



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Feminism and the welfare state: on gender and individualism in The Netherlands

Bussemaker, J.

Citation

Bussemaker, J. (1992). Feminism and the welfare state: on gender and individualism in The Netherlands. *History Of European Ideas*, 15(4-6), 655-661. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3563953>

Version: Publisher's Version
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3563953>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

FEMINISM AND THE WELFARE STATE: ON GENDER AND INDIVIDUALISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

JET BUSSEMAKER *

In 1914 the Dutch Calvinist leading man Abraham Kuyper wrote a pamphlet against the suffrage of women, one of the political topics of that moment. He attacked feminists, by saying that their demands for the vote are embedded in an individualistic view that would destroy national unity.

Kuyper wrote: 'The political case is a general interest of the nation. The one who crushes that authority in the atoms of each private interest, undermines each being of the State, transforms authority into utility, and lowers national order, which is created by God, to an instrument, that serves the seeking of one's own advantage (Kuyper, 1914: 67).

It will be clear that Kuyper did not sympathise with those feminists who pleaded for general suffrage for women. Kuyper saw this feminism as the result of a false individualism which originated in the French Revolution and in the (economic) individualism of J.S. Mill. This 'political feminism' was totally rejected by Kuyper. But Kuyper did sympathise with another conception of feminism, one that was not individualistic and political, but relational and non-political. In his words: 'a non-political Feminism, that pleads for progress in human knowledge, vigour of personality and freedom in position, has to be supported wholeheartedly' (Kuyper, 1914: 25).

EGOISM AND PUBLIC INTEREST

In most of the historical publications about the first-wave of feminism in the Netherlands Kuyper is not regarded as a feminist.¹ It is indeed doubtful whether his aspirations are feminist; his argument for a non-political feminism seems above all a reaction to the feminist movement that already existed and pleaded for suffrage for women. His argument seems to be more dictated by considerations of strategy than of content. It shows how difficult it is to define feminism; is everyone a feminist who uses the word 'feminism', or does feminism refer to a special set of ideas, to a strategy of liberation or to a movement? Do we have to make—and if, how—a distinction between arguments of content, strategy or politics?² Besides these considerations, which I will not explore in extension in this paper, Kuyper also highlights the importance of the relationship between 'feminism', the struggle for its definition and the character of the nation-state.

Kuyper's definition of feminism as non-political is similar to, what Karen Offen

*Department of Political Science, Free University Amsterdam, Koningslaan 31, 1075 AM Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

calls, a relational-feminism. In the same way, Kuypers political feminism is comparable with, what Offen calls, individualist feminism. In the individualist tradition the individual irrespective of gender is posited as the basic unit of society and the emphasis is on abstract concepts of individual human rights and autonomy, while relational feminism features the primacy of a companionate, non-hierarchical, male–female couple as the basic unit, and emphasises women's rights as *women* in relation to men, insisting on women's distinctive contributions for society (Offen, 1988: 135–136).

These distinct ways of thinking can also be traced *within* the women's-movement of first-wave feminism, although the conceptions differ all along: equality versus difference—rationalistic versus ethical—and ultra versus social or evolutionary feminism. The well-known distinction between egoism and public interest, between the individual and national unity returns again and again in debates about the foundations of feminist demands. We have to keep in mind that these distinctions arose often from strategic arguments, in order to distinguish oneself from those opinions one rejected. Let me give one example. In 1907, E.C. Van Dorp, one of the members of the *Bond* for Women's Suffrage (emanated from the *Union* for Women's Suffrage. Although their goals did not differ—both wanted the suffrage—they disputed about the arguments that had to be used), stated that 'evolutionist-feminists' also want to have the suffrage, but that this is demanded in benefit of the public interest. For they want to have 'better conjugal rights, more justice in respect of the unmarried mother and her child, equal education for women, and no hindrance for women to practice any profession, in short: the freedom that is necessary for the perfect development of individual capacities' (Mossink, 1986: 110). Ultra-feminists on the contrary, according to Van Dorp, want something totally different. They insist on economic independence, for unmarried as well as married women and are against warmth and tenderness. Ultra-feminists have—maybe unintentional, but indisputable—the ultimate goal to 'dissolve the family' (Mossink, 1986: 110).

