

Identity and Collective Memory in the Making of Nineteenth- Century Feminism

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According to the historian Maria Grever, analyzing feminist sites of memory is a way of shedding new light on the women's movement in the West. It calls attention, she writes, "to how these memories define a feminist identity", and to how certain women "did not earn a place in the pantheon of feminist culture".¹ Historical monographs offer an important means for the movement to produce a collective memory about itself. Read by people who wish to improve the conditions of women and to change the ongoing construction of gender, the accounts of feminism and reform told in these monographs also serve as something to relate to and identify with. For Grever, these narratives produce a certain memory that can be added to, maintained, and commemorated as well as contested or rejected.² In this article I will explore this function of the historical monograph, taking as my example the Finno-Swedish feminist Alexandra Gripenberg.

A central figure in the International Council of Women (ICW), Gripenberg participated in a huge European-American feminist network.³ On the eve of the rise of the international struggle for women's suffrage in 1904, she published a three-volume monograph, *Reformarbetet till förbättrandet af kvinnans ställning* (1893–1903) (Reform Work for the Improvement of Women). It was originally meant to be published in English, but for some reason this did not happen. Nevertheless, as a lengthy study of reform work undertaken to change the conditions for women throughout the Western world, it serves as one of many continued feminist memories, to use Grever's typology. Gripenberg offers repeated advice on how to achieve strategic progress, not

merely local goals. Doing this identity markers are implicitly put forward for the reader, showing what it takes to identify with the movement. The first volume, published in 1893, was devoted to a series of countries: the US, Britain, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Russia, Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, and Greece. The second volume, published in 1898, was dedicated to France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. The last volume, published in 1903, covered the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland) and is far longer than the others. Even though the monograph does not conceal its Western focus, its stated ambition was to offer a general analysis of the state of the Woman Question and of the possibilities for progress. Changing gender conditions around the world were seen as crucial for progress since the development of women “from sexhood to humanhood” was regarded as a question that involved “half of humanity”.⁴

Gripenberg’s universalist approach to the Woman Question was quite typical for the time. By and large, women’s rights and needs were generally discussed and written about with few concessions to social, economic or religious conditions. In Gripenberg’s analysis, the situation of women was intimately connected to modernity and civilization. The women’s movement in different countries was portrayed in a largely unreflective, Western/Eurocentric way. First and foremost, the ethical basis for feminism was made clear: Christianity in general and Lutheranism in particular. Implicit but notable was the absence of remarks about its middle-class, white, and liberal character, prerequisites that were taken for granted. Such identity markers were something to which readers could relate, creating feelings of affinity or exclusion. As Sara Ahmed notes, the women’s movement described functioned as an institution orienting around particular bodies, that is around certain kinds of women.⁵ These women were indisputably white, Christian, and liberal. But, as the following analysis will show, the text also contained less predictable markers. Relating the absence of the almost compulsory feminist stress on innate feminine qualities and motherliness to the many contemporary feminists living either as single or engaged in same-sex relations, Gripenberg also offered possibilities for identification for women who chose to live without men.

This article will not pursue an analysis of the geopolitical framing of the West in contrast to “the rest”. The construction of imaginary

Western and non-Western women, as well as of a hyperreal West and a hyperreal Orient, will be addressed elsewhere.⁶ Instead, this article argues that Gripenberg's monograph can be read as one of many that contributed to the collective memory of First Wave feminism in the West.⁷ *Reformarbetet*, it will be argued, functioned as an effective means of social cohesion participating in the construction of a feminist space, a particular space to relate to or depart from. As Grever remarks, memory production was by and large an outcome of knowledge production, historical consciousness, and invented traditions within the movement. The events and people which eventually gained a place in the pantheon of feminism was an effect of an ongoing production of collective memory. Collective memory is in itself a result of prior selections, agreements, and decisions about what and whom to remember, what to document, and how to display events and people. Besides the production of historical knowledge about the women's movement and the struggle for reform, a major role in shaping and upholding feminist identities was also played by invented traditions within the movement. As inventions, such traditions functioned not only as a means of countering the construction of narratives from outside but also served as traditions shaping feminist ideals. As Grever notes, analysis of the women's movement and the functions of its memory production and invented traditions: "throw[s] considerable light on how people relate to the past. All 'invented traditions' use history to legitimate action and cement group cohesion. In addition, 'invented traditions' illuminate processes of inclusion and exclusion within power relations."⁸

