

# Open Research Repository

## **Biography and 'Cheshire Cat Stories'. A geopolitical journey through a Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms, Central, East and South Eastern Europe**

Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Loutfi, Anna
Publisher	Verlag V&R Academic
Download date	2024-12-12 22:41:39
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14018/10660">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14018/10660</a>



**Anna Loutfi**

## Feminism, biography and cheshire cat stories

*A geopolitical journey through a biographical dictionary*

Anna Loutfi reflects on the use of the nation–state as an organizing principle for central and eastern European feminist history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She detects what she calls feminism's "imperial ironies": feminists in central and eastern Europe acted within international feminist networks, while at the same time were confronted with emerging nationalism in territories that had been parts of former empires.

This paper was first presented in June 2007 at the international L'Homme–conference "Imaginary borders in Europe from the perspective of women's and gender history"<sup>1</sup>. I was invited to participate as one of the co–editors of *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms, Central, East and South Eastern Europe, nineteenth and twentieth Centuries* — hereafter referred to as the *Biographical Dictionary*<sup>2</sup>. The initial aim of my paper was to clarify the dictionary's concept of Central, South and South Eastern Europe, but, in the end, I decided that the difficulty of developing any coherent criteria for such a definition would make for more interesting discussion — especially with respect to the fascinating, dynamic interplay of geography and what I call "geopolitics", biography/biographical narrative, and gender identity that one can trace through the *Biographical Dictionary* as a whole. This paper, then, has been developed — from an original intention to clarify geographical borders, and justify points of geographical exclusions/inclusions regarding the selection criteria of the *Biographical Dictionary* — into an exploration of the ways in which the biographical genre (particularly vis–à–vis feminist experience) exposes the political instability of the nation state and its borders as an interpretive framework for personal identity.

The paper first attempts to define the term "geopolitics", and asks what we might understand by the concept of "feminist geopolitics" — especially for those working to chart women's and feminist life stories located across the rapidly changing geopolitical face of central, east and south eastern Europe in the nation–building epochs traversing the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Biographical Dictionary* forms the basic case study in this respect, and with reference to the enigmatic figure of the Cheshire Cat from Lewis Carroll's famous Victorian children's story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Like the eerie Cheshire Cat, the national identities of many subjects featured in the *Biographical Dictionary* keep appearing, disappearing and reappearing, only to persist in fractured and discontinuous forms. The partial–embodiment, disembodiment and perpetual resurfacing of national identity suggest that while it is impossible for historical biographers to isolate feminist projects from nation–building ones, feminist identity can be envisioned, at the same

time, as something "more than" or "beyond" national identity.

The paper then turns to its main provocation, with the following question: How valid is it for feminist biographers to use the nation state as a primary coordinate for organising, framing and giving meaning to feminist history and individual life trajectories? And how can feminist biography that unambiguously frames its subject in terms of a primarily *national* identity avoid reproducing the unacceptable exclusions of class, caste, "race", ethnicity, social status, etc. that the national coordinate demands, even as it attempts to offer a (partial) "corrective" to the gender exclusions of particular national histories? To put the question differently: can a volume like the *Biographical Dictionary* avoid reinforcing a "grand narrative" in which European feminisms/feminist movements appear to be the exclusive property of literate national elites?

This paper attempts to interrogate the limits and possibilities for women's and gender history provided by the genre of national biography; to examine the possibilities of the biographical narrative for feminist geopolitics, using the ambiguities, ambivalences and occasional half-heartedness of what I call *Cheshire Cat stories* as a point of departure; and finally, to make some methodological suggestions for future biographical projects.

### **Feminism, biography and geopolitics**

The traditional valorisation of history and disregard for geography in the social sciences, as Michael Heffernan has pointed out, has generated a need to politicise geography<sup>3</sup>. He notes that whereas "geography is regarded as ontologically insignificant, an immutable unchanging and independent physical background to the swirling historical drama", history is, by contrast, "the realm of ideas"<sup>4</sup>.

Geopolitics — or the politicisation of geography — offers an antidote to the social-scientific understanding of geography as a set of "meaningless", or "lifeless cartographic abstraction[s]"; geopolitical approaches consider geography as "an intellectual arena of ideas and beliefs"<sup>5</sup>. Here, the term "geopolitics" is emphatically disassociated from its historical roots in the late nineteenth-century political works of German geographers such as Friedrich Ratzel<sup>6</sup>. Rather than being deployed in order to make explicit a link between geography and the state (focusing on the state principle of definition through territorial acquisition and expansion), "geopolitics" is here understood as a deconstructionist social scientific method, seeking to question the foundational ideologies and assumptions underpinning geographical concepts. Such a definition of geopolitics may be regarded as a somewhat inevitable consequence of certain shake ups in the academy after the "world system revolution of [19]68", namely a growing and "deep scepticism" about existing cultural, intellectual and political institutions — accompanied by various cultural, linguistic and post modern "turns" in the social sciences<sup>7</sup>.