What is of interest in these debates is that they show that the discussion about feminism can only be understood in the broader political context of the beginning of the 20th century. This political context in the Netherlands can be described as a period of transition from a liberal hegemonic state to a confessional and denominational segregated state.³

Towards the twenties the hegemony of the confessionals was established. The dominance of the confessionals (protestants and catholics) was established on the political level by the numerical overweight of confessional parties and confessional governments; the liberals and social-democrats were condemned to permanent opposition. On the cultural level the Netherlands were a very 'christian nation' in which, compared with other West-European countries, Christian ethics were dominant: there was a rather severe sexual morality, motherhood was highly valued and the family as fundamental unity of the state was accepted by nearly everyone (Stuurman, 1983: 102).

From this perspective it was not surprising that relational feminism became dominant in feminist thinking, especially when one of the main demands, the suffrage, was fulfilled in 1919.

THE MODERN WELFARE STATE

The question of relational versus individualist feminism, egoism versus public interest, the individual versus the national state, returns sharply in a period that can be seen as the reverse of the one described above. I mean the period of the 'second wave of feminism', when the welfare state is 'completed', the confessional denominational segregated state definitely has been replaced by a more pluralist state, and Christian ethics lose their dominance. The political context of this period can be described as a struggle between the rests of the confessional segregated state, the ideology of the welfare state, and the intervention of new political movements, especially the women's movement.

My main question is whether the two conceptions of feminism traced in first wave feminism can also be found in the second wave and how these conceptions are related to the politics of the welfare state.

Let's begin by looking more closely to the relation between feminism and the welfare state. At the heart of the welfare state is the system of social insurances and social benefits. These welfare arrangements have been built in the fifties and sixties under governments of mainly catholics and social-democrats. Catholics still had a very pronounced traditional view on sexual relations and the family. Social-democrats had a much less clear view on the family. They pleaded for formal equal rights, but did not have a comprehensive view on issues concerning the family, sexuality and motherhood. This partly explains why the catholic view on the family could rather easily be incorporated in the welfare state. With respect to gender-relations the Dutch welfare state cannot be defined as the result of a compromise between christians, liberals and socialists, which is the common view in social sciences, but seems to be rather a compromise between the christian ideal of the family and the civic-democratic principal of equality before the law (Outshoorn, 1982: 417).

In the fifties some changes in the law were arranged, in order to give women more formal rights, such as the abolishment of the 'action-non-capability' of wives. Measured to the principle of formal equal rights, the emancipation of women seemed to be completed, at least that was the dominant view in Dutch political circles. In general, the relationship between men and women was not one thought of in terms of equality, but comprehended in terms of equal merit (equivalence), which means that men and women had complementary tasks with respect to the public good. The tasks of women are often described in terms of 'motherhood': women would derive a particular civic virtue from motherhood (Akkerman, 1985). Part of the dominant view was that principles of equal rights might in no way threaten the family. Not only the confessional parties, but also the liberal and social-democratic party supported in the late fifties and sixties the family as the smallest and fundamental unity of society. The family was the fundament the welfare state was built upon. In 1959 the social-democrats wrote in their new platform that 'the party acknowledges the fundamental value of matrimony and family for the growth of personality of all members of the family, as well as for society' (Partij-programma 1959, punt 9).

In the sixties, the secularisation decreased the power position of the confessionals, and the rise of social movements were part of radical changes in

the political equilibrium. The women's movement was one of the most important movements that arose in the late sixties.

Where 'first-wave-feminism' often is described—at least in the long run—as social, relational or communal, 'second-wave-feminism' seems to be much more individualistic. Siep Stuurman has stated with regard to the Dutch feminist movement, that both individualist and collectivist ideologies are present, but the core of ideology of 'second-wave-feminism' seems to be the idea of the economical, political and physical right to self-determination (Stuurman, 1985: 206). And Linda Gordon, referring to American and British feminism states that 'we have accomplished more in the sphere of "rights" than in changing social structures' (Gordon, 1980: 280).

Whatever we may think of the consequences of the individualist-feminist conception, and apart from the fact that the Dutch and American histories differ in many important respects, it may be clear that second-wave-feminism is, also in the Netherlands, more individualist than relational.

INDIVIDUALIST FEMINISM AND THE WELFARE STATE

Second-wave-feminism has changed the fundamentals of the welfare state in a radical, but complicated, way. The relation between feminism and the welfare state has always been ambivalent. The welfare state was criticised for the way gender-relations were incorporated in legislation and social facilities on the one hand, but at the same time feminists demanded an extension and improvement of that same state. The right of women to independent social benefits, as well as the right to paid labour, can be seen as an extension of the logic of the welfare state from the family to the individual. But feminists also demanded an extension of the welfare state appealing to the right to self-development. Feminists argued that women must be seen and treated as individuals as such, and not as wives or mothers. On every level—political rights, juridical rights and social relations—second-wave-feminism pleaded for individualism.

