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## ‘Reclaiming the F Word’: A Multilingual Approach to Nineteenth-Century Swedish Feminist Periodicals

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# ‘Reclaiming the F Word’: A Multilingual Approach to Nineteenth-Century Swedish Feminist Periodicals

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The main point of this contribution which I will illustrate with a short overview of my research is: how a multilingual and multicultural approach to nineteenth-century periodicals might enable us to have a positive impact on contemporary history. My approach involves a cross-cultural exploration of the audiences of feminist periodicals and what might be found (or not found) there. Specifically, I analyse the development of Swedish feminism from the transnational exchanges of nineteenth-century periodicals, and speculate about its usefulness in resolving more contemporary disagreements about feminism.

In 2006, Toril Moi commented on the damage caused by ‘feminist bashing women of the 1990s’ and insisted on the need to find ‘new theoretical paradigms’ in feminist theory. Moi summarizes the nightmarish vision of men-hating feminists, and of women transformed into dispassionate domineering mothers. Indeed, as she claims, ‘the result is the situation we see today: *feminism* has been turned into the unspeakable F-word, not just among students, but in the media too’.<sup>2</sup> As Ulla Wikander emphasizes, ‘with time and geographic displacement, the definition [of feminism] has changed and lost in clarity’.<sup>3</sup> Though of course it is important to distinguish which feminism, and which feminist history is being described, Moi’s argument is with a specific turn in feminist theory since the 1990s rather than with the mostly white, middle-class movements of political feminism, rooted initially in the nineteenth century.

Radical, and especially divisive, representations of what constitutes feminism have caused some disquiet. At their core, I argue, are the cultural issues posed by different understandings of feminism as a concept. Feminism is an ideology (like liberalism or socialism), and has been defined in various ways in different languages, cultures, political contexts. For example, while a Swede would embrace feminism as embodying a ‘natural’ claim for gender equality, a French person may shudder at the term as loaded with a specific, perhaps inhospitable, cultural history. I aim to unpack these instinctive reactions

- 1 The ‘gender equality’ page of an official website promoting Sweden, its nature, politics, lifestyle, and values, [Sweden.se](http://Sweden.se), boasts of ‘Reclaiming the F word’ [accessed 11 May 2022].
- 2 Toril Moi, “I Am Not a Feminist, but...”: How Feminism Became the F-Word’, *PMLA* (2006), 1735–41 (p. 1739).
- 3 ‘Med tiden och med geografisk förflyttning kom det att få förändrade och mindre klara definitioner’ (my translation). Ulla Wikander, ‘En utopisk jämlikhet. Internationella kvinnokongresser 1878–1914’, in *Det evigt kvinnliga: En historia om förändring*, ed. by Ulla Wikander and Ulla Manns (Lund: Författarna och Studentlitteratur, 2001), pp. 127–60 (p. 132).

with a historical and multilingual perspective. Hopefully, by understanding the origins and the development of Swedish feminism we can see the concept of gender equality as something which is meaningful, as opposed to normative, and more attainable, given its multicultural origins.

The initial question of my postdoctoral research project funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) is the following: can a multilingual exploration of the late nineteenth-century press unravel the cultural transformations of feminism? Looking back at the history of feminism we may wonder how a minor nineteenth-century power such as Sweden managed to take the lead in matters of gender equality. Britain and France were nineteenth-century leaders of the first women's movements. The term itself was originally used by French socialist Charles Fourier in 1837, but it was not widely adopted until much later. The first international congress for women's rights to take place in Europe was hosted in Paris in 1878: the *Congrès international du droit des femmes*. A women's movement had been initiated a few years before in Britain with the periodical the *English Woman's Journal* (1858–64), a paper 'collectively owned by mid-century feminists'.<sup>4</sup> This venture, according to Teja Varma Pusapati, 'marked the emergence of organized feminism in Britain'.<sup>5</sup> A year after the *English Woman's Journal* appeared, Swedish editors Sophie Adlersparre and Rosalie Olivecrona launched the first Scandinavian woman's journal, *Tidskrift för hemmet* [*Home Review*] (1859–85), whose content was directly inspired by its British precursor. Adlersparre and Olivecrona met the British editors at international conferences and their headquarters in London and shared information via personal exchanges and letters to promote the women's cause in Scandinavian countries.

*Tidskrift för hemmet* (with Adlesparre as sole editor from 1867) was a unique leader in the Nordic market until another generation of women's periodicals started to appear nearly thirty years later. These newcomers promoted different types of feminisms, targeting other readerships. For example, Alma Åkermark's periodical *Framåt* (1886–89) was concerned with the needs and opinions of the working classes, in rough opposition to Adlersparre's 'bourgeois' outlook. The periodical *Idun* (1887–1963) was a more commercial venture addressed to housewives, before it opened to culture and women's rights. From the 1880s to the turn of the next century, the Swedish (and Scandinavian) press hosted a complex debate on morality around the 'woman question', with the problem of prostitution a central issue. Swedish feminism thus emerged in transnational conversation with French and British influences even as it distinguished itself.

My project thus aims to trace the circulation, interpretation, and transformation of feminism(s) in European periodicals. I focus on the early Swedish women's press, but with a transnational perspective. The main challenge of this research is to unravel the complexities of cultural differences. I need to navigate and point to these hurdles as I tumble along in English, French, Swedish, and perhaps German (witnessing the ties of Germany and Sweden in nineteenth-century women's organizations and periodicals). Politicians (especially in Sweden) also construe the term feminism differently, according to their own political colours. My project defines the 'woman question' in the Swedish press as the debate on women's roles and duties in society in relation to an international consensus for the promotion of gender equality. My hypothesis is that early Swedish feminists sought inspiration from prominent European powers, especially France and Britain, to support female emancipation and promote women's participation in the public sphere. By focusing more particularly on the French and British contributions

4 Teja Varma Pusapati, 'Novel Networks: The "Specialité" of the *English Woman's Journal*,' *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 47.4 (2014), 597–612 (p. 598).

5 Ibid.

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to the debates on the 'woman question' over five decades (1858–1908) of the early Swedish feminist press, I aim to show how feminism is a common construction, which was pushed forward in Nordic debates, as Sweden rapidly developed its economic strength.<sup>6</sup> Hopefully, this research, within the framework of multilingual periodical studies, will initiate a new paradigm, which does not point to Sweden as a country that has adopted a different, idealistic, or perhaps suspicious take on feminism. Rather, my multicultural outlook upon the history of the Swedish feminist press invites us to share positive common reflections on feminist theory.

This multilingual approach might also help open a door to more cultural understanding. What I am most looking forward to is an exchange with Swedish, British, and French experts on how we can bridge the gaps between our views on feminism by unravelling the complexities of cultural differences. The transnational, multilingual dialogues among nineteenth-century periodicals require similar dialogues among scholars now, as we pursue clearer understandings of feminism past and present.

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6 Swedish scholars acknowledge that the early promotion of women in the public sphere has been a key component to the country's cultural and economic progress.