The critical potential of a geopolitical approach lies in its capacity to deconstruct dualisms such as history/geography, nature/culture, politics/family, state/society, public/private, etc. As Val Plumwood has pointed out, dualisms — or hierarchical and binary forms of differentiation — form webs, systems, networks and exist as a "fault-line" of interlocking structures which run through a conceptual system in its entirety<sup>8</sup>. One dualism passes "easily over into the other, linked [...] by well-travelled pathways of conventional or philosophical assumption"<sup>9</sup>. The politicisation of geography via the

historicization and temporalization of state borders and institutions works in a similar way, breaking down not only the dualism of history/geography, but also other dualisms (such as fact/fiction; private/public; state/everyday life, etc.) which have traditionally served to hierarchically organise our understanding of past and present into "significant" and "insignificant" terrains.

It should hopefully be clear by this stage that it is in this breaking down of dualistic frameworks that I hope to bring my themes of geopolitics, feminism and biography into explicit symbiosis. By doing so, I will follow a well-established tradition among feminist historians and biographers, who have sought to break down the highly gendered dualism of "significant" over "insignificant" that has traditionally structured the discipline of history, and which persists in relegating women's lives to the sphere of the "less important"<sup>10</sup>.

All in all, my notion of a "feminist geopolitics" useful for women's and feminist history is here defined simply as a framework or approach which seeks to break down any distinction between the "relevant" or "irrelevant" historical domain or actor, and so sets off a critical process of dismantling the whole fault-line of hierarchical dualisms organising our conceptual universe. In this paper, I shall try to demonstrate this methodological approach with reference to the *Biographical Dictionary*, which forms my case study. I hope to highlight the contradictions of using the nation state as an "organising principle", and to explore the ways in which feminist biography — especially in relation to eastern Europe — exposes those contradictions. I say that feminist biography and nationalism are particularly interesting as joint points of reference in an Eastern European context because here, the competition between multi-ethnic empires over territory that characterised states' foreign policies, and strengthened "the national principle" in the period from the mid nineteenth century to the outbreak of the first world war, was exacerbated by domestic tensions of empire and nation as the nationalities of these very multi-ethnic empires began to contest hegemonic processes of nationalisation (e. g. the "magyarization" of the Hungarian part of the Austrian Monarchy) and create territorial claims of their own based on the principles of national autonomy and cultural self-determination. For this reason, it might be said that by the late nineteenth century, national identity was becoming a primary determinant of political identity — which I think makes for a potentially interesting exploration of the tension between national and feminist forms of political identity. It is this tension that I set out to explore below.

### **The spatial concept of the nation structuring the *Biographical Dictionary***

The *Biographical Dictionary* is a collection of past feminist lives, or, more precisely, a collection of "the lives, works and aspirations of more than 150 women and men who were active in, or part of, women's movements and feminisms in 22 countries in central, eastern and south eastern Europe" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries<sup>11</sup>. A casual glance at the *Biographical Dictionary* is enough to see that these lives have been editorially classified using the national state as its key organising principle, on the basis of the *Wikipedia* map of "Europe in 2005"<sup>12</sup>.

Should there be any doubt as to where the various male and female biographical subjects belong on this geopolitical map, the *Biographical Dictionary* contains an appendix to the Introduction which lists the names of the feminist activists under the name of the following nation states: Albania,

Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey and Ukraine<sup>13</sup>. The *Biographical Dictionary* does not, therefore, pretend to be about transcending, or even interrogating these geopolitical configurations; on the contrary, it acknowledges their organisational value for locating territories "generally perceived to be "outside" the "core", yet nevertheless part of Europe"; territories with shared histories as parts of former empires: Russian, Prussian, Habsburg and Ottoman; and with shared state–socialist histories as parts of the former Soviet empire<sup>14</sup>. Of course it is questionable as to whether a national configuration such as "Austria" — that is the Western "half" of a powerful Central European empire in the period of Austro–Hungarian dualism — can, strictly speaking, be regarded as "outside" the European "core". However, the editors of the *Biographical Dictionary* are aware of this problem and do not borrow geopolitical frames — either the "idea of Europe" or "the nations" of which this idea has been more recently comprised — without reservations. In the first place, the nations themselves are, in the words of the editors, designed only "to provide a guideline to readers wishing to locate the current nation states where the [biographical] subjects [...] were active, or to identify the nationalizing/nationalist contexts in which their feminist and women's movements operated"<sup>15</sup>. In the second place — and this relates both to the project of defining the European "periphery" in relation to a "core", and defining the boundaries of Europe more generally — "a simple definition of 'Europe' is always a "politically laden one", mapped across "homogenous entities that do not exist", and so "the question of which countries to include in a *Biographical Dictionary* of this nature is a difficult one". The point is that, without reification of some kind, the project of the *Biographical Dictionary* could never have come into existence at all. Furthermore, editorial awareness of the process of reification — of "Europe", of the "East", of countries as "nations" (e. g. Austria and Hungary rather than Austro–Hungary) — renders immediately explicit the ambiguities of this project<sup>16</sup>.