These individualist aspects come together in the fundamental critique of the family as the basic unit of society.⁴ The institution of the family seemed to be the clearest example of what feminists did not want. But by criticising the family, feminism sometimes seems to fall into the same trap as those they criticise: the family is seen as a non-problematic, unequivocal unit, that is characterised as 'oppressive'. Feminism never has had problems with defining what is wrong with the situation that exists. Although there have been developed *some* notions of other relationships, for example in connection to 'sisterhood' and 'the personal is political', it appeared to be very hard to give some alternatives for family-life, that would be in reach for a broad range of women (and not only for the well-educated, well-earning ones).

But that does not impede the conclusion that emphasising individualist demands seemed to be the most logical option for second-wave-feminism. It seems as logical as the emphasis on relational thinking was for first-wave-feminism. Individualist feminism was the result of the contradiction of the welfare-state itself: the discourse of individual self-development for everyone on

the one hand, and a stabilisation and ideology of family-life on the other. Feminism was a critique of the confessional ideal of the family, as well as a critique of the 'modern democratic family relations', which were both incorporated in the welfare state.

As relational feminism became more and more dominant in the first wave, individualist feminism seems to have grown even more dominant in the eighties. Feminists still strive for individual rights, which are now formulated as absolute rights. In the political vocabulary, this demand is defined as an 'individualization' of rights (especially social benefits), and has further identified feminism with individualism. It is especially in this context, that other (non-individualist) conceptions of feminism are being developed by people, who wouldn't have defined themselves as feminists in the sixties and seventies. And as was the case at the beginning of the century, the confessionals (now organised as one party of catholics and protestants) are again the ones who pick up the problem and redefine feminism. Contrary to liberals and socialist, confessionals have a framework which enables them to call problems of relationships, emotions, sexuality, public and private arrangements into question. It is precisely this complex of ideas and arrangements that becomes a public problem in the eighties. What began as a primarily social and cultural process in the sixties, has become a political problem in the eighties, linked to the crisis of the welfare state and its conception of national unity. The Dutch confessional party is strongly against any connotation with 'individualism'; individualism is a pejorative. As far as sex-relations are concerned this is apparent in their critique of 'individualistic', even egoistic feminist demands, which set, according to the confessional party, people apart and neglect the essential social character of the person.

In one of the publications of the confessional party on emancipation, the former catholic Member of Parliament, A. Groensmit-van der Kallen criticises different streams of feminism for being too individualistic. As an alternative she wants a new conception of feminism; one that abolishes 'masculinism' and establishes a new cultural area from the point of view of the 'in body and spirit complete human, man and woman equivalent to each other, with a polarity in equilibrium to each other' (Groensmit-van der Kallen, 1982: 26).

Whatever we may think of such a conception of feminism inspired through religion, it would be too simple to define it as anti-feminist or as an effort to undo feminism from its most radical elements. Although there are undeniable conservative tendencies with respect to gender relations in the Dutch confessional party, this quotation is part of an article which brings up a question that is relevant for feminism; the question of feminism as a political ideology, as a set of ideas that are linked to questions about the state and citizenship. It shows us also, in the words of Rosalind Delmar, that feminism does not have the copyright over problems affecting women (Delmar, 1986: 13).

FEMINIST CITIZENSHIP

In conclusion, I would say that it is of main importance for feminism to

consider the relation between the position of women and questions of citizenship, responsibility towards national questions and the nation-state. Citizenship implies any identification with the nation-state, from which the individual derives his rights and through which he accepts his duties. A feminism that does not think about citizenship anymore, could be individualist in the pejorative sense of the world. This would be a feminism that 'proposes the freedom of women as the absence of responsibility for others', to quote Linda Gordon again: 'a deformed individualism that does not defend critical, independent moral norms' (Gordon, 1980: 280). This would really be an egoistic feminism.

But how do we have to think about citizenship, without losing the good aspects of individualism? We shouldn't go back to the fifties, when women owed their position as citizens to a sort of maternal citizenship. We have to recognise the limitations of the concept of individualism; to accept its egoistic forces, as well as its liberating forces.⁵ But we also have to remember that feminism itself has changed the meaning of individualism, for example by focusing on aspects of self-development linked to individualism, instead of focusing on—gender-biased—property as the core of individualism.⁶

Feminism cannot leave the questions of solidarity, responsibility and meaningful relations to others. We must take the needs of people to give shape to relations seriously, instead of neglecting them. If not, feminism would be on the wrong side of the individualistic tradition. But I doubt if we simply can use relational feminism to solve this problem. Karen Offen states that we should start from the framework of relational feminism and incorporate individualist claims into this framework (Offen, 1988: 156). I would choose an option the other way around. If not for arguments of content then for arguments of historical logic, as far as second wave feminism in the Netherlands is concerned. I would plead for the use of productive forces of individualism, but incorporate relational feminism.

