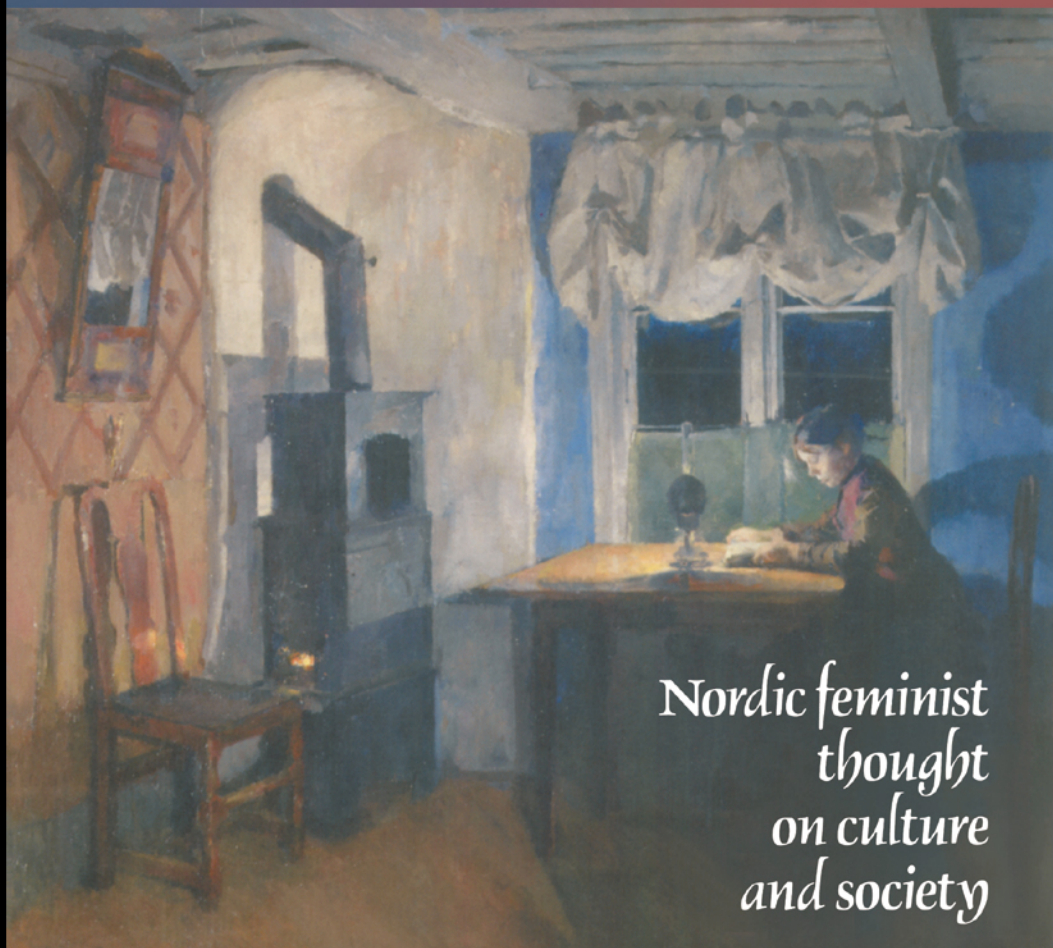


Is there a Nordic Feminism?



Nordic feminist
thought
on culture
and society

Edited by Drude von der Fehr,
Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Bente Rosenbeck

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Is there a Nordic feminism?

*Nordic feminist thought on culture
and society*

Drude von der Fehr
University of Oslo

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University of Copenhagen

and

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Foreword

The editors of this collection have performed a considerable service in introducing to an English-speaking readership the range of ideas and writing that represent Nordic feminism today. This task is long overdue. As will be apparent from the lists of references, such a body of work has been developing over a period of some years although, from the perspective of Britain, this endeavour has sometimes been obscured by the writings of French or American feminist scholars.

It would be wrong, of course, to present an over-unified impression of the writings from the range of countries, as well as the range of academic disciplines, represented in these pages. The question of the identity of Nordic feminist writings is addressed specifically in the concluding chapter. There are complex historical differences and interrelationships between the countries represented here as well as differences within each of the specific countries along ethnic, religious and regional lines. Nevertheless, some unifying themes do emerge. These include the development of a solid welfare state tradition within each country and the way in which this has established the parameters within which much subsequent political and social debate has been conducted. Linked to this has been a detailed and often profound exploration of the meaning of “care”, both formal and informal, going beyond the simple documentation of those in need of care or the needs of the carers. Finally, there has been the significant representation of women in many areas of public life in all the Nordic countries. This has led to a searching examination of the character of patriarchy and the extent to which it has been significantly altered by such developments, or merely modified.

These themes will be found in the chapters that follow. But the reader will also be impressed by the range of voices included here and the subjects covered. Some of the names, and certainly some of the topics, will be familiar, others less so. There is certainly no forced unity, and this recognition of diversity is one of the volume’s many attractive features. I hope the reader will enjoy listening to these voices and appreciating the

differences and the unities represented here. I, for one, found it a fascinating and informative experience.

David H.J.Morgan
University of Manchester

Preface

The idea behind this book is the attempt to understand some of the complex changes in culture and society that concern women and feminists in the Nordic countries today. This volume comprises part of the response to the editors' invitation, addressed to feminist scholars in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, to join together in this attempt. This is not the first time that Nordic feminist scholars have worked together across the boundaries of their different countries and different languages. Yet, what is unique about this particular volume is that it results from a co-Nordic work process in which many academic borders have also been crossed. The basis on which the contents of this book have been structured—where, for example, literary essays and film analysis are integrated with research on women's struggle in parliamentary politics as well as with gendered interactions in work organizations and in identity production—expresses this crossing of established boundaries. In the introduction we will elaborate on the themes and concepts around which the contents of the book are organized.

A book on feminism from a particular country or region could be attempted in more than one way. Usually, articles taken from journals and books already published would be collected together in order to give a representative overview of the history of a country's feminist theory and research, or to present in one volume the most influential pieces of work by feminist scholars in that particular country (see, for instance, the series on feminist thought in different countries published by Routledge and Basil Blackwell in the early 1990s). Our way of preparing this volume has been different. With the exception of [Chapter 2](#), which is a substantially revised version of an essay published earlier in Swedish (cf. Wetterberg this volume), all the articles included here have been specially written for this volume.

The eighteen chapters that comprise the edited contents of this book are the result of a selection process which started with more than sixty submitted abstracts and papers. Our book does not offer a comprehensive history of Nordic feminism nor should the selection of essays be seen either as representative or as a distillation of the most

influential work being done in this field. What we invited, and thus what we try to catch glimpses of rather than cover *in toto*, are some of the different themes and modes of inquiry concerning culture and society that Nordic feminists are dealing with at the end of the twentieth century.