### *Imperial Ironies*

In seeking to define the precise borders of Europe and of "its nations", we as editors of the *Biographical Dictionary* found ourselves wrestling with a question seemingly more appropriate to the discipline of international relations than history: the question of "how state borders should be drawn". Writing from the discipline of international relations, Jon Mandle elaborates:

[I]t would be utopian in the pejorative sense to consider carving up territories from an imaginary state of nature. [...] Because the current world is already divided into states, the question we must face concerns the possibility of redrawing existing borders<sup>17</sup>.

The point I wish to make here is that, like invading or occupying military forces, historians cannot simply ignore historical or existing state borders and so inevitably end up "redrawing" them. This redrawing cannot be disentangled from its culturally imperialist past. The move to "define Europe" as a distinct territory has been described as tendentious from roughly the early eighteenth century, with the signing of the "Treaty of Utrecht" (1713), after which a more pronounced definition of Europe in "cultural" and/or "civilisational" terms as an internally cohesive and externally limited entity began to emerge<sup>18</sup>. In wrestling with the problem of how to define the borders of both "Europe" and

its eastern "limits", the *Biographical Dictionary's* editors inadvertently follow in the footsteps of imperialist figureheads such as Peter the Great (1672—1725), who also sought to establish the boundary marking "European Russia" off from its Asian territories; to establish the point at which "West" became "East" and where "Europe" itself ended<sup>19</sup>.

Written histories of "Europe" and "Europeans" have largely been histories of particular national states and of national actors, selected on the basis of some shared experience conceived of in cultural terms. This remains true today — notwithstanding the popular currency of "non-national" buzzwords<sup>20</sup>. It also remains true for European feminist history, which still works predominantly with national histories<sup>21</sup>. As cited, Jon Mandle has implied that it is utopian — impossible — to try and avoid "redrawing" geopolitical boundaries. But does this mean that there should be no critical reflection on the implications of using the nation state as an organising principle for feminist history? We as editors of the *Biographical Dictionary* — as mentioned above — explicitly acknowledge the "national principle". In order to document feminisms and women's movements in central, eastern and south eastern Europe, the *Biographical Dictionary* aims to provide readers with information about feminism in "national contexts" which have remained hitherto ignored or marginalised in the Anglophone world of international scholarship. The result is that "feminist history" in these less well charted regions of Europe becomes synonymous with "national history". Furthermore, it is simultaneously confirmed that in the West, too, feminist history is national history, since the *Biographical Dictionary* seeks to provide readers with a documented series of national histories able to (at least partially) complement the existing (well-documented) history of Western European feminisms<sup>22</sup>.

The above is intended to draw attention to what I choose to call feminism's "imperial ironies". The act of staking out the terrains of feminist history inadvertently results in the deployment of (re-)territorializing techniques that render feminist projects and national projects part of the same modernising logic. This logic, in so far as it is national, is also imperial, since (as I have tried to demonstrate above) "Europe" as a civilizational entity can only be understood as an aggregate of "European nations": a balance of power that is inherently exclusionary and cannot easily be disentangled from imperial Europe's historically hegemonic position in the world: what Etienne Balibar refers to as "European apartheid"<sup>23</sup>. As he states:

Drawing "political" borders in the European sphere [is] a way at once to organize the world's exploitation and to export the "border form" to the periphery, in an attempt to transform the whole universe into an extension of Europe, later into "another Europe", built on the same political model<sup>24</sup>.

Many questions arise as a result of what I have here chosen to call feminism's "imperial ironies". Some of these questions I will organise as three distinct areas of inquiry:

- What kind of historical feminist subject is produced through the act of assuming her possession of "a nationality"?
- Is the life of a feminist subject always a "feminist life"? What of national (and with it class, ethnic, etc.) chauvinisms that are insensitive to the interests of "all" women? How can feminist history become more sensitive to the problem of the "subject" in this context, considering the ways in which this problem has been addressed in poststructuralist theories?