If individualist feminism is seen as synonymous with egoism it will not bring us further; if relational feminism becomes synonymous with traditional conceptions of motherhood and family life the same is true. Anyway, neither of them as such can bring forth a framework which enables us to understand and solve some important problems of feminism and the national welfare state.

Jet Bussemaker

Free University Amsterdam

REFERENCES

- Tjitske Akkerman, 'Inleiding: ontzuiling, gezinspolitiek en feminisme in Nederland', pp. 11–37 in Tjitske Akkerman en Siep Stuurman (ed.), *De zondige riviera van het katholicisme. Een lokale studie over feminisme en ontzuiling 1950–1975* (Amsterdam: SUA, 1985).
- Teresa Brennan and Carol Pateman, "'Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth": Women and the Origins of Liberalism', *Political Studies* 27, 2 (1979), 183–200.
- Jet Bussemaker, 'Feminism, de crisis van de verzorgingsstaat en het dilemma van de individualisering', pp. 116–136 in Pim Fortuyn en Siep Stuurman (ed.), *Socialisten in no-nonsense tijd* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1987).

- Rosalind Delmar, 'What is Feminism', pp. 8–33 in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (ed.), *What is Feminism. A reexamination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
- Linda Gordon, 'Het individualisme en de kritiek op het individualisme in de geschiedenis van het feministisch denken', pp. 261–284 in *Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis* (Nijmegen, SUN, 1980).
- Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna and David El Wellbery (ed.), *Reconstructing Individualism. Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford University Press, 1986).
- Ulla Jansz, *Denken over sekse in de eerste* (Amsterdam, Sara/Van Genneep, 1990).
- Abraham Kuyper, *De eerepositie der vrouw* (Kampen, 1914).
- Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1973).
- Marijke Mossink, 'Tweeerlei strooming? "Ethisch" en "rationalistisch" feminisme tijdens de eerste golf in Nederland', *Socialisties-Feministische Tekstan 9* (Baarn: Ambo, 1986).
- Mary Hidgley, 'Sex & Personal Identity. The Western Individualistic Tradition', *Encounter* 62 (June 1984): 50–55.
- Karen Offen, 'Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France', *American Historical Review* 89, 3 (1984): 648–676.
- Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs* 14, 1 (1988): 119–157 [Comments and reply in *Signs* 15, 1 (1988): 195–209].
- Joyce Outshoorn, 'De sociaal-democratie en het vrouwenvraagstuk', *Socialisme en Democratie* 9 (September 1982): 411–423.
- Siep Stuurman, *Verzuiling, kapitalisme en patriërchaat* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1983).
- Siep Stuurman, *De labyrintische staat. Over politiek, ideologie en moderniteit* (Amsterdam: SUA, 1985).
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, Vintage books, 1945 [first published in 1835 en 1840]).

The production and presentation of this paper has been made possible by financial support of the 'Werkgroep Onderzoeks Zwaartepunt Vrouwenstudies' of the University of Amsterdam.

1. Compare the recent dissertation about gender in the first wave of feminism by Jansz (1990). Because her book was published after I had finished this paper, I could not take her findings into consideration in this paper, although it would be of interest.
2. See for an interesting analysis of these questions, especially for the relation between feminism and the women's movement, Delmar (1986). She rejects, I think rightly, the identification of feminism with the women's movement.
3. Denominational segregation is a special Dutch phenomenon. It shortly can be described as a vertical organization of society through lines of religion and politics. In the Netherlands two large confessional 'pillars' existed, the catholic and the protestant. Next to these existed two non-confessional 'pillars', the social-democrat and the liberal (see Stuurman, 1983).
4. It should be noted here that the 'breadwinner-family' in Holland has been extremely dominant.
5. I have no place here to get into discussion about different conceptions of individualism, but it should be recognized that 'individualism' is a very problematic and ambiguous concept. Although people seem to think that they have to be pro or contra individualism in the rhetorics of daily politics, reality is far more complex. See the contributions in distinct issues of *The History of Political Ideas* on the history of the concept of individualism, see Lukes (1973) for an overview and of course the still magnificent work of De Tocqueville (1945).
6. See the several feminist contributions to conceptions of individualism, for example Brennan and Pateman (1979), Midgley (1984) and Heller *et al.* (1986).