Had it not been for Margareth Whitford this project would never have been undertaken. Thanks are due to her for pushing for a book in English on Nordic feminism. Once begun, many individuals and institutions have supported this project. First, we would like to thank all those who sent us their papers knowing that only a few would be included. We would like also to express our special gratitude to all the contributors for their willingness to follow us through the many phases of this project and for their patience as time went by. For their help in correcting our English we acknowledge the following: Mary Bjaerum, Malcolm Forbes, Kathleen B. Jones, Mika Mänty, Anka Ryall, Linda Schenck and Margaret Whiting. Thanks also to the Centre for Women's Research, University of Oslo for their help in arranging a working conference during the early stages of the project. Financial support from four research councils made the conference, as well as several editorial meetings, possible: thanks to the Research Council of Norway (NFR), the Swedish Council for Planning and Co-ordination of Research (FRN), the Nordic Cultural Fund, and the Joint Committee of the Nordic Research Councils (NOS-H). In addition, NOS-H gave us a grant to cover some of the printing costs, support that deserves particular acknowledgement. Last, but not least, it has been a great pleasure to communicate with David Morgan, the series editor, as well as with Caroline Wintersgill, Senior Editor at UCL Press.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: ambiguous times— contested spaces in the politics, organization and identities of gender

Anna G.Jónasdóttir & Drude von der Fehr

Is there a Nordic feminism?

It would be easy to answer yes, of course, there is a Nordic feminism. Look at the consequences feminist thinking has had for women in the Nordic countries! The question, however, implies much more than that. We know for a fact that feminism in the Nordic countries has had a great impact on most women's lives, but is there something specifically *Nordic* about the movement and the modes of thought that lie behind it? A related question is whether there is one Nordic feminism or many. In other words, what is feminism in the Nordic countries about? The authors of this edited volume address these questions indirectly. At its close, in [Chapter 18](#), one of the editors, Bente Rosenbeck, deals directly with the questions: "What is the Nordic?" and "What is Nordic feminist scholarship?"

Generally speaking, the situation today in the Nordic countries and in Europe as a whole is radically different from that in the late 1960s and early 1970s when contemporary feminist scholarship emerged. Throughout the 1980s and up to the late 1990s, much in the economic and political structures of these countries has been more or less fundamentally transformed, as too has much in their social and cultural life. Not least, practically every kind of intellectual orientation or belief system—philosophical, theoretical, politico-ideological—that dominated people's modes of thinking 20–25 years ago, has been somehow displaced or altered, and feminist thinking is no exception.

Our reason for producing this book is the widely felt concern with present changes; concerns with changing conditions and changing modes of living, loving, working, acting, thinking and writing among women in this part of the world. The substantial aim of the book is, therefore, to identify and elaborate on some of the different historical, social, political, cultural and theoretical *breakups* which are currently taking place in the Nordic countries. By "breakups" we mean profound and in some respects sudden shifts which seemingly put an end to, radically transform or alter the course of on-going cultural and societal processes. Needless to say, our

ambition is not to register historical changes in any strict sense, that is, to compare some precisely measured items between one moment of time and another. We aim to come up with some understanding of the different situations or contexts in which changes happen and are acted upon; to obtain more adequate concepts of women's experiences as well as new knowledge about changing gender relations more generally.

How, then, are women in various Nordic contexts situated today, and how do they act on their situations, socially, politically and culturally? What can be said about female-male relations in these contexts, and what kind of gender problematic is expressed in cultural production? What is the prime concern of Nordic feminist theory and research at present? How has it changed? In what direction(s) is it moving? In short, what does this book tell us about all this?

The outcome of the relatively open-ended premises we started with, and the subsequent interactive process of dealing with the material, will now be summarized and clarified somewhat before we proceed with a more substantial account and discussion of the chapters that comprise this book.

Themes and central problematic of the book

At first glance, the nature of the chapters which follow is such that the book could have been neatly divided into four or five sections according to the aspect of the subject with which they appear to deal. On the surface, the chapters cluster around topics such as "women and politics", "women and men at work", "changing forms of experiences among Nordic women", "women and cultural history", "gender and subjectivity in postmodernity (or late modernity)", to name just a few. Also, if organized solely on this concrete level—the social science and history contributions on the one hand, the aesthetic and philosophical on the other—these contributions would most likely be seen only in isolation.

However, beneath these divisions we also detected another pattern, a number of main *themes* that connected the various chapters somewhat differently and which thus warranted a more analytically grounded division of the whole collection into three distinct, but not wholly separate parts. Having chosen this alternative mode of presentation, the volume is structured so that three internally connected themes are arranged around the key concepts "politics", "organization" and "identity/subjectivity". These concepts, of course, still relate to the fields of different concrete subjects at the most immediate level (distinguished above), but they are also intended to function more analytically to help present and discuss the various subject areas or themes, now understood as both distinct yet connected. To take an example: even those chapters that deal most concretely with women in politics (Chs 2 to 4), show that women, in acting politically, often also problematize and try to politicize organizational

fundamentals of society and culture at large. Likewise, we see in these chapters how women in politics struggle with issues of identity both in relation to men and among themselves. In other words, politics cannot be analyzed or discussed for long before questions regarding such issues as rationality, identity and subjectivity also emerge.

By distinguishing such themes with the help of key interlinking concepts, we were able to see connections which made the crossing of disciplinary boundaries to construct the three parts seem natural. To take another example. The process of reading and thinking about women in early modernity as they sought self-realization in arranging literary salons (Chs 7–8) in which men—and women, too—had access to the most pleasant room, the most receptive listeners and thoughtful responses, suggests some obvious similarities with the mode of making life pleasant at work—not least for their male colleagues—which the women gynaecologists in the Danish case study practise almost two hundred years later (cf. Ch. 12). This leads to the next analytical level by which we transcend the division into parts, or rather it leads to another sense in which the parts are connected.

A central *problematic* runs through the whole collection: women's variously situated and historically shifting struggle with men or male-dominated preconditions concerning how to organize and run society, and how to set and ground its cultural premises. Thus, also, this problematic entails women's various and shifting strategies and negotiations undertaken in order to make room for themselves and their concerns; all this on societally and culturally existing ground that seems to be constantly contested. To speak about struggle in this connection does not mean that women never benefit from the existing conditions they live in and act on. But to "see" the issue of struggle in this sense as it runs through the chapters is also to see relational complexity that demands a particular mode of thinking relationally. It should be underlined, perhaps, that differences or conflict-ridden relations between women are not glossed over or veiled here; the point is rather that the complex of male-female relations and the various same-sex relations do not necessarily exclude each other altogether, theoretically or empirically.