— Does feminist history produce an "ideal-type" of feminism or feminist subject, the latter appearing as the sole agent of, and catalyst for, social change in favour of women?

I attempt a provisional review of these areas of inquiry in the following and final section of this paper.

### **The feminist subject and Cheshire Cat stories in the *Biographical Dictionary***

In Lewis Carroll's nineteenth-century fantasy tale *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice meets a strange creature on her travels through Wonderland called the Cheshire Cat. Initially menacing, the Cat is described as having "very long claws and a great many teeth", and therefore Alice feels she has to treat it with respect<sup>25</sup>. The authority of the Cat is reinforced by its location above Alice's head; looking down, it appears either suspended in the air or in the boughs of an overhanging tree, and its air of blatant arrogance is communicated through its enormous grin. As the central authority on the spatial layout of Wonderland and the whereabouts and nature of its inhabitants, the Cat informs Alice that "[i]n *that* direction lives a Hatter: and in *that* direction lives a March Hare: they're both mad"<sup>26</sup>. The Cat itself is more difficult to locate, since it keeps appearing and disappearing from view — sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly, "beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after it had gone". The fact that the grin remains after the rest of the Cat has disappeared suggests an authoritative presence even in absence which Alice finds quite discomfiting and alienating: "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin [...], but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!"<sup>27</sup>.

For the sake of argument, let us treat the Cat as a metaphor for the modern nation state. In Carroll's tale, the Cat speaks rudely before the King, who tries to order its execution and is prevented from doing so by the fact that the Cat has no body from which its head can be removed (even though, as the King tries to point out, anything that has a head can be beheaded)<sup>28</sup>. The relationship of the Cat to Alice — the former's unsettling effect on the latter — is on the one hand striking enough and on the other hand ambiguous enough to serve as a way of reading the lives in the *Biographical Dictionary*, a way of making sense of the "imperial ironies" of its framework. The geopolitical landscape of the subjects featured in the *Biographical Dictionary* is haunted by Cheshire Cats; in a number of entries, emergent statehood appears as a hallucinatory, fragmented and constantly changing manifestation of personal identity experienced in alienated form as being "outside", or in tension with, the self.

Take, for example, the opening of Sandra Meshkova's biography of Regina Ezera (a Latvian prose writer born in 1930). Regina Ezera is described as growing up "practically without a mother tongue" and learning Latvian at school only later, "as a foreign language"<sup>29</sup>. Europe — in these pages — is as confusing as Wonderland is for Alice: foreign languages are at the same time mother tongues and the known world is constantly having to be unlearned and relearned<sup>30</sup>. The difficult relationship of negotiating this shifting geopolitical landscape becomes an alienating/alienated poetic state.

Indeed, to return to the work of Etienne Balibar, such narratives reveal the inherent tension that accompanies the "evolution of the notion of a people":

[A] strong tension that may become very violent on occasion. The historical insertion of populations and peoples in the system of nation–states and of their permanent rivalry affects from the inside the representation of these peoples, their consciousness of their "identity"<sup>31</sup>.

Many of the people included in the *Biographical Dictionary* were prominent literary or cultural figures (poets, novelists, essayists, etc.). Between them, many knew a great deal of languages (the book contains few monoglots). In their life stories, the education of women is indistinguishable from the emancipation of the nation; the two are intertwined and both women's emancipation from "tradition" and the traditional gender division of labour tend to be valued in the sole context of the national struggle: women as educated national citizens and/or educators (as mothers) of national citizens. Education, linguistic competence and literacy in a range of languages are important thematics in the *Biographical Dictionary*. As the introduction to the *Dictionary* points out, education "is what the first initiatives to improve women's lives [in the region] focused on"<sup>32</sup>.

The above is significant if we are to take seriously the idea of Cheshire Cat as an expression of the violent identity politics of local elites as they struggle to represent themselves — "from inside" (to cite Balibar once again) — against the changing geopolitical landscape. In order for feminists to campaign for women's education, they had first to conceive of themselves as both national and European subjects, possessed of an elite transnational European education, as well as linguistic competency and literacy in the national vernacular. In the late nineteenth century, many of these subjects invested a great deal of energy into publishing and translating works from western European languages into languages of the central, eastern and south eastern European region.<sup>33</sup> Although the feminist subject was not generally possessed of what might be called a formal education (in the *Biographical Dictionary*, for example, many of the women described learned through personal tutors or self tuition, either individually or as members of women's clubs and organisations), this education was not "unstructured": knowledge of foreign languages, European, and, in the last analysis, national identity were important dimensions of who they were and the kinds of projects they worked on.

