

ENTANGLED HISTORIES OF FEMINIST ADVOCACIES IN THE INTERWAR BALKANS AND CENTRAL EUROPE

DIMITRA SAMIOU

POLITICS, FEMINISMS, FEMINIST ACTIVISM, FEMINIST POLICIES AND FEMINIST MILITANCY
(SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES)

THE TERMS POLITICS AND POLICIES

As you may already know, the word “politics” derives from the Greek word “polis”, meaning the ancient city-state. In Classical Antiquity, *Politics* meant the *act of governing the city-state*. The same word was incorporated into the language of our *modern liberal tradition*. Thus, the primary meaning of the term *politics* refers to all procedures that *relate to governing*, either a state, or a supra-state entity or any group of people.

Although there is *not* an unanimously accepted definition, *politics* is nowadays perceived in a much broader sense. Politics is basically defined as a set of activities that are associated with *making decisions*. And what matters the most is *who* is making the decisions and for whom. Therefore, the core concept of *politics* relates to *power*. It has to do with the *distribution of power* among social groups, among organized groups, among political parties, among states and state coalitions, even among individuals. Today, it is largely admitted that all political decisions affect *public* and *private* relations *as well*. So, politics has to do with both the *public and the private spheres*.

More precisely, politics concerns the distribution of power among:

- Social groups
- Organizations / Associations / Bodies (non-State entities)
- States / State coalitions (sovereignty)
- Political institutions (political parties, political authorities etc.)
- Private institutions (schools, universities, institutes etc.)
- Individuals

Politics may be performed by different actors, in different places, with different means.

Accordingly, social, economic and political actors dispose both of *official* and *non-official* ways of interfering with public policy and thus enhance new decisions:

Official ways of influencing public policy:

1. The most common way of making official decisions is through *State and Inter-State Institutions (political institutions)*. The direct way to do so is to be a

member of these institutions, to participate in person. The *indirect* way is to influence decisions by *voting in elections*. Needless to say, that state institutions have both the *authority* and the *power* to take decisions that affect *all the members* of a community.

2. States and inter-state institutions also make decisions through *Official Diplomacy*, that is by negotiating, by discussing with others more or less peacefully.

3. And, last but not least, the oldest way of making politics is by *making war*. According to the famous military theorist Carl von Clausewitz “war is the continuation of policy with other means.” What is impressive is that Von Clausewitz conceived of war “*as a major political, social, and military phenomenon which might involve the entire population of a country*”. In other words, Clausewitz believed that war was performed not only by the army, but by the whole nation.

I think that this is an interesting view. It seems that this was exactly the situation in Europe and particularly in the Balkans, during the last decades of the 19th century till the end of WWI, when aggressive nationalism and war prevailed. We know that an astonishing big number of women in these countries contributed to the war effort in order to gain national victory, sometimes also aspiring to a feminist victory.

Unofficial ways of influencing public policy:

1) Through *national, regional or international Organisations / Associations* (the NGOs), which do not have *public authority*, but which may have the *power* to operate so as to *persuade* or *oblige* public authorities to take decisions.

2) Undertaking *grassroots* activities is another form of policy. Grass roots activities may lead to *political movements*, which sometimes may also lead to *uprisings*. Grassroots activities may be altogether *spontaneous*, or may be organized and promoted by NGO’s or other social and political groups. These forms of action may challenge the social and political *status quo*, either by creating a new social and political order, or by bringing-upon at least *a small number of* changes. Even if grassroots agencies do not succeed, they probably influence society by providing new visions, that alter social mentalities and norms, which at their turn may lead to further changes.

3) Another way of performing politics is by *using unofficial diplomacy*. For example, *lobbying is an unofficial way* of negotiating. Lobbying means that a group of people is trying to intervene into the decisions of an institution, from which it is excluded. E.g.: Interwar feminists lobbied into the Versailles Congress, because they were totally excluded from its sessions. They were also obliged to lobby into the League of Nations, because only a few women were allowed to participate as full members.

“THE POLITICAL”

All the above seems quite clear. Yet, a certain misunderstanding may arise in the way we use the word “political”, the adjective “political”, when *specifying* an activity, or a person or an idea. Obviously, the term “political” refers to power relations, but it is sometimes difficult to understand *which one* of the above policies mentioned, a speaker or a writer is referring to. Do they refer to an *official* or a *non-official* procedure? What are they referring to? So, when writing a paper, let’s say, the only way to avoid confusion, is by explaining to our audience what exactly we mean by the word political, especially if it is used in many ways at the same time.