It seems to us that if, on the basis of this book, we are to speak generally about changes or discontinuities in the situation of Nordic women today, seen through changes in what Nordic feminist scholars deal with, we might say the following. If we take as a point of reference the situation, say, ten years ago, then a main focus was on *women's participation and visibility* in politics, in paid work, in cultural activities. It was a question of women becoming as much valued as men, although, or even because, they acted differently. While today the issue of participation and visibility continues to be addressed, in spite of advances, the focus has widened. Also, concentration seems to have moved more decisively to engage with

the very *preconditions/premises* on which women were “let in” in the first place, as well as with those which frame their possibilities today. This means that *equality and difference*—both as institutionalized principles (in law and other formal rules) and as rhetorical arguments—have come into focus. This pair of principles also runs through the present volume in the form of a shifting problematization and arguments that characterize, or rather comprise, a part of what was formulated above as the central problematic of the whole collection.

The last point in this account of our analytical elaboration of the book’s contents concerns the question of how to deal theoretically with issues of equality/difference; that is, is it possible to *think about* this notoriously difficult dichotomy in a non-dichotomous way? We think so. As a matter of fact, the ambition to do precisely this in the field of philosophy is the main thrust of [Chapter 14](#) below (Heinämaa and Reuter). While neither primarily nor exclusively following these philosophical tracks, we assume that we show—by the very way in which we arrange and present the book’s contents—that we embrace a view that may be called dialectical on how to practise a mode of *thinking relationally*. Three important aspects of this view need to be mentioned here. First, it goes beyond dichotomies in that things can be both equal and different at the same time. Secondly, instead of thinking in terms of closed or discrete categories of meaning and societal facts, this view is directed at processes in which people interactively—and through some form of dynamic practice or struggle—create various kinds of social and cultural value, including the social value of people. Finally, this view allows for “seeing” things, events and conditions as multilayered, that is, as being and happening at various levels. Therefore, investigations on different levels of analysis and of abstraction are needed.

Regarding the stance taken above and in addition to the more often expressed dichotomy criticism, the adequacy of the equality/difference concept as an analytical tool to be used empirically in history and the social sciences is open to question. This is because the concept is most often applied on the level of philosophical ideas about human nature rather than as a theoretically elaborated concept constructed for empirical use. The result is that questions about women’s positions, possibilities or outlooks being equal to or different from men’s receive a reductionistic treatment as different levels of abstraction are conflated. Confusion often arises as to when these concepts are being used as philosophical and logical categories and when they are being used as empirical concepts aimed at generalizations and ideal-typical descriptions. In [Chapter 2](#), Christina Carlsson Wetterberg takes issue with the kind of approach to women’s history that uses the equality/difference duality as a conceptual tool to determine shifting views and standpoints in the women’s movement and, thus, to understand women’s strategies in various contexts. The abstract either/or thinking that this entails does no justice, she argues, to the

complexity of the concrete circumstances from which women's political strategies emerge. The approaches must also allow space for both/and thinking.

Politics in ambiguous times

Perhaps the most conspicuous and most discussed example of the breakups or changes mentioned above is the contested and uncertain situation of the Nordic welfare state. This issue is partly connected to another one, widely held to be of great importance for the future and further development of the relatively "women-friendly" Nordic societies. In question here is, of course, the emergence and the highly uncertain future of the so-called "New Europe" in general and the European Union in particular. For instance, the fact that women are numerous and comparatively strong in the parliaments and governments of the Nordic nation-states does not necessarily mean that women would be influential to the same extent in a centralized Europe governed by procedural means and principles basically different from those in which women won their political power in the first place.

However, rather than addressing the welfare state debate or the discussion on the EU as such, the chapters in the first part of the book problematize *the premises on which Nordic women are, and have been, politically influential*. Grounded in material mainly from Sweden and Iceland, they show how women have struggled politically among themselves as well as with men—and not in vain. Looking back, in all the Nordic countries we can easily discern increasing levels of participation and greater visibility of women in politics—a story of success can obviously be told. However, the authors included here have chosen to raise somewhat different questions. Who has the power effectively to define what is common ground and which are the areas of cleavage between women? Although we can see from the historical evidence given here, both from the more remote and the recent past, that men resist women's political action in various ways, why is it that women have not to a greater degree acted in a unified manner (Ch. 2)? How does it come about that some issues tend to be women's issues and others not? On what premises do male politicians claim that women shall obey and "follow the men"? Moreover, when women politicians, such as the Swedish Social Democratic women in the late 1970s, grow desperate and feel forced to revolt against party discipline in order to fight for their core issues, how should this particular kind of party in-fighting be framed, that is, in what scholarly terms should it be conceptualized and interpreted (see Ch. 3)? *Gendered interests* seem to be intricately woven into the structure of social cleavages on which the modern party system as a whole has been built. At least, after reading Wetterberg's and Karlsson's contributions here, one begins to wonder why,

over the years, it has been considered so much more threatening to famous Swedish party discipline when a group of women joins together and acts for the common good than when men (happen to) act in single-sex groups for the same purpose.

In cases such as that of the Icelandic Women's Alliance, when women decide to organize and conduct politics "on their own premises", how do they do it and what do they themselves think is different about their way? On the other hand, do phrases and arguments taken from an idiom of women acting on their own premises necessarily mean total separation from men and a categorical difference thinking? And what are the strengths and weaknesses of the Women's Alliance strategy, to organize separately and differently within the existing political system (Ch. 4)? Furthermore, when actually successful in their own terms, what premises *are* women acting on, which may, somehow, explain their success in the first place? If, for instance, Icelandic women can be said to have benefited politically from the specific peaceful version of nationalist difference thinking that prevailed in Iceland in the nineteenth century, during the struggle for independence from Denmark, is there a cost too of this benefit (Ch. 5)? Finally, what is the political and ideological message to women around the world of a writer such as the American Camille Paglia who today actually advocates far-reaching separation; a writer who claims not only that women and men are fundamentally different but also applies radically biological and sexualized difference thinking to the whole of human culture as well as the rest of the cosmos (Ch. 6)?

All but one of the chapters brought together in [Part I](#) problematize the ambiguous terms on which women as a differentiated collective are and have been able to act as an interested party in the organized power struggle of democratic politics. We believe that the kinds of issue discussed here may open the door to raising other highly relevant questions, such as how to understand and analyze the possibilities and barriers for women with regard to moving on and enhancing their power in more or less transformed political decision-making arrangements.