Progress for Christ's sake

Time and space have an important place in the work of Gripenberg, who consistently relates societal progress to contemporary historical and political conditions. Based upon a trinity of foundational ideals consisting of Enlightenment philosophy, the Gospels, and the Reformation notions of individual freedom, care for others, and civic responsibility are made ethical precepts for political and feminist change. The text evinces a firm belief in reason that is, however, not entirely secular (that is, left-wing). The religious ethical dimension is con-

stantly present and contrasted with secular, materialist ethics. Having no doubt that Christian, or rather Lutheran Protestant, ideals are necessary for progress, Gripenberg emphasises that these must be combined with the belief that all humans are individuals and capable of personal development as well as of moral and political agency. Evident in a number of paragraphs women are seen as fully capable of becoming educated human beings and future citizens, not the least when the United States is discussed and when conditions for women in countries dominated by the Catholic or Greek Orthodox church is analysed.⁹

Gripenberg had a firm belief in progress. Paraphrasing Hegel on the title page, the whole enterprise sets off: once an idea has appeared, it eventually conquers the world, not without resistance or struggle, because it is ethically right.¹⁰ Women's entitlement to freedom and justice is justified by ideals of Enlightenment philosophy and Christianity that have already been accepted. It is unjust to treat women as other than human, and hence unjust to suppress and exploit a fellow human being because of her gender, race, or class. This line of argument is evident throughout Gripenberg's discussion of political and social rights for African-Americans, the European working class, and women in general.¹¹ Science and rational thought are, moreover, seen as crucial for progress and will accelerate progress. The barrier to progress is quite clear: ethical inconsistencies in society, women's lack of formal education, the protection of male privilege, and the lack of feminist consciousness.

For Gripenberg, the idea of progress – the gradual realization of ethical principles and political ideals inherent to the West – provides the matrix for general change. As already noted, she quickly narrows this matrix down to Christianity (in contrast to “the Oriental”), thereafter to Protestantism (in contrast to Catholicism), and, eventually, to Lutheranism (in contrast to Calvinism and the Greek Orthodoxy). This narrowing tendency is particularly discernible in the chapters on Russia, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Greece. Interestingly she makes no comment on Anglicanism or Judaism in Europe and the US. Nor is the role of contemporary Jewish feminists commented upon.¹² Religious and cultural heterogeneity is thus made invisible at a national level, with the exception of Greece, whose religious hetero-

geneity Gripenberg regards as too important to leave unremarked. Regardless of education or class, Muslim women are portrayed as less advanced, a result of ethical deficiencies and sexual morals in Muslim societies. Although Gripenberg was a fierce advocate of social and political reform, socialism was ranked alongside Oriental ethics as one of Western feminism's greatest enemies, mainly because of its long neglect of women's claims for equality, and its atheism.¹³

Gripenberg's story is not just an optimistic narrative about inevitable, albeit hitherto contested, progress towards full justice and gender equality in the West. The analysis centres on hindrances to a progress that ought to be, if given possibilities to prosper without gendered prejudices, male resistance, formal and informal hindrances of different kind. Lack of formal possibilities for women to earn a living of their own is alongside with the decisiveness of women to act and carry out changes, put forward as main tools for social change, eventually leading to a world of equality and independence for women.¹⁴ Freedom is the overall goal: freedom for all women. Once again, as a liberal feminist Gripenberg is not exceptional in this respect, nor is her concept of freedom. Freedom is contrasted with the secular variety for which socialists were assumed to be striving. Freedom is, first and foremost, freedom from exploitation and different kinds of injustice, and the right for all people to find happiness in an ethically just world. As noted, for Gripenberg, Lutheranism provides the basic ethical foundation for the right kind of freedom because of its starting-point in ideas about equality and care for others. The idea of freedom becomes politically intertwined with equality: no one is to suffer because of the freedom of others. In Gripenberg's argument this perspective came to include women of different classes, even though she was fiercely opposed to wider social change. As an outspoken opponent of socialism, Gripenberg carefully avoided socialist ideas, rhetoric, and analysis.