Let’s take 2 examples:

➤ We may say: “these *people have political aspirations*”, meaning that they want to be involved into party politics or parliamentary politics. Or

➤ We may say: “*feminism is a political movement*”, meaning that this movement challenges gender relations and evokes social change.

So, we must be careful when using the term “political” in order to refer to public institutions, and when using it in order to refer to social agents who challenge the social and political structures, sometimes also challenging public institutions themselves [as was the suffragist movement].

“FEMINISM(S)-FEMINIST ACTIVISM”

In accordance with the above, it is clear that feminism was -and still is- a *political movement*, because it deals with *power relations* between genders. And we all know that gender is a core hierarchical structure within society; it is an oppressive structure which penetrates all human areas and all human activities, putting women in positions of exclusion or inferiority or mistreatment. As far as Interwar is concerned, it seems that all interwar *feminisms* tried to empower women by changing women’s roles and women’s status in society, but they *conceived* it in *very different ways*; and they also *acted* and *reacted to the challenges* they faced, in many different ways:

1. Some feminists were simply trying to ensure more *freedom* for women, so that they could be more creative in social activities, primarily intellectual and educational ones (and this was the advocacy of the more hesitant and reserved female actors) [*how we should call them? Cultural feminists, Pro-feminists?*]

2. Other feminists believed that they should *gradually* assure *legal rights* for women, beginning by education rights, labor rights and social protection. This means that some groups of feminists demanded only *civil and social* rights and they were reluctant to accept the demand for *political* rights (and this was the advocacy of the conservative feminists who were being, let’s say, “smoothly active”, who were not so precipitant and so anxious to gain equality) [*how we should call them? Social feminists?*]

3. Other feminists were demanding *full equality with men* -the sooner the better (and this was the aspiration of the more radical feminists who were struggling for:

equal social rights, equal economic rights, equal political rights. Suffragists may be characterized as being radical feminists. We call them “radical”, because they were demanding *full equality for women*. And we also call them *radical*, because they used *militant ways of struggle*. [*“Suffragists”. Democratic feminists?*]

4. Other feminists believed that the solution to their problems was the total change of the economic and political social structure. And these were the socialist feminists/ communist (feminists).

5. Others may be called nationalist feminists, as I think Gabriela is suggesting, or ethno-nationalist feminists, as I think Maria is suggesting.

6. Partisan feminism?

7. Government feminism? State feminism? State-run feminism?

Now, as far as the above *feminist tendencies* are concerned, I think that the distinguishing feature between them, relates to the idea of *citizenship*. Not all feminists believed in *women’s citizenship*; the more so, in *equal citizenship*. [citizenship is the quality/the attribute/and the legal status of being a *full member of a society*, as the famous sociologist T. H. Marshall argued in 1950. *Citizenship* means *the inclusion* into the polity. And according to the political philosophy of modernity, no one can be legally a citizen if he/she is deprived of the *symbol* of citizenship, which was/is the right to vote and to be elected, to be a member of the constituency. Because these rights are supposed to be the principal means of assuring one’s personal interests.

So, if a certain percentage of interwar feminists *refused* the idea of being granted political rights, in fact they refused the *legal status of being citizens*. And they did so by only accepting the rather *superficial* quality of being “social citizens”, which practically meant that they were simply recognized as *social individuals* and nothing more. This means that Civic and Social rights do not recognize you as a *citizen of a state*. They only provide personal freedom and social protection to all.

Yet, regardless of their discrepancies, all interwar feminists, in a different way each one of them and each national or international feminist group, shared the aspiration for the establishment of a more peaceful society, a more altruistic one, after having endured the disasters of the Great War.

To conclude, interwar feminism was a *political movement* not because a number of feminists were demanding *the right to vote and to be elected in Parliament*, or because they were affiliated to political parties. Primarily it was a political movement, because it *challenged the core concepts of gender relations and gender roles as being unequal and unjust for women*. Yet, it is more than true, that some feminists did not confine their activity to feminist demands alone; they also engaged to *unofficial diplomacy*, being very close to their governments and certain political figures. So, they were campaigning, at the same time, for their feminist demands

and their national interests or the political visions of their party leaders. These activities were also political. Feminists performed cultural diplomacy in order to strengthen transnational peace relations in their region.