These chapters, moreover, show clearly that the "ideological duality", to borrow Wetterberg's phrase, that comes from the abstract use of equality versus difference thinking, comprises a vital element in the ambiguity that characterizes the premises on which women and men, as well as women and women, relate politically—in consensus and contest. Hence, we find it interesting to connect to these concrete and historically located studies a politically concerned critique by a literary analyst, of a writer whose radical difference thinking and cultural criticism go against feminist claims to sexual equality and the dissolution of gender divisions, as well as against the more general abandonment of limits found in deconstructionism and postmodernism. In her chapter, "Postmodernist space in Camille Paglia's *Sexual personae*", Kerstin Westerlund Shands focuses on the spatial

metaphors in Paglia's work. Thus, it may equally be read in relation to the chapters that make up the book's second part, arranged as they are around the theme of organization and contested space. Either way, it stimulates further questions: Is Paglia's extreme difference thinking radically liberating or is it conservative? Further, from what textual levels do these words derive their political meaning? Can Paglia's polemical dichotomizing moves against feminism be read as an expression of a widely felt cultural anxiety in an era when the traditional dichotomies are in general dissolution?

Another question, then, is how we are to understand the relationship between philosophical discourses and rhetoric on the one hand and people's acting and thinking in socially structured situations on the other. As a part of recent postmodernist debate, this has become—in a new way, we might add—a fairly open question. Precisely this issue becomes urgent with respect to Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir's revealing analysis of the male-authored maternalist element in Icelandic nationalism, derived initially from the Herder variant of German Romanticism. What connection, if any, is there between the Romantic ideas about the nature of Iceland, idealistically constructed by male poets and liberation heroes, as the Mother of the land's sons, and the political impact Icelandic women today may have as they profile their electoral programme around women's and children's social and economic disadvantages? What is at issue here seems to resemble Wetterberg's questioning of the meaningfulness of deriving knowledge about concrete historical realities from analyses of ideas about human nature (see [Ch. 2](#)).

Organization and contested spaces

Although the aim of this book is to understand the present, the fact that some of the historical analyses found in [Part I](#) concern the nineteenth century does not make their inclusion here less appropriate, quite the contrary. That was the time when nationalism emerged, an ideology which, as we can see from Björnsdóttir's contribution ([Ch. 5](#)), relied heavily on the dualist symbolism of femininity and masculinity. Politically, the late nineteenth century saw the birth of the party system, and it was the formative period for the first wave of the women's movement as well as the labour movement. So, looking back with gender-seeing eyes into this period of transformation elicits knowledge about *variously situated gendered interactions and struggles that actually centre around fundamentals and basic premises*. They centre around such fundamental matters as how society—including the production and reproduction of its people, of life—should be organized; and around how politics—including socio-sexual politics—should be institutionalized; and they imply the repeatedly contested question of what makes humanity human and where—in *what*

kind of room/space—the practice(s) necessary for *that* value creation take (s) place.

Part II also starts with history, this time the history of culture and aestheticism. Chapter 7 is about the importance in Nordic cultural history of the literary salon hostess as a feminine aesthete, while Chapter 8 is about a specific “feminine dramatic tradition, the one-act play”, which originated in the salon culture. In the first of these contributions, “Taste, manners and attitudes—the *bel-esprit* and literary salon in Scandinavia c. 1800”, Anne Scott Sørensen points out that, initially, the salon was a form of institutionalized public taste within the private sphere, during a period when public cultural institutions had not yet been established. In the second one, “The dream of reality: a study of a feminine dramatic tradition, the one-act play”, Anna Lyngfelt tells us that later the salon also offered the women writers of the “breakthrough of modernity” (1870–90) the possibility of using a medium of entertainment to express things that, according to the norms of the time, were not to be spoken of in polite society. By such means women could participate in the contemporary debates about the institution of marriage as well as the whole issue of women’s position in society.

If they were to be seen only as isolated subjects of study in the cultural history of modernity, it would make little sense to place these chapters together with studies of organizational changes and various kinds of women-men interactions in the contemporary workplace. However, in these chapters on culture, we read several stories. Most importantly, within the context of this book, they tell us a story of the historical genesis of a kind of “room” where women could create/produce their femininity by acting on their particular capacities and bringing their feminine powers into play; and as a matter of historical fact, it should be added, that *this creating and elaborating of particularized femininity was undertaken in direct or indirect communicative relation to men for whose creative/productive personal development this “room” was also a precondition.*

Scott Sørensen and Lyngfelt tell an exciting story about how women’s spatial agency is closely connected to aesthetic, erotic and performance modes of expression. The question is whether contemporary methods of organizing and reorganizing societal space, and the opportunities for women to act, to use their powers and to express identities—in direct interaction with or as compared to men—somehow resemble the salon culture. This question is as fascinating as it is frustrating. Does it really make sense to think that even the gendered opportunity structures of today can be understood against the background of the salon’s special intermediate as well as temporary position, that is, as constituting a temporary interspace between the private and the public sphere? Does it make sense to think that even the growth of Nordic women’s power and opportunities since about the 1970s is temporary and in various respects

conditioned by an overriding value—the furthering of men’s power and opportunities? The point is not to answer decisively yes or no. Yet we wish to play a little with this resemblance, the salon as a metaphor. Perhaps, still, our possibilities for acting are more or less tied down to premises comparable to the ones that were shaped in the early modern salons and reformulated by, among other things, women’s experimentation with the one-act play.

One hundred years later (c. 1970–90) we could, to paraphrase the literary expression above, speak about the “late-modern ‘breakthrough’ of wage-earning women”. During this period women have used their “taste, manners and attitudes” to create and arrange another kind of room, another “salon”—the workplace. In particular, this concerns the part of the public sector, the welfare state, that opened up for women in this period, expanded fast and became, as it were, “feminized”. It became feminized in the quantitative sense and, many would say, in a qualitative sense as well. It is here, in the new private/public interspace, that the elements of a new kind of social rationality have been developed, the kind of rationality which Norwegian feminist sociologists identified in the late 1970s and termed “responsible rationality” and “care-work rationality” (cf. Chs 10 and 17 below). In a thought-provoking contribution, Hildur Ve discusses the simultaneous disintegration of both the Nordic welfare state and the meaningful use of the concept of responsible rationality in feminist analyses (see Ch. 17).

Closely connected to the expansion of the Nordic welfare state has been the massive number of women entering paid work. As a matter of fact these two processes are interwoven. Furthermore, if there is any one social practice that—apart from the wage nexus—links the two processes, it is care work, which to a certain extent has “gone public”. However, such work is still and to a much greater extent carried on in private and still mostly done, or co-ordinated, by women. Not surprisingly, then, the question of whether there is any common trait that characterizes Nordic feminist scholarship often elicits the answer—with respect to the social sciences—that it is strongly work-oriented, theoretically, empirically and ideologically.