Space and belonging

The space claimed was universal and free, where women of all classes were regarded as agents. This space also had a private and corporeal dimension. The stress was on women's agency as citizens, as rational,

moral, and embodied beings as well as wage-earners. Liberate women, give them the opportunity to make choices, to act and live independently. Gripenberg offers few normative prescriptions about roads to be followed after liberation. Recommendations about suitable areas to act or perform within are few even though the cultural, religious and political framework is evident. It is noteworthy that Gripenberg does not choose to point out certain areas for women to exercise their future rights as citizens. When not stressing women's complementary duties or innate feminine capabilities, Gripenberg leaves open an imaginary space in which women will be counted as individuals, whatever they choose to do, even beyond the matrix of marriage and motherhood. If read as part of an identification forming contribution, Gripenberg's monograph thereby provides a possibility for women to relate to feminism without the almost compulsory prerequisites of nineteenth-century feminism where women are first and foremost seen as mothers, as the bearers and rearers of children.

The feminist identity processes in Gripenberg's work are complex: make women reflect, act and mobilise. Let them loose and trust them as agents, capable of acting on behalf of their own! Gripenberg presents this idea without specifying what kind of feminists are to be produced or which particular women are to be included. At the same time, the text specifies a number of aspects of feminist identity. Cultural and religious norms are explicitly held within the realms of Western, protestant ethics. Bringing in Gripenberg's own feminist context, the international women's movement in general and the leadership of the ICW in particular, other identification markers become manifest. The group of transnational feminists in the ICW leadership consisted largely of Protestant, bourgeois, middle- and upper-class white Western women. Despite their national differences, they came together in a politically somewhat vague but liberal enterprise to improve women's conditions worldwide.¹⁵ This enterprise fitted well with ideas about progress and femininity elsewhere. According to T.J. Boisseau, at the World's Fair of 1893 in Chicago, where the ICW held its constitutional meeting, a strong, relatively new, feminine ideal along ethnocentric lines was presented:

The exposition presented an opportunity to invent a model of modern American womanhood in keeping with its modern ethos. *Modern* did not denote only contemporaneity in the context of the exposition. The adjective implied the attainment of civilised moral standards and social relations as well as the development of industry and technology.¹⁶

The ICW very much continued to work along this path. But at the same time, as Leila Rupp has shown, the feminist “we” produced within the ICW leadership also provided a space for women to live and work without men. For the leadership itself, the ICW functioned as a transnational all-female and feminist space where women, often slightly controversial on a national level, could carry out political work and form personally important networks and relations. This transnational, almost cosmopolitan space enabled friendships across national borders outside of marriage and even same-sex relations. Rupp shows how many of the prominent feminists within the ICW leadership, and, later, in the international suffrage organisation as well as in the international peace movement, formed intimate relations with women in the organisation as well as lifelong friendships across national borders. This seems not to have posed a problem for either the movement or Gripenberg.¹⁷

The feminist identity processes at work in Gripenberg’s monograph are both clear and vague as regards normative and implicit prescriptions about how to be a feminist. This was most often effected through displays of ethical and religious ideals contrasted to non-desirable qualities, creating a picture of a feminist *persona non grata*. A genuine belief in women’s agency makes the recommendations and thereby the construction of the other stops at a general, overall ethical level. The goal was to let women become citizens in all respects. As such they were supposed to be good, independent Christians, just and responsible persons who did not misuse or exploit others. Christianity, social awareness, reflection, agency and selflessness were displayed as necessary components. Beyond these prerequisites, women were free to choose and the feminist space was open to anyone. At the same time, the general ethical framework dismissed women on racial grounds as well as on class/caste, religious, and cultural grounds. The overall narrative argues for a successful transnational feminism based on Protestantism, liberal political values, and women’s agency. In many respects, Gripenberg’s historical representation of Western civilisation as progress

is unsurprising. In many respects, it follows other nineteenth-century Western narratives. What stands out is the particular feminist space Gripenberg carves out, where consequences of regarding women as individuals and agents supported the idea of women living as single, outside of marriage and children, even to choose a life in partnership with other women.