Thus an "ideal figure of the feminist"<sup>34</sup> appears in the *Biographical Dictionary*: she has for the most part some material resources; she is well versed in political theories of citizenship and "women's emancipation" from a range of "European" countries and in a number of languages; and she is in possession of a crystallizing national identity, forming her "inner centre"<sup>35</sup> Hermine Beniczky, for example, was a pioneer of national reforms in women's education in late nineteenth–century Hungary. She was exposed to theories of education by Jean–Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Jean Paul Richter, and drew a theory of value from these "European works", in which the social value of young girls was to be understood as a national asset: her organisation's mission statement spoke of transforming "the young Hungarian woman into "a more valuable and useful member of Hungarian society" through "valuing herself more highly"<sup>36</sup>. Benicky's own mother tongue was German, but she struggled to learn Hungarian in order to pioneer national Hungarian–language initiatives in women's education Hungary, to demand state support for such initiatives in the late 1860s, and to be able to declare her position at a women's conference in Frankfurt in 1869, in her own (native) German language, as one of "we Hungarian women"<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, Dragojla Jarnevic, a prominent figure in the so–called "Illyrian revival



movement" (the Croatian national movement of the nineteenth century) was schooled in German in the 1820s — "the language of culture and everyday communication among the Croatian middle class prior to the rise of the [...] national movement" —, but very early on in life she threw herself into what Sandra Prlenda named "the nationalist call (to the daughters of Illyria) for women to abandon German literature and adopt a Croatian vernacular, educating their children in the national language and spirit"<sup>38</sup>.

Are these examples of "Cheshire cat stories"? What do I mean by this term? I tried to suggest earlier on in this paper that the manifestation of the Cheshire Cat in the Alice in Wonderland tale may be read as signifying a tension with self, and I further implied that this tension may be situated in broader systemic tensions of imperial power — which construct national and European selves through a process of exclusions (of others). Here I elaborate still further by suggesting that this systemic and personally experienced "tension" is peculiarly resonant in the life stories of pioneers of modern "progressive" or emancipatory movements. The Cat insists on pronouncing "where" and "what" people are (in *that* direction lives a Hatter; he's mad, etc.). In this sense, the Cat quite literally draws up national borders (in that direction lives —; he speaks —). The irony is that the Cat itself is ambiguously located and its identity is — literally — under constant transformation (appearing and disappearing from view; here a head, there just a grin...). The paradox may be summarised crudely thus: the pioneer of modern Croatian women's identity, for example, does not have to have a coherent Croatian identity herself; or, to put it differently, she may be a pioneer of Croatian feminism while at the same time "learning to become Croatian" herself. To be a pioneer of, say, a movement for reform of women's education in nineteenth-century Europe entailed a struggle on the part of the movement's leaders to learn to read, to write, and to discursively engage (on the terms of enlightenment theories of citizenship and education) in the language of particular national institutions — and all this often at great cost and trouble to themselves.

I hope that it is clear from the above that the use of a national coordinate for structuring and making sense of feminist/women's movements history makes visible a paradigmatic "type" of feminist leader, who, from the mid nineteenth century onwards, leads women's rights initiatives under the rubric of national women's/feminist organisations. This feminist leader can be seen to possess both a "transnational" (or "European") identity and an (emerging) national identity. Interestingly, the coexistence of these identities — indicating a peculiar interdependence of "national" and "international" frames of reference — grows more, not less pronounced at the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, developing into a complex matrix of both nationally *and* internationally defined feminist agendas and goals. Women's activist networks begin to develop a sophisticated set of communication channels through which to articulate this dual identity and its goals: the material and spiritual "improvement" of nations on the one hand and the establishment and development of international networks between women across national boundaries on the other. In the *Biographical Dictionary*, Roxana Cheschebec gives a detailed account of the life of Princess Alexandrina Cantacuzino, a leader of the Romanian women's movement in the interwar period, whose life provides concrete examples of how her feminism was informed by both these goals. Cheschebec notes that Cantacuzino "invested most of her material resources and energy" into the *SONFR (National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women*, founded in 1910), "inspired by the wish to create an educational and cultural movement among the masses that would strengthen the nation and instill the moral and ethical values of Christian Orthodoxy". At

the same time, Cantacuzino was an extremely internationally active figure — and what Cheschebec describes as her successful "international career" and "preoccupation with "internationalism" continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s, through her affiliations with the International Council of Women and the League of Nations<sup>39</sup>.