Much has been written about work: women in paid and unpaid work, the different working conditions of women and men, the possibilities of achieving gender equality at the various workplaces and through work. Still, not much has been done on gender issues from an organizational perspective nor on the complex of questions raised here, that is: *what, actually, is produced at the workplace? Which values are created there?*

Statistics derived from various sources as well as other kinds of evidence continue to show a seemingly ineradicable pattern of gender segregation at work, an increasing or stagnating gap in wages between women and men, and almost no increase in the number of women holding high positions in

any power structure other than the state-political one. This apparent inconsistency usually perplexes people, not least many foreigners who have a picture in their minds of the Nordic countries as the mainstay of sexual equality. How are the anything but fragile, albeit changing, patterns of inequality being produced and reproduced?

In the four chapters that comprise the rest of the second part of this book, various organizational aspects of work and what occurs at work are investigated and theorized. What happens, Hanne Nexø Jensen asks, when a public organization in which the majority of the employees are women undergoes a process of change (Ch. 9)? Who pushes for and who restrains the new status quo? What kinds of conflict between men and women are revealed in this process? In short, what does gender mean to organization and what does organization mean for the possibility of reforming unequal gender arrangements?

The workplace seems to be neither solely nor simply a place where work is done and products made for markets. *The workplace is also a place in which people—as socially conditioned sexes—are “made”,* a “room” in which gendered value is created. Perhaps not only labour power but also “love power” is being “exchanged” and “consumed” at the workplace.¹ If so, where does the one dimension (economy/work) end and the shift into the other (sexuality/love) begin? What theoretical views and what conceptual keys should be used to approach such “mixed” processes? In Chapter 10, Kjersti Ericsson argues persuasively that some of the concepts which have been developed for studying sexual harassment may shed light on the gendered character of qualifications for work that other conceptual keys cannot.

When students of organizations and the workplace have begun to “see” the dimension of sexuality in their field, sexual harassment has tended to be the area on which they have focused. However, in Chapter 11 Elina Haavio-Mannila shows that there is more to “sex at work” than harassment. Love is there too. She presents the results of a comparative study from four cities in four different countries (Copenhagen, Helsinki, Stockholm and Tallinn) of people’s varying experiences of attraction and love in the workplace. Although the boundaries between oppressive and non-oppressive love relationships at work or anywhere else are by no means clear, and the difference, we might say, does not speak for itself, we agree with the author that it is “worth noticing that 76 per cent of women get happiness and joy from workplace romances and only 25 per cent get heartache”. But what does this tell us if the aim is to interpret or explain the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the prevailing working conditions of Nordic women and men? At the very least Haavio-Mannila’s tables tell us that the more or less eroticized interactions between women and men in the workplace often lead to quite different consequences for the two sexes. This in turn may imply that women and men in the seemingly socio-

sexually and socioeconomically advanced Nordic countries, still function under profoundly different conditions when it comes to living out in practice matters of sexual desire. When this desire is acted out in the ambiguously located interspace between public openness and private closure—the kind of room which intimacy at the workplace occupies—women's greater vulnerability becomes particularly accentuated.

How complex most matters of equality and difference are in the whole set of relations through which women and men interact, is clearly demonstrated in Karen Sjørup's case study (Ch. 12). Also at a highly professionalized and equalized workplace, such as the contemporary Danish hospital, although other things *are* equal, women and men as socio-sexual subjects are not. As already mentioned, opposite as the two settings are, the early modern salon seems to reappear—if somewhat modified—in the contemporary gynaecology department.

Without doubt, equality between women and men in the Nordic countries has advanced considerably and in many respects over the preceding 25 to 30 years. Their best-known achievement is probably the unusually large amount of women wielding power at all levels of electoral politics and even, in some of these countries, in government. Also, while there are variations, of course, between the five countries, the figures from Denmark relating to waged work and higher education that Sjørup presents are roughly equivalent to those for the other countries. About the same proportion (90 per cent) of women and men are in paid work, and of university students now half, or more, are women. Furthermore, during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the number of day-care facilities for children increased markedly. At the same time, sexual segregation in the workplace and in the choice of education programmes continues. And in practically all hierarchically organized social settings, other than party-based politics, the absence of women is glaring. As in the rest of the world, here too the economic, bureaucratic and scientific-technological power elites remain male. However, this seemingly insuperable and entrenched male dominance does not go wholly unchallenged; nor is it intact in each and every segment of society.

The subject of Sjørup's wider concern is the change that she argues is occurring in the construction of gender within the professions, among them the medical profession. Inspired by the theories of Foucault as well as of Weber and Parsons, she is also concerned more generally with changes in how power is produced in the form of society which she characterizes as postmodern. In assuming that the professions contain the central key to the understanding of societal power production, she thinks that women's intervention in the professions entails one of the essential changes. *What, then, is the result of this intervention? On what conditions does it take place? What kind of power is produced within the professions? Who become empowered when women enter the professions?* In her case study

Sjørup finds an obvious break in the traditional gender-divided rationale; that is, the rationale that directed an almost male-only, scientifically oriented medical profession in its interdependent connection with an almost female-only, care-working semi-profession, the nurses. The break, however, is not clear-cut. Women—young women—are now in the medical profession in great numbers; and similarity between men and women in education, professional ethics and skill—but not gender difference in “taste, manners and attitudes” as in the salon—is a precondition for women’s integration. Still, the women in Sjørup’s study operate on very different conditions from the men, as professionals and as people. Even if they are many and even if they are young and skilled, the women *professionals*/the professional *women*, seem to be forced into a multifaceted dilemma—*because they are women*.

The point is, that even in institutional settings, which contain so many of the elements necessary for genuine equality between women and men, a certain pattern of gendered differences tends to develop, a pattern that actually *follows the conventional division between the sexes*. Although new in form, this pattern is all the more intriguing if we connect the organizational matters revealed here to recent issues in the field of subjectivity and personal identity-making. Here we are thinking of the widely held belief that people today, particularly young people, are free from earlier norms when it comes to constructing their own selves. A much greater scope is now thought to exist for each and every one to construct her or his own identity and consequently, it is assumed, to fashion her or his own social existence. Anyway, a part of the problem of the apparent inconsistency or paradox revealed above interlocks with the key issues in the third and last part of this volume, the part where questions on the subject and the making of gendered identities constitute the primary theme.

