

Introduction

What were the origins of this modernization of society?

How did it come about?

The feminist movement developed in West Germany around 1973; it created women's centers and within just a few years hundreds of innovative women's projects. Unlike the socialist women's groups, the feminist movement was directly democratic and autonomous. It recruited members from the non-dogmatic, anarchist scene and was realistic and able to develop rapidly because it was not bound by the prescriptions of party strategists.

In the years that followed, the environmental movement emerged and adopted the concept of the autonomous women's movement. Like the latter, it dispensed with leftist notions of revolution, concentrated on its own concerns and defended grassroots democracy and autonomy against takeover attempts by the communist groups and parties that dominated politicized youth in those days.

Unlike those groups, the women's and environmental movements decisively changed society. In order to learn something about how modernization pushes are initiated, it is worth knowing about the beginnings of the women's movement, which first and foremost means finding adequate documentation.

Biographical-historical background

I (Cristina Perincioli) am describing the history of the emergence of the new women's movement as a participant in Berlin. I came to Berlin from Switzerland in 1968 to study at the Film Academy dffb. Together with five women, I founded the lesbian group within the Homosexual Action West Berlin (HAW) in 1972, the Women's Center and the first women's media group in 1973 and the first rape crisis hotline in Germany in 1977. I was not a member of the Action Council for the Liberation of Women (1968–69) and also did not take part in the famous 1971 campaign against Paragraph 218 in which women confessed to having had (then illegal) abortions; the women prominent in these movements included Helke Sander, Frigga Haug (both born in 1937) and Alice Schwarzer. The women's centers that proved important for the women's movement were founded only in 1973, and by significantly younger women, the next generation, as it were.

In order not to present my own personal viewpoint alone, in the 1990s I interviewed 27 Berlin activists of the founding period, and I would like to thank them here for their many hours of memory work. They speak here in their own words: Prof. Helke Sander, Dr. Beate Kortendieck, Prof. Cillie Rentmeister, Beatrice E. Stammer, Monika Schmid, Prof. Cornelia Mansfeld, Prof. Frigga Haug, Elsa Rassbach, Esther Dayan, Prof. Eva Rieger, Gisela Necker, Alexandra Goy, Helga Pahl, Prof. Ilse Kokula, Monika Augele, Monika Kühn, Petra Lang, Dr. Roswitha Burgard, Renate Sami, Helene Schwarz, Brigitte Classen, Ulla Naumann, Waltraut Siepert, Renate Richter, Dr. Dorothea Schemme, Edda Hertel, Magdalena Kemper und Verena Becker.

Many women who later did important work in the women's movement and the projects are not quoted here because I wanted to focus solely on the founding process and the run-up to it. In contrast to the projects that followed, this phase of the new women's movement is barely documented, and I was interested in precisely this question: How did we manage, without role

models—at this point we knew nothing of earlier feminist movements in Europe—to bring a new women’s movement into being with the organizational forms of the ‘women’s center’ and the ‘women’s project’?

For that reason, I describe the period from the Action Council in 1968 to the founding of the Berlin Women’s Center in 1973—the laborious search for an organizational form appropriate to the women’s movement. After all, in those days, the organizations familiar to leftists were either communist parties or workplace and neighborhood groups and militant groups. The notion of a ‘women’s center’ had yet to be devised. It was gay men and lesbians who first put this concept of self-organization into practice in the Homosexual Action West Berlin (HAW) beginning in 1972, thereby providing a key impetus for the Berlin Women’s Center. The Frankfurt Women’s Center arose at almost the same time, incidentally; the run-up was quite similar there as well. In this book, however, I limit myself to developments in Berlin from 1968 to 1974. After 1974 the women’s movement increasingly translated its interests into projects, at first autonomously and without public funding. In the 1980s the movement’s social ideas found a broad basis in social work, including under the umbrella of social welfare organizations.

The following timeline documents the context:

1968 A tomato is thrown at a speaker at the SDS Congress in Frankfurt

The ‘68er movement splits into dogmatic (KPD, DKP, KBW etc,) and non-dogmatic groups (workplace and neighborhood groups)

1969 The Action Council for the Liberation of Women is disbanded

1970 Socialist Women’s League of West Berlin (SFB)

Anarchist women form the Frauenfront, the Militante Panthertanten and Frauenkommune

1971 The first women’s films, gay films, Paragraph 218 self-incrimination action (women publicly admit to having had abortions)

1972 Lesbians and gay men found the Homosexual Action West Berlin

1973 Lesbians and straight women found the first Berlin Women’s Center

1974 The anti-nuclear energy and environmental movements emerge

Mode of administration

In the first part of the book, I recount the beginnings of the new women’s movement in Berlin based on the personal experiences of participating women, chronologically and in four sections: the leftist movement, the anti-authoritarian movement, the beginnings of the lesbian movement and the establishment of the women’s center—conflicts and all.