What is the significance of these two coexisting identities: one transnational, literate (and literary), bilingual and culturally identified as "European"; the other capable of, in some cases, "fanatical" adherence to national identity? (The choice of the word "fanatical" is not my own but that of Sarolta Geöcze, a pioneer of institutionalised women's education in Hungary who stated in 1912 that "we must develop patriotism to the point of fanaticism")<sup>40</sup>. My aim here, in drawing attention to this dualistic aspect of what I have rather hesitantly described as an "ideal–typical" feminist leader in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is certainly neither to reduce feminism in this period to an "ideal type", nor to a set of violent or exclusionary nationalist practices; this latter approach would to begin with completely overlook the international (and often pro–pacifist) mobilisations within feminism that I have just mentioned, which could, and indeed often did, condemn national(ist) sympathies as "anti–feminist". Instead, I aim to draw attention to the ambiguity of the state for feminism — as both a familial "supplement", a welfare institution, a distributor of rights/social provision, *and* as a military institution engaged in continually regenerative violence (war), in which territorialisation and reterritorialisation, exclusion and "cleansing" are naturalised through inevitable references to the "social good" (references which inevitably contain the seeds of gender stereotypes and inequalities)<sup>41</sup>. One is reminded of the benign and at the same time malevolent figure of the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's tale, with its big grin and its sharp claws: the owner of one's identity, and, at the same time, that of which we feel most afraid. Avowedly internationalist and pacifist feminist subjects like Roza Schwimmer, in wishing to become visible citizens of "a" state, found no solution to this paradox in their lifetimes: in order to be internationals, they had first to become subjects in their own right; in order to become subjects, they first had to become national — an essentially violent and alienating process of "self identification"<sup>42</sup>.

## Traces

But the above leads me to perhaps what I find most fascinating in the *Biographical Dictionary*: the fact that its "organising principle" — the nation state — makes explicit these internal contradictions of feminism, and draws the reader's attention to (1) the alienating process of "self identification" that feminist leadership entails and (2) feminism's difficult task in the scheme of history (the reconciliation of feminist, nationalist and internationalist agendas). In some of its biographies, the *Biographical Dictionary* describes women who are trying to articulate highly untenable positions, in which they seek to critically address their own "geopolitics of location", or challenge the subsumption of women's interests under the cause of the (masculine) "social". For example, wealthy Czech–German writer Tereza Novakova (born 1853) is described by her biographer Libuse Heczko as condemning "the insular national idealization of Czech society"<sup>43</sup>. Another case is that of Narcyza Zmichowska, who belonged to a mid–1840s social circle of liberal politicians and philosophers in favour of Polish independence, yet she herself "was opposed to military and conspiratorial activities that in her opinion were both unprofitable and harmful" — a position she maintained even after the Russian suppression of the Polish Uprising in 1863 and in her private correspondence, in which "she questioned the principles of Polish romanticism, the

effectiveness of the military struggle against the partitioners, and the cult of the artist"<sup>44</sup>. Alexandra Kollontai, too, although she worked hard to show that women's interests as a group were ultimately dependent on the success of the Bolshevik project, also expressed doubts regarding the possibility of sexual equality under communism (at least from the early 1920s). Interestingly, it was in Kollontai's little discussed works of fiction that she was able to develop a critique of gender relations independently from official party orthodoxies. We can bring out Kollontai's critique of "the common cause" (what I refer to above as the "masculine social") through attending to her ideas as a person rather than as a feminist or socialist leader. One wonders about the truth of something Adrienne Rich wrote not so long ago in her *Notes Towards a Politics of Location*:

As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest  
myself of that country merely by condemning its government  
or by saying three times "As a woman my country is the whole  
world"<sup>45</sup>.

Perhaps, "as a woman", one cannot divest oneself of one's country simply by condemning its government. But in the struggle to reconcile a feminist identity with a national/social one, and in the traces of incommensurability that this struggle leaves behind, the fine lines between "national biography" and "Cheshire Cat story" appear. This fine line has much to tell us about the ways in which people do struggle between the act of "self identification" and condemnation of government, and invites us to reconsider what we understand by feminisms — past and present.