Identity/subjectivity—between equality and difference

In the third part of this edited collection we have brought together contributions from psychology and philosophy, a film analysis as well as a literary essay and, finally, a piece of work from the discipline of sociology. The five chapters are connected in two ways. First, they all take up problems of identity, rationality and subjectivity on the individual level of analysis rather than on the institutional or structural levels of politics and the organized production of social and cultural values. Secondly, the implicit and explicit concern with the equality/difference issue here takes a somewhat new turn. In Parts I and II actual or idealized differences are more central than *de facto* or potential equality. Here the view shifts insofar as a wider potential equality between the sexes is put into focus as a possibility to strive for. The point is not to search for a model of identity or equality for humanity as a whole. All the chapters here, in one way or

another, deal with the intricate question, *what must be equal and on whose premises in the gendered condition, so that differences cease to be oppressive.*

To begin with, when viewed from a psychological perspective, which approaches should be used to investigate women's ways of becoming women and of handling their personal existence in the various settings of society? In [Chapter 13](#), Hanne Haavind argues for an interactionist approach to make women's experience and self-creating agency intelligible; not only as such, but also as women themselves understand their living conditions and opportunity structures historically. On the basis of several empirical studies of women in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, she discusses methodological and theoretical issues of wider, essential interest.

Just as Sjørup, Haavind speaks about changes in the social circumstances under which gendered life is lived. She thinks that women are no longer forced by social norms to develop fixed feminine needs or otherwise to satisfy a certain feminine role model. On the contrary, the force of today's circumstances, thought to be particularly strong in the Nordic countries, predicates that women and men should be integrated equally into all social settings and that gendered stereotypes in attitudes and activities should disappear. At the same time the pressure to be—and remain—"one's gender" is at least as forceful as before. According to Haavind, these are the paradoxical terms on which women and men have to handle the making of their identities, the creation of their own personas. And to make oneself into a unique person is thought to be the "solution" of otherwise inherently conflict-filled situations. However, that which is and that which happens continuously in the "room" between opposing demands—to be equal and to be different simultaneously—should be termed *power*; and power for Haavind equals male dominance and its inversion, female submissiveness. This means that even if the notion of a freely and autonomously *negotiating subject*, which is now widely used to replace the concept of a naturally or socio-culturally determined person, is somehow in tune with the times, it does not necessarily follow that all negotiating subjects are equally positioned or equally empowered.

A phrase from Haavind (also included here) that has for many years had wide currency throughout the Nordic countries says that *a woman today can do everything as long as she does it in relative subordination to a man.* This statement expresses the core distinction of the contemporary form of the linguistic code which, according to Haavind, *is* gender and which in that cultural-contextual capacity "acts as a forestructure of experiences", a "matrix" that frames the relations and interactions between women and men. Leaving aside many intriguing questions as to the usefulness of thinking gender only or primarily as the "making of meaning" and as a code that "acts through language and resides in language", we ask instead whether *the gendered condition which Haavind's statement above is meant*

to characterize, can be demolished—in thought as well as concretely, in practice. Obviously, if understood—as Haavind understands it—as an empirical generalization, it is often demolished, individually, without any measurable consequences for the larger context. But can it be done away with more definitely? If so, how?

Considering Sara Heinämaa and Martina Reuter’s “Reflections on the rationality of emotions and feelings” (Ch. 14), one answer to the above questions might be that the first step to subvert this condition should take place within philosophy. Doing away with beliefs about systematic differences, differences that also mean the inferiority of women, must begin by breaking with some of the most central dichotomies in classical philosophy, particularly the traditions that oppose reason to emotions and mind to body. This very mode of thinking, in its various versions, Heinämaa and Reuter argue, is a much greater problem for feminism than open antifeminist attacks. In their discussion, they confront two of the most prominent women philosophers of today, Martha Nussbaum and Amélie Rorty, who have tried to solve this problem. As against Nussbaum and Rorty’s attempts, Heinämaa and Reuter suggest an alternative mode of thought, sustainable enough effectively to transcend the mind-body dualism, namely the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. They think that his notion of the *human body as actively intentional, experiencing subject* is one that fits feminism, and that in this basic bodily respect women and men are alike.

What happens, however, when women, in concrete life or in cultural performances, live actively and intentionally in and through their bodies and act powerfully “towards a world” which as a matter of fact is dominated by men? What happens, for instance, when a woman takes a “posture in the midst of the world”—to speak further with Merleau-Ponty—as an erotic body subject? These questions, together with interesting and seemingly contradictory answers, are raised in a reading of Kirsten Drotner’s essay (Ch. 15). Drotner writes about Asta Nielsen, one of the greatest stars of the silent screen, who, according to Drotner, is today also one of the least known. This actress was great in every sense in which a film actress is great. It is estimated that before the First World War she was seen by 2.5 million cinema goers every day in about 600 cinemas. One of the prominent directors she worked with compared her with Greta Garbo—to Nielsen’s advantage. While Garbo may have been “godlike”, for him Asta Nielsen was “human”. Drotner argues that Asta Nielsen, through the powerfully eroticized persona she created, offered “new forms of cinematic pleasure to both sexes, if for different reasons”. Why, then, Drotner asks without, however, giving a definite answer, is it “the childlike Mary Pickfords and not the eroticized Asta Nielsens who have gone down in film history as the early film stars?”

“A woman who uses her sexuality as a means of power is never liked”, a woman journalist wrote recently in a Swedish newspaper article about the American film actress Sharon Stone.² Considering Drotner’s analysis of Asta Nielsen’s eroticized, even violent performance, in relation to the historical facts about her achievements and popularity, statements such as that above are not universally true. Nielsen’s star status was shaped, Drotner points out, in a period of rapid changes in the Nordic countries, an “era of sexual struggle” too. We assume that whether an actress is liked or disliked depends on *when and how, and on whose premises*. It depends on how truly such “use” of sexuality is felt and thought by the audience to be in tune with their own experience and intentions as bodily subjects *vis-à-vis* the world of their particular time and place—to connect back into the Merleau-Pontyan view and add to it an historical dimension. Another question is which and whose truth remains alive and which does not survive the “sex struggle” of shorter “periods of rapid changes”.

It is interesting to note that of the three different female personae mentioned in Drotner’s chapter as having been created on the silent screen—the godlike, the childlike and the human—the human is the one that soon fell into oblivion. This suggests that D.H. Lawrence may have been right in thinking that women’s humanity is an essentially contested matter (to paraphrase Gallie’s frequently used words) in the sex struggle. Lawrence wrote:

Man is willing to accept woman as an equal, as a man in skirts, as an angel, a devil, a baby-face, a machine, an instrument, a bosom, a womb, a pair of legs, a servant, an encyclopedia, an ideal or an obscenity; the only thing he won’t accept her as is a human being, a real human being of the female sex.³

The complex and dynamic human woman whom Nielsen created in her artistic practice and brought into the open had to compete with the ethereal “ideal” woman as well as with the “baby-face”, and lost—at the time. This leads into Lis Wedell Pape’s chapter which takes us further into the contested field of subjectivity and rationality (Ch. 16).

