

Call for Papers

Futures Past **Feminism and the Radical Democratic Imaginary**

International Essay Workshop
University of Vienna, Department of Political Science
July 6-7th, 2023

Conveners: Linda Zerilli & Oliver Marchart
Chicago–Vienna Faculty Grant & ERC Research Project *Prefiguring Democratic Futures*

Aims and rationale

The political history of Western feminism is typically described as encompassing various “waves” of theory and practice, with each wave building on, but also going beyond, an earlier wave. Thus, the second wave (1968-1980s) is seen as taking up and radicalizing the first wave (1848-1920) struggle for political rights by expanding the concept of rights and of politics itself beyond the confines of the formal political sphere; the third wave (1991-?) is seen as taking up and radicalizing the second wave’s concept of “women” as the political subject of feminism. Handy though this periodization may be, it has left many feminists wondering which wave they are in anymore. Some feminists argue that the various waves have given way to “intersectional feminism.” Still, that description does not address the fundamental question of what kind of critical political work the concept of a “wave” was supposed to do in the first place. It was not until 1968 that people started talking about feminism in terms of different waves, and that feminism came to be understood as having a history at all. This shift allowed feminists to root their political demand for change in a historical democratic struggle for social justice, not least as a way of countering the popular view of the women’s liberation movement as an impossibly utopian project made up by a bunch of social malcontents.

In the workshop, we want to reflect on this periodization of feminism critically and explore how conceptualizations of the past shape imaginative visions of possible futures. How we understand the past directly affects what can count as a “realistic” course of social, political, and economic activity. Furthermore, our conception of the past is shaped by a projected future, and different societies have different ways of imagining the relations between their future and the past. Originating in the revolutionary eighteenth century, Western feminism’s conceptualization of this relation, its own “futures past” (to speak with Reinhart Koselleck), is characterized by an anticipatory and distinctively modern temporality that assumes the novelty and openness of the future. If the history of feminism calls at times for rewriting, that is less because new facts are discovered than because the ever-changing present opens new perspectives on the past and makes new demands on what it can mean. As a result, the past is figured more in terms of projected futures than fidelity to how things were. For this reason, feminist historiography is rife with debates about whose story is told, and the idea of a “wave” itself has been criticized as overly generalizing in ways that blind us to the far more fraught and complex histories not captured in its conceptual net.

Thus, the workshop will provide space for scrutinizing the conceptual problems associated with producing historical knowledge and forms of periodization concerning feminist political futures. It is based on the premise that emancipatory politics is best described as an ongoing creation of the social-historical world, animated by collective radical imagination. Contributions will explore how an emerging new social movement like feminism developed alternative temporalities in response to the rapidly unfolding political crises of the time (e.g., the Vietnam War, nuclear arms race, the Cold War, desegregation and racial terror, and anti-colonial struggles).

Like the new left politics in which many cut their political teeth, feminists sought to reveal a hegemonic order in which democracy had been hollowed out. But also, like the other new social movements (e.g., Black Power, the student movement, environmentalism, and radical pacifism) that arose in the 60s and 70s in both Europe and the United States, feminist visions of social change have been accused of being naïve forms of utopianism doomed to founder on the shoals of political reality.

Contributions are welcome that discuss diverse texts and practices in which utopian visions were articulated in temporal terms as forms of public freedom, as creative action, and as “prefigurative politics.” No mere means to an end already secured by the linear movement of universal history itself, prefigurative politics aims at creating “figures of the newly thinkable” (Castoriadis) in the here and now, both as a way to interpret the past and imagine different feminist futures critically.

Contributions can be motivated, for instance, by the following set of questions:

- In what ways has feminism’s radical political imaginary been enabled and constrained by a specific practice of historiography?
- To what extent are the progressivism and presentism that tends to characterize contemporary feminism’s relation to its past a problem for its future?
- In what ways and to what extent are feminist struggles embedded within an emancipatory project of a radical democracy?
- How has feminism’s political imaginary been challenged and reconfigured, for instance, in the context of Black feminist criticism?
- How can a critically renewed historiography of feminist struggles enrich today’s feminist movements and contribute to the collective emancipatory effort to radicalize democracy?
- In short: What are the “futures past” of feminism, and how do they speak to us today?

Format

We strive towards creating a workshop atmosphere that allows for serious, productive, and collaborative engagement with each other’s work. Workshop participants send in an essay (max. 3000 words, deadline: June 15, 2023), with the expectation that all of the papers are read in advance. In addition, each participant will prepare and present a commentary on one of the other papers. Each session begins with a brief opening statement by the author(s) on the background of the text (5 min), followed by a commentary (10 min) that opens the general discussion of the text.

Venue and Accommodation

The workshop will take place in person at the University of Vienna. Online participation is not possible. There is no participation fee. The organizers are happy to give recommendations regarding travel arrangements.

Publication

We plan to publish the workshop’s proceedings as a special issue in a peer-reviewed journal and/or edited volume.

Timeline

Deadline for abstracts: April 21, 2023

Communication of results: April 30, 2023

Deadline for essays: June 15, 2023

Submission & Contact

Please send your application with an abstract of max. 300 words and a brief biographical note to predef.erc@univie.ac.at (deadline: April 21, 2023). For any questions regarding the Cfp, please contact the organizers Sara Gebh (sara.gebh@univie.ac.at) and Sergej Seitz (sergej.seitz@univie.ac.at).