## Conclusion

We can glimpse traces of incommensurability between national and feminist identities today thanks to the work of many feminist historians and theorists who have explored the ways in which modern nationalism and socialism, conducted in the name of "new "inclusive" social and political movements", have historically served to promote new and innovative forms of gender hierarchy, exclusion and patriarchal order in the state<sup>46</sup>. Of course the processes by which modern nation states establish themselves through rigorous processes of social exclusion has not only been theorised by feminists. Theorists of nationalism, including Marxist and "world-system" theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Etienne Balibar, have shown that the abstract egalitarian category of "the citizen" is established in the same moment that both a hierarchy of citizens and the differential category of "the non-citizen" are acknowledged. The push to include and exclude around the coordinate of citizenship is not a contradiction, but rather an essential feature of how states manage populations<sup>47</sup>. Thus, it is clear that there are dangerous exclusions or even anti-feminist/patriarchal objectives inherent in feminist projects organised through national, or other hierarchical collective-building coalitions; hence, the editors of the *Biographical Dictionary* take pains to point out that initiatives to improve women's status may not have "necessarily aimed for women's equality [...] or challenged patriarchal structures"<sup>48</sup>. On the other hand, it has become increasingly clear that it is impossible for historical biographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to isolate feminist projects from nation-building ones. Awareness of the possible complications of this for the broader question of defining what "feminism" is has brought about a more pronounced research focus on the "internationalism" of feminist and women's movements: indeed, one of the aims of the *Biographical Dictionary* is to "contribute to the expanding field of international and

comparative research of women's movements and feminisms"; and involvements with international networks and organisations are strongly foregrounded throughout the *Biographical Dictionary*<sup>49</sup>.

The growing interest in feminist internationalism in recent decades, alongside the increasing awareness of what we as the *Biographical Dictionary* editors call "the close relation between nationalism and socialism and "the woman question"<sup>50</sup>, makes it more necessary than ever that feminist theory (and historiography) examine the contradictions of feminism and, relatedly, its exclusions — revealed in the tension between national and international identities. Finally, I depart with a final question: has feminism really come to terms with its own subaltern? Who are "our feminist subjects", constructed both in the service of, and in tension with, the (male) state? Who are they "not"? So far, I have spoken only of women whose feminist (political) identities lay in ambiguous relationship to the state from which they received/wished to receive their "emancipation". But what of the thoughts and ideas of history's "other" women: anarchists, women without a state, migrants, ethnic minority women, travellers and nomads, "illiterates"/"semi-literates" (though I dislike these terms), prisoners, "non-politicals". Do they have the same "research credibility" as the official voices of Marxist-socialism, liberal feminism, national revivalism, fascism, etc? Are they possessed of "movements", "organisations", "ideologies", "politics"? Are voices to be discounted just because they are "more difficult" to research? I think it is easier than we think, but it is time to start looking. Perhaps by thinking through (once again) the elitism of particular feminist subject positions, without denying the social relevance of feminism as a set of concerns with the potential to affect and "speak to" all women.

---

<sup>1</sup> Held at the *Bruno Kreisky Forum*, Vienna, Austria.

<sup>2</sup> Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova and Anna Loutfi (eds.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, nineteenth and twentieth Centuries*, Budapest/New York 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Heffernan, *The Meaning of Europe. Geography and Geopolitics*, London et al. 1998, 1-8.

<sup>4</sup> Heffernan, *Meaning*, see note 3, 3f.

<sup>5</sup> Heffernan, *Meaning*, see note 3, 6 and 4.

<sup>6</sup> Whose concept of *Lebensraum* (living space) was later used to justify the imperialist policies of the Third Reich through the assumption of an organic link between territorial power and cultural regeneration; cf. Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie*, München/Leipzig 1897.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System*, Cambridge 1991, 65-83.

<sup>8</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 1993 London/New York, 41-68.

<sup>9</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism*, see note 8, 45f.

<sup>10</sup> See Richard Holmes, *The Proper Study*, in: Peter France and William St Clair (eds.), *Mapping Lives. The Uses of Biography*, Oxford 2002, 7-18. What Virginia Woolf called "the art of biography" (in: *The Death of the Moth, and other Essays*, New York 1970, 3-6) has been widely discussed in feminist scholarship for its potential as a genre to bridge the (gendered) dualistic domains of the "relevant" and "irrelevant". For the longstanding feminist engagement with the meanings and use value of biography for women's and gender history see in particular Alice S. Rossi, *Feminist History in Perspective: Sociological Contributions to Biographic Analysis*, in: Dorothy Gies ed., *A Sampler of Women's Studies*, Ann Arbor 1973, 85-108; Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford 1975; also Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York 1999 (Orig. 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, XXI.

<sup>13</sup> Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 16-20.