Taking the questioning of the classical modern and, as she puts it, androcentric subject as a point of departure, Pape turns to Heideggerian phenomenology and to the poetic discourse of the Danish woman poet, Inger Christensen, in an attempt to show what a genuine alternative to the rational, autonomous, self-centred subject might be. By an analogous reading of Heidegger and Christensen, Pape wishes to thematize the particular power or capacity ascribed (by Heidegger) as a privilege to poetry—or to art more generally—to bring immanence into existence. Such particular poetic practice, Pape thinks, can be understood and named by the phrase from Derrida as “writing ‘as woman’”. The privilege of poetry/

writing “as woman” means, to borrow from one of Pape’s quotations from Heidegger: “the inaugural naming of being (to bring into the open for the first time) all that which we then discuss and deal with in everyday language” or, in short, to let truth happen. Viewed thus, poetic language “keeps open the manifestation of the world”. In her reading of Christensen’s work Pape demonstrates what writing “as woman” might be.

In her poetic practice Inger Christensen establishes a dialogue, not only with “things” already “defined”, but also with “the logic/still/not defined / .../the logic left/as/an uneasiness, a despair, a pulse with no body /which/is a criticism of the body because it’s a criticism of life” (cf. the poem “det/it” Christensen 1969). To write—or to act—“as woman” means to “de-realize”, to decenter the subject. It is to be a pro-ducer (Latin *pro+ducere*) in the “interplay of difference”. It is to intervene in affairs of “inaugural naming” as both listener and speaker, both receiver and deliverer.

To lead on from Christensen and Pape into the subject matter of the collection’s penultimate essay, by Hildur Ve. What if, now, the capacity to “listen” and to “relate itself” to that which is “left out” or “concealed” behind that which is already “defined” and “described”, is the capacity of “beings” to write “as wom/e/n” in *poetic* practice and in *philosophy*; and if the capacity and privilege to write “as woman” is that which brings about new manifestations of the world—in *texts*? What powers and privilege are there in living people that would manage to do all this in social reality? If a fundamental *rethinking* of rationality takes place in poetic work, as Pape tells us (after Heidegger and Christensen), and if this work is essentially gendered, as Pape also suggests, by adopting the phrase “as woman” from Derrida, where, then, in the social world, through what kind of “real work”, occurs the *remaking* of things and conditions that ratio(nality)—rethought or not—is needed for? And is this remaking and the rationality that “works” (operates) in society also gendered?

Yes! was the practically unanimous answer of feminists to the last question, from the late 1960s and until about the late 1980s. Among Nordic feminist scholars, not least in Norway, the genderedness of the rationality that “worked” at home as well as outside the home, was brought into the open in the contemporary process of remaking both these areas. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, Norwegian feminist sociologists in the late 1970s and early 1980s began to rethink and reconceptualize rationality as they met various forms of it in their research. In the process of remaking that started in the Nordic societies in the early 1960s an immense new private/ public interspace has been created. This creation contains more or less strong elements of a new kind of social rationality, in other words a new kind of guiding principle for how to organize and carry out the new tasks which the advanced industrial/ postindustrial societies call for. Most importantly now, and increasingly,

people themselves—young and old, sick and healthy, skilled and unskilled—are simultaneously the workers, the work objects and, to a great extent, the means used in the work process.

The elaboration of the Weberian conception of rationality and its basic distinction between instrumental and value rationality, which resulted in the concepts of “responsible rationality” and “care-work rationality”, comprised an important part of a wider development of feminist thought that, at the time, occurred mainly within the broad context of the social sciences. This means that the measure of the fruitfulness of concepts was first and foremost their empirical sensitivity and usefulness for generating new ideas, and not criteria set by philosophical logic or epistemological principles. Of course, philosophical or metatheoretical issues are never wholly absent from empirically oriented conceptual and theoretical work. In this Norwegian case, what concerned the women sociologists and motivated them to rethink rationality was of course the prevailing one-dimensional, either/or view of it, frequently used in their discipline. Either people were rational or they were irrational, difference from the one and only *ratio* was *irratio*, at best a lack that could be and should be remedied—in the image of the One.

What has emerged worldwide since the 1960s is an intellectual movement or movements whose message is that the main struggle or “interplay of difference” that feminists should be concerned about is not that between the sexes, particularly not the concrete things that happen to women and men. What matters, according to this message, is the interplay of all (other) differences, not least those among women.

In her chapter, Hildur Ve shares with us her deeply considered experience from what she calls a “decade of chaos”. Her phrase refers to the last ten years and the results of the “simultaneous signs of disintegration of the welfare state within Western societies, and postmodernist deconstruction of theories and concepts within feminist thought”. The former development, she continues, “constitutes a serious threat to the public sector which—however inconsistently—has served as a basis for job security and influence for women. The latter implies a dissolution of the analytical tools which have enabled women to understand and criticize—at least in the Nordic countries—part of the ideological basis for male dominance and power, and consequently achieve some political influence.” Rather than looking back in anger or despair, Hildur Ve makes a thorough assessment of the rights and wrongs of the “chaos”, particularly the conceptual part of it.

We would like to conclude this introduction by connecting again to the first chapter in this collection, “Equal or different—That’s not the question. Women’s political strategies in a historical perspective” (Ch. 2). Here, Wetterberg offers insight into the feminist debates in Sweden around the turn of the century. Among others she discusses Frida Stéenhoff, a

radical socialist feminist writer who met with both appreciation and silence from the labour movement. Sténhoff opposed the internationally well-known Ellen Key's idealization of motherhood as being the determination of woman, and perhaps more importantly she opposed the terms on which the "woman question" was debated. In a letter to Ellen Key in 1903, Wetterberg tells us, Sténhoff wrote the following, and we conclude by embracing and emphasizing her point:

It is true that I differ with you on one point—on the special nature of woman.... I no longer occupy myself with that point. I am less interested in describing the nature of woman than I am with ensuring a place for her nature, be it flesh or fowl. Either is fine with me.