To elaborate further: Gripenberg did not draw on national solidarity among women. Common ethical, political, and religious ideals are instead presented as the glue that could unite women across the world. Mobilisation of women, co-operation, networking, feminist solidarity, and ethical unity are important, regardless of nationality. The political importance of a particular transnational space for women, a place within which to act as well as a space in which to exist, was considered crucial for long-term feminist change. Although Gripenberg strongly believed in working with feminist men, she did not overlook the importance of an all-female space. She herself felt at home in the ICW, which represented a massive female network at the turn of the twentieth century, providing a transnational space in which women of different nationalities, cultures, and sexual orientations could meet. While Alexandra Gripenberg was a strong believer in the possibility of solidarity among women, the feminist “we” that she put forward had its limits. She thereby participated not only in cementing group cohesion but also in producing a cultural memory of the nineteenth-century women’s movement.

Notes

1. Maria Grever, “The Pantheon of Feminist Culture: Women’s Movements and the Organization of Memory”, *Gender & History* vol. 9, no. 2 Aug (1997), 372. My italics.
2. Ibid.
3. Gripenberg was a board member of the ICW at the turn of the nineteenth century and was considered for the chair when Lady Aberdeen resigned. However, she turned down the offer. Ulla Wikander, *Feminism, familj och medborgarskap: Debatter på internationella kongresser om nattarbetsförbud för kvinnor 1889–1919* (Göteborg/Stockholm: Makadam förlag, 2006), 232.
4. Alexandra Gripenberg, *Reformarbetet till förbättrandet af kvinnans ställning* (Helsinki, 1903) vol. 3, foreword.

5. Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness", *Feminist Theory* (2007).
6. "Hyperreal" is here used to denote an imaginative trope whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: 2008) 27. See Manns, "Time, Space and Place in the writings of Alexandra Gripenberg", *Scandinavian Journal of History* (f.c).
7. The term "collective memory" refers to group identity within a social movement. See, for example, Verta Taylor & Leila J. Rupp, "Loving Internationalism: The Emotion Culture of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888-1945", *Mobilization: An International Journal* vol. 7, no. 2 (2002).
8. Grever, 367.
9. See particularly "Introduction", 8f. and the chapters on the US, Belgium in vol. 1, France in vol. 2.
10. Detailed reference to Hegel is not given. See title page, vol. 1. Quote in original: "En idé framträder, förvandlar världen, medför kamp och strid, framkallar sin motsats, luttras och renas, blir ändtligen segrande, och världen har dermed blifvit en annan."
11. See the chapters on the US, Britain, Belgium, France, and the Nordic countries.
12. Ernestine Rose (1810-1892), for example, daughter of a Polish rabbi and an international feminist, is the only one mentioned, and very briefly, in the chapter on the US. Rose was a free-thinker and outspoken atheist who had married a British Owenist. See Bonnie S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
13. On misogynic writers, vol. 1, 110ff., 136, vol. 3, 72. On socialism, see vol. 1, 117f. in the chapter on Germany, and vol. 2, 67ff. on France.
14. This is discussed in several chapters of the monograph.
15. Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: the Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997).
16. T.J. Boisseau, "White Queens at the Chicago World's Fair, 1893: New Womanhood in the Service of Class, Race, and Nation", *Gender & History* vol. 12, no. 1 (2000), 36. Cultural and ethnical homogeneity in the international suffrage organisation is discussed by Charlotte Weber (2001) in "Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911-1950", *Feminist Studies* vol. 27, n. 1. See also Rupp, *Worlds of Women*.
17. Leila J. Rupp, "Sexuality and Politics in the Early Twentieth-Century: the Case of the International Women's Movement", *Feminist Studies* vol. 23, n. 3 (1997). I make this observation without any suggestion about Gripenberg's personal life. On the stress on motherhood in the emotional life of the ICW, see Taylor & Rupp.