- 14 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 5.
- 15 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 16.
- 16 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 5.
- 17 Jon Mandle, *Global Justice*, Cambridge 2006, 89.
- 18 Heffernan, *Meaning*, see note 3, 25f.
- 19 Mark Bassin, *Expansion and Colonialism on the Eastern Frontier: View of Siberia and the Far East in pre-Petrine Russia*, in: *Journal of Historical Geography*, 14 (1988), 3-21; also idem, *Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space*, in: *Slavonic and East European Review*, 50 (1991), 1-17.
- 20 For example: local, sub-national, transnational, international, supranational, regional and global, etc.
- 21 Cf. for example the following works - groundbreaking for their endeavours to cover some aspect of feminisms and women's movements in central and eastern Europe: Karen Offen, *European Feminisms*, Stanford 2000; Sylvia Paletschek and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (eds.), *Women's Emancipation Movements in the Nineteenth Century*, Stanford 2004.
- 22 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 2f.
- 23 Etienne Balibar, *Droit de cite or Apartheid?*, in: idem, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. by James Swenson, Princeton/Oxford 2004, 31-50.
- 24 Etienne Balibar, *At the Borders of Europe*, in: idem, *People*, see note 23, 1-10, 7.
- 25 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, New York/Scarborough 1974, 87f.
- 26 Carroll, *Alice*, see note 25, 89.
- 27 Carroll, *Alice*, see note 25, 66-69.
- 28 Carroll, *Alice*, see note 25, 117.
- 29 Sandra Meshkova, Regina Ezera, in: Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 127-130, 127.
- 30 As Alice herself puts it early on upon her arrival in Wonderland: "London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome, and Rome - no, *that's* all wrong". Carroll, *Alice*, see note 25, 38.
- 31 Balibar, *Borders*, see note 24, 8.
- 32 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 7
- 33 A notable example is John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women*, which was read and translated by many subjects whose lives are described in the Biographical Dictionary. Mill's *Subjection* was, for example, translated into Czech in 1890 by Charlotte Garrigue, wife of Czechoslovak Republic President, Tomas Masaryk.
- 34 I take this phrase, somewhat provocatively, from the opening line of Foucault's chapter on *Docile Bodies* (Discipline and Punish), where he speaks of the "ideal figure of the soldier" emerging in the late eighteenth century: the ideal-typical model of the universal modern citizen; cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, London 1975, 135.
- 35 Or, as Michel Foucault would say, her soul.
- 36 Anna Loutfi, *Hermin Benicky*, in: Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 54-57, 55.
- 37 Loutfi, *Benicky*, see note 36, 56.
- 38 Sandra Prlenda, Dragolja Jarnevic, in: Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 185-188, 186.
- 39 Roxana Cheschebec, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, in: Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 89-93, 90. Cantacuzino's career curiously parallels that of Sarolta Geöcze in Hungary. Geöcze was a middle-class teacher working for most of her life in Budapest, without the same kind of material means as the aristocratic Cantacuzino. Nevertheless, we do see a familiar pattern in the dual nature of her feminist projects: by the late 1890s, Geöcze, like Cantacuzino, was convinced that girls' education was a necessary step towards strengthening national patriotism and morality. And, like Cantacuzino, Geöcze was also involved with the *International Council of Women* through the *Alliance of Women's Association* in Hungary. She travelled widely throughout her life to study (in France, Switzerland and England in the 1890s) and to attend international conferences (in London, Washington and Geneva in the early decades of the twentieth century); cf. Anna Loutfi, Sarolta Geöcze, in: Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 153-157.
- 40 Cf. Loutfi, *Geöcze*, see note 39, 155.
- 41 Cf. e. g. Rada Ivekovic, *The Fiction of Gender Constructing the Fiction of Nation: On How Fictions are Normative and Norms Produce Exceptions*, in: Karl Kaser and Elisabeth Katschnig-Fasch (eds.), *Gender and Nation in South-Eastern Europe. Anthropological Yearbook of European Cultures*, 14 (2005), 19-38, esp. 29.

42

For a biography of Roza Schwimmer, Hungarian peace activist and later diplomat and international campaigner for world government, see Susan Zimmermann, *Roza Schwimmer*, in: Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 484-490.

- 43 Libuse Heczkova, *Tereza Novakova*, in: Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 372-375, 372f.
- 44 Grazyna Borkowska, *Narcyza Zmichowska*, in: de Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 628-632.
- 45 Adrienne Rich, *Notes Towards a Politics of Location*, in: idem, *In Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*, New York 1986, 210-232. The quotation: "As a woman my country is the whole world" is a reference to Virginia Woolf (from Woolf's *Three Guineas*, 1931).
- 46 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 3. For an understanding of the theoretical moves involved in legitimising gender exclusion through an emphasis on greater democratic inclusion cf. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Cambridge 1988.
- 47 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity*, in: Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (eds.), *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, London/New York 1991, 71-85.
- 48 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 4f.
- 49 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 2.
- 50 Haan et al., *Dictionary*, see note 2, 6.

---

Published 2009–02–13

Original in English

Contribution by L'Homme

First published in L'Homme 2/2008

© Anna Loutfi / L'Homme

© Eurozine