At this late hour of the twentieth century we are, if anything, still "less interested" in dealing with "the nature of woman" than with the question of "ensuring a place" for women in culture and society—be their nature "flesh or fowl". Perhaps the most important issue for feminism to address, now and in future, concerns the possibility for combining social constructivism and the critique of essentialism with ontological realism. We believe in this possibility and that there are modes of thinking that offer various ways to ground such combinations. Philosophical pragmatism, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the research tradition of critical realism are examples of such modes of thought. Directly or indirectly the combined use of constructivism and realism as a way of approaching gender issues characterizes most of the contributions to this collection. For us that is one of the most interesting results of this project. There is no *one* Nordic feminism and, thus, no unitary focus or a sole mainstream in the Nordic countries' feminist scholarship. We think, however, that one of its streams, some of which runs through the pages of this volume, focuses on the organization of everyday life, on dialogical or interactive individuality, on the importance of ethics in the formation of gendered individuality, and on ontological realism. This focus, we believe, can be seen as significantly Nordic. At the same time it connects us to several equally fascinating contemporary schemes of thought being developed in other parts of the world.

Notes

1. The concept "love power" (compare "labour power") was coined and used in Anna G.Jónasdóttir's *Why women are oppressed* (1994). Originally this book was published under the title *Love power and political interests* (1991).
2. *Dagens Nyheter*, 27 May 1995.

3. Quoted after Morgan 1970:633.

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PART ONE

Politics in ambiguous times

CHAPTER TWO

Equal or different? that's not the question. Women's political strategies in historical perspective

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Introduction

From the end of the nineteenth century, when the modern political party system was born, women have made various attempts to organize themselves across party and class boundaries.¹ However, the predominant trend has been that women have more or less fully conformed politically to the various party doctrines which were gradually established.

Why haven't women to a greater degree acted in a unified manner in politics and is it possible to discern a common interest among women? This chapter focuses on these questions in a historical perspective. The concrete examples are taken from Sweden during the period 1880–1930 and the emphasis is on the social democratic women's movement. The empirical discussion is aimed at illuminating the more general question of how women's political action should be analyzed and understood.

Much of the research on the history of the women's movement, especially in America, has been structured around the concepts of equality/difference. The analyses have focused on how the different parts of the movement have conceptualized the question of women's nature. In other words, whether women are inherently similar or different from men. The concept of feminism has as a rule been reserved for a political strategy, which takes its point of departure from the conviction that men and women are alike. If one accepts this premise, one has also taken a stand about what kinds of politics can be said to be in the interest of women, namely, politics that have as their starting-point the conviction that men and women are alike.

Questions about the concepts of equality/difference and about the presence of common interests for women, as a group, have also arisen within Nordic research and debate. In Sweden, Yvonne Hirdman has used this pair of concepts in her analysis of the women's movement and stated that women social democrats supported the ideology of difference quite early on and, further, that the continued development of the social

democratic, the liberal and conservative women's movements can be seen as an oscillation between the two alternatives (Hirdman 1983, 1986).

Two questions arise here. First, is it possible to discern two distinctly different lines of thought within the women's movement? Secondly, is this question of women's innate nature the most relevant question around which to structure analysis? Of late, a good deal of criticism has been directed towards this model of analysis, both empirically and in principle, since it has proved difficult to categorize the different women's movements according to the equality/difference dichotomy. Indeed, these two ideas have often existed side by side.² When I analyzed the Swedish social democratic women's self-image and political action around the turn of the century, I chose to emphasize the variations and incongruities, both ideologically and in everyday life, experienced both by the individual woman and by women collectively (Carlsson 1986). Instead of focusing on the more abstract "nature of woman" and placing the discussion in the realm of ideas, we ought to strive to widen and concretize the discussion. In order to understand the contradictions and incongruities that characterized women's political action, one must see them in relation to women's everyday life, which was not homogeneous. Women's differing positions in society constantly created divergent loyalties and different needs.

What is political?

Ever since the days of Plato and Aristotle women's role in society and their nature have been objects of speculation within philosophical, religious and political thought. The household, both in Athenian society and in the western agricultural society, was the economic nucleus of the communal structure and therefore the status of women had a given place in discussions about the nature of society. Woman was defined principally in relation to the family and she was seen as innately inferior to man.³ Quoting Aristotle, "With regard to the differences between the sexes, man is by nature superior and leading, woman inferior and led" (from Eduards & Gunneng 1983:32). Or, as Martin Luther stated, "Rule and supremacy belong to man and by the command of God woman must obey and submit to him, he shall rule in the home and in society..." (from Åsbrink 1959: 33).

With the growth of modern society and industrialization the household lost its earlier role as the foundation of production in society and thus the family as a theme for philosophical and political thought tended to disappear. The family and the relationships between men and women were relegated to the private sphere, and politics were defined with regard to the new, public sphere. The question of the relationship between the sexes did not, of course, simply cease to exist. If anything, it was discussed more fervently than ever during the nineteenth century, especially within

medicine, but what I want to point out here is that the discussion was separated from the area that later would be defined as political.⁴

From the point of view of European women the nineteenth century was paradoxical. At the same time as modern ideas of women's liberation were being articulated ever more clearly, a new family form was being consolidated—starting in the upper classes—where women were increasingly being relegated to the domestic sphere. However, the contrasting political ideology was based on the role of the individual in industrial society as opposed to that of the household in earlier times. In accordance with this—and to a great extent out of economic necessity—the formal emancipation of women took place (Qvist 1960, 1978). The previous unequal treatment meted out to women by the law, such as legal incapacity and a smaller share of any inheritance, disappeared, but the family lived on—children were born and needed to be cared for, the household needed to be run. Of course, these everyday matters did not become obsolete when ideology started to focus on the individual or when labour was redefined to mean paid labour only. Home and children continued to be the responsibility of women and, in spite of the new ideology, women and men did not have the same opportunities to participate in politics and in the public sphere.

The so called “woman question” meant different things for different groups of women. For women of the middle class it coincided for the most part with the drive for formal emancipation, where they sought to create opportunities for unmarried women to make their living and strived to strengthen women's status within marriage. For women in the lower social strata there were no formal barriers to work. The main difficulty for these women was the struggle against poverty and the childcare problems that resulted when mothers were forced into the labour market.

Ideas of women's emancipation were first expressed in an organized manner during the French Revolution, but they were thwarted. Women's organizations were forbidden and some leading feminists were executed (Abray 1975). The ideas persisted, though, both in liberal and socialist form. They were developed most consistently by groups within the utopian socialist movement, who opposed all forms of oppression. Their goals were often formulated as a struggle against the three evils: religion, private ownership and marriage. Among other things, they strove to create socialist oases within the framework of contemporary society, where the individual could live in a socialist society in which free love was central. It would prove difficult to live up to these ideals, owing to the fact that people did not arrive as clean slates but instead were creatures of their backgrounds, which was particularly true in regard to relations between the sexes (Taylor 1983). But even if these experiments did not succeed, it is interesting to note that during the early 1800s, the possibility still existed to formulate all—embracing ideological alternatives. These utopian socialists