conceptualised not as a site of patriarchal oppression, but as a site of resistance against the oppressive authority. It is thus not surprising that after the transition the possibility of becoming full time mothers and house wives, and retreating completely to the private sphere was seen by some of the women of the region as a positive development (cf. Nash 2002). This was especially so, considering that the newly born public sphere was not very welcoming of women. At the political level any attempt to ensure the positive treatment of women was refused in the name of a celebrated liberal ideology which did not allow for a Scandinavian type interpretation of justice. At the workplace capitalism showed its true colours, the competitive, masculine environment was also repugnant for many women.

A closer look at the region, however, reveals that CEE countries, just as the Scandinavian ones, cannot be seen as a monolithic whole. Talking about post-socialist (or, with western terminology, post-communist) women is almost as universalizing and misleading as talking about women in general. When we look, for example, at the citizens' relationship to the state and its institutions, a clear difference emerges between the Czech Republic and the other CEE countries. The Czech Republic is the only country in the region with a true democratic tradition. The democracy of the new Czechoslovak state founded in 1918 combined with progressive and generous social policies, women's emancipation and a 'feminist' president, Masaryk (Nash 2002: 296), resulted in the fact that the relationship of the Czech people with the state is less adversarial than elsewhere in the region. While feminism in the post-socialist states is mostly resisted and interpreted as a deceiving ideology of socialism, it is resisted in the Czech Republic as something no longer needed, as women's emancipation was already achieved in the interwar area, a period of special importance and a source of pride in the collective memory of the nation.

In sum, then, Anglo-Saxon feminism defined itself in opposition to the state and achieved its success on the basis of a strong civil society movement activism. It was a 'feminism from below' which nowadays turns to a more theoretical orientation characterised by postmodern, post-structuralist approaches. Results are difficult to translate into policy recommendations or everyday activism. Followers of this approach face criticism of elitism and of not offering solutions to 'real' women's real problems.

The 'shy feminism' of CEE countries is partly the legacy of the socialist era, characterized by a forced 'feminism from above'. A distrust in the state and its institutions, disillusion from democracy combined with weak civil society and a general turn away from politics characterize the region. Scandinavian 'state

feminism', the result of a combination of 'feminism from above' and 'feminism from below' goes furthest toward the achievement of true gender equality, but faces problems of globalisation and multiculturalism.

The resulting diversity reflected in these three main strands of feminism is a problem (or opportunity) the whole European Union has to face. Womanhood, feminism, democracy, the public and the private, these concepts are constructed very differently in different regions of the European Union. The resulting diversity of attitudes can lead to misunderstandings in dialogue and possible failures of the unifying attempts of the EU's gender policies. Without a clear understanding of the historical context and the resulting diversity of meanings, we cannot really understand how gender and democracy work in these countries.

Conclusion

'There is no ideal means to study gender identity' – claim DeFrancisco and Palczewski (2007: 11). This assertion refers to the basic dilemma this paper addressed, namely, making any statements about women run the risk of being over-generalizing, universalizing and strengthening existing stereotypes about basic, essential differences between men and women. Research on the subject of woman may reify the term itself, which can in turn serve as an oppressive category for women 'not fitting' into wider social and political constructs. Does this mean that we should give up attempts at studying this subject? Certainly not. But it means that we cannot undertake research on gender and cannot interpret results of this research without a sufficient degree of self-reflexivity.

There are certain precautions we can take to avoid, as far as possible, the above mentioned dangers. I argue that any research project on gender should integrate the following concepts: diversity, intersectionality, context, meaning and agency. Diversity refers to the recognition that women are not a homogenous group, differences in nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, class, education etc., strongly affect their self-identities. Intersectionality calls attention to the fact that the above mentioned differences intersect with each other in various, diverse ways. A sensitivity to the historical and territorial context of our research helps to explore the roots of the existing diversity. A study of meaning will help understand why the same words and concepts, 'woman' and 'democracy', mean different things in different times and places. A study of the construction of these meanings will expose power at work in these concepts. Finally, in this struggle to define the meaning of woman, gender and democracy treating women as active participants, aware of and resistant to hegemonic discourses, will give us hope that clarity and change is indeed possible.

The European Union, this huge repository of diversity, faces the challenge of safeguarding this diversity while upholding dialogue and providing equal and just treatment to all. Diversity, within it gender diversity, clearly poses a challenge to democracy, a challenge it must face and address with success. Otherwise anti-democratic forces familiar from the history of Europe will offer alarming solutions to simplified problems. As the unfortunate strengthening of the extreme right in some countries at the European parliamentary elections shows, this is a real danger.

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