Part 2, “Documents and Reflections,” compiles documents such as the self-presentation of the Berlin Women’s Center and minutes of women’s meetings in which one can read in the original version the questions that feminists asked themselves in those days. “Documents and Reflections” also allows the Action Council, the Women’s Liberation Front, Bread and Roses and the Socialist Women’s League of West Berlin (SFB) and the sociologist Frigga Haug to speak for themselves. Additional texts provide insights into establishment pressures on us—the political police, employment bans, the hounding of lesbians by the media—and the action forms we used to try to break through them.

Early Looks Back—Far Removed From Reality

From among the early writings on the beginnings of the new women’s movement I have

selected four slim volumes by four pioneers—Barbara Sommerhoff, Rosemarie Nave-Herz, Frigga Haug, and Lottemi Doormann—to highlight the problem of factual inaccuracy. The image they convey of the new women's movement seems to be oriented towards the present-day function of women's projects as state-financed service providers. This literature ignores the movement's anarchist and cultural revolutionary roots.

These authors only describe the movement from the outside as non-participants, or like Frigga Haug, as members of the Socialist Women's League of West Berlin (SFB) and Lottemi Doormann from the perspective of the Democratic Women's Initiative or the German Communist Party (DKP). In the 1970s, both organizations were firm opponents of the autonomous women's movement. Yet in their book titles they claim to present the history of the new women's movement, and not only the viewpoints of socialist women's groups. In her dissertation on the new women's movement Christa Karras, too, writes only about her socialist women's group.

The abovementioned authors of the 1980s and 1990s paint a confusing picture: First they describe how consistently and ideologically correctly socialist women—unlike feminists—developed their strategy for women's emancipation while not neglecting any of the truly important questions facing society. Yet, according to Lottemi Doormann, the feminists remained “politically ineffective” because they were “totally devoid of theory,” although they founded women's centers and limited themselves to “a bit of action” and “spectacular forums on violence”:

The radical feminist groups' estrangement from political realities and their nearly exclusive concentration on the private, individual, personal sphere—this at a time of heightened social crisis, which was fought out not least on the backs of a large segment of their fellow women—that is what I reproach these groups for... The relevant gentlemen received their ... performances with enthusiasm; it was just so convenient to divert attention away from the material and mental misery of millions of women plagued by economic worries.

Now that the reader has reconciled herself to the inevitable failure of the autonomous feminist movement, Doormann enumerates the achievements of the new women's movement: exclusively feminist projects like the magazines EMMA and Courage, the Frauenoffensive publishing company and the women's calendar as well as battered women's shelters, rape crisis hotlines, women's health centers and feminist therapy groups.

The Fear of Not Being Normal

There is another reason for being precise about the history of the movement: Rosemarie Nave-Herz sees the reputation of the women's movement as endangered by the ‘public avowal of homosexuality.’ This leads, “among those who did not know the women's movement from personal experience, to an equation of feminism with lesbianism and thereby to a sweeping labeling and rejection of the new women's movement.” Barbara Sommerhoff, too, complains In this way, segments of the population gained the erroneous impression that feminism was identical to lesbianism. Lesbians shared with their predecessors the mockery that they had already heard 150 years before, that they were too ugly to find a man and were thus homosexual by necessity.

That was the least of autonomous women's worries in those days, whether homosexual or

heterosexual. Only these two authors appear to be stuck in the 1950s; they would be most surprised to learn that lesbians initiated the Berlin Women's Center and all of the women's projects that followed, and that lesbians were in fact the driving force of the autonomous women's movement.

With this book I would like to expand the basis of facts and provide the foundations for locating the movement historically: Who did what when and with what intentions? Where did the actors come from? What motivated them? Meeting minutes, letters and documents from this period as well as many interviews with the protagonists can offer such a foundation. The book title is borrowed from a letter: In 1974 Cillie Rentmeister wrote to me in London, "... and now our Daumier exhibition in Charlottenburg Palace is getting a feminist section too. How fast everything is moving! When I think what things were like just two or three years ago... Berlin, my how you've changed! Berlin is going feminist!"

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