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### **Feminist theory and feminist movement in Spain**

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## Feminist theory and feminist movement in Spain<sup>1</sup>

von Elisabeth de Sotelo

### Preface

Feminist theory in Spain has developed very rapidly in the past 30 years. As a result, women's mentalities and their social position have changed due to both specific feminist objectives and a general awareness of social issues. These processes are all the more noteworthy since feminism in Spain does not have deep historical roots. In spite of feminist achievements, a Spanish feminist movement as such still does not exist strongly to date. However, with its swift development, Spanish feminism has caught up with feminist results in other European countries, and in certain issues it has even achieved some remarkable progress. The cornerstones and developments of every feminist approach illustrate the respective social-political contexts and highlight the different problem areas and objectives. Feminist theories and movements can only be understood in terms of an entire society, its particular developments, and the difficulties it faces. These theories are embedded in a process of societal change and restricted by the given political framework, which is to be questioned and overcome, although initially it outlines the scope for action while determining the course to be pursued. Feminist concepts and advances thus reflect the historical, political and cultural specifics of the social structure which has formed. Every feminist approach – even if it has drawn upon the fundamental principles of enlightenment, freedom and equality – is therefore simultaneously the result of a confrontation with the culture- and national-specific characteristics of an existing androcentric world view and with the guidelines of the zeitgeist which govern women's daily lives.

### Feminism in Spain since 1868

Spain caught up with the political developments in Europe in 1868, with its first democratic agenda and the beginnings of the more liberal views. European utopian, social, and republican efforts worked together to modernize the nation and reconstruct the educational system. During that time, women too obtained some individual freedom, and according to the progressive constitution they were granted certain civil rights, such as freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. In 1868, the "Ateneo de Se oras", the first women's cultural center, was established.

A leftist socio-reformative Catholic approach was the reaction to the liberal tendencies. In 1860, the "Asociaci n Cat lica de Se oras" (Catholic Women's Association) was founded, an institution that educated women in accordance with Catholic philosophy and focused on public welfare. Its main objective was to deconstruct the image of women as inferior beings while emphasizing their moral and ethical advantages as wives and mothers. The focus on women's emotional qualities and their unique educational abilities resulted in a feminist approach that became popular in Spain later on as social feminism. At that time some Catholic groups were using the term "feminismo sensato" (sensible feminism).

Another early group of feminist women focused on the anticlerical republican orientation; sometimes they referred to themselves as female freemasons or spiritualists. The first groups appeared between 1856 and 1859 and wrote in the magazine "El Pensil de Iberia" initially as utopians from C diz and later from Catalonia. Their most famous representative was  ngeles L pez de Ayala. Republican papers – "El Progreso" in 1896 and "El Gladiador" in 1906 – published contributions from and about women. In 1879, women's magazines such as "La Luz del Porvenir" and "La Conciencia Libre" were established which discussed suffrage. However, with an increase in Restoration and a growth of Catholic power, independent thought was impeded more and more. The republican women were the pioneers of a social change; they founded schools based on rationalist ideas and attempted to change social conditions while fostering freedom and progress.

With the exception of short time spans during the centuries before and after the foundation of the First Republic in 1873, Spain's strict Catholicism and its isolation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century suppressed a confrontation with international philosophical approaches and hindered the establishment of women's organizations. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, the influence of the Enlightenment was spread by a francophone student (Heinrich Ahrens 1808-1874) of Carl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832), a philosopher almost unknown in Germany. It both added on to already existing liberal



ideas and served as the foundation for a new educational concept based on rationality. This concept had a major impact on the establishment of a free educational institution in 1876: the "Institución Libre de Enseñanza", a center for science and education which did not tolerate any sexual discrimination. The center was founded by a group of professors, among them Francisco Giner de los Ríos. The foundation of this center of free and liberal thinking was a hallmark in Spain's development. Even though in this dimension it was a singular attempt, it helped loosen the inflexible societal structures marked by rigid class distinctions and strict Catholicism, and its consequences can still be felt today.

Nevertheless, Spain remained a nation with rigid class structures and legitimated privileges. Considering the political system, it was so unthinkable to demand women's political participation that even the concept itself seemed strange. At the beginning of the short duration of the First Republic in 1873, liberal activities had been made possible whose effects could still be felt after the downfall of the Republic. However, a republican democratic orientation was then halted along with the emancipation processes.

In contrast to the women's suffrage movement, there were other groups who demanded women's social emancipation. A famous leader of this current was Concepción Arenal (1820-1893) who fought for women's active contribution to public life, but nevertheless emphasized that women's role as wives and mothers ought to be the focus in women's education. Another famous feminist of that time, Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921), lifted her voice in favor of improving women's education and admitting them to higher public positions. This woman of letters came from a progressive family and received her education in Europe. She was one of the first women who had the privilege of lecturing at the Ateneo de Madrid (private society initiating intellectual activities). Her book "La España Moderna" (1890) and the women's book collection "Biblioteca de la Mujer" encouraged many women to publish their writings.

Access to education was available to Spanish women much earlier than it was for German women. This has had an effect that can still be felt today in terms of the presence of women on university campuses. The first regulations of education about women teachers "Escuela Central de Maestras" had already been established in 1857. In 1871 women were allowed to participate in preparatory

courses and enroll as students. Problems arose in terms of the academic titles to be awarded, but in 1888 – the year in which political conflicts peaked as German feminists issued their "yellow brochure" demanding higher public education for women – the universities were opened to women, first in Barcelona and then in Madrid and elsewhere. By 1896 the first women had completed their doctorates. In Spain there was an enormously large schism between illiterate women and those with access to higher education. The problem of illiteracy persisted until the 1960s. At the same time, however, the student body was balanced in terms of representation, more than 20 years before this was the case in Germany.

In Spain it was not until 1918 that a feminist movement existed in the sense of a large number of women who had joined forces as groups and advanced feminist causes, which had been the case in the US and Germany. Although there were several women who dealt with women's issues (working in particular towards better education and more professional opportunities), this bourgeois or socially oriented tendency was as weakly developed as feminist literature was, and neither succeeded in triggering a movement. The degree of organization was strongest among Catholic women, whether in their groups or in congregations. Las Teresianas, who were founded by Pater Pedro Poveda in 1908, dedicated their efforts to education, charitable work, and medical care, and their orientation towards the outside world created a niche of emancipation within the Catholic world. The beginning of the feminist movement dates back to the year 1918, when the "Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Españolas" (ANME) was established. This group introduced a political change, and its members included women from a wide variety of political orientations and differing feminist and philosophical approaches. María Espinosa, the founder of the group, was as much a part of the Catholic reform movement as María de Maeztu or Victoria Kent. Other women were republican free-thinkers who had little to do with the church. The ANME was the first society to call for the political equality of women in civic, penal and economic issues. The voices expressed by the ANME were quite moderate overall and usually did not address the societal structure and hierarchy of gender roles which had been intensified by the Restoration; they confirmed women's purpose as wives and mothers as defined by Catholicism. Dedicated feminists called for a new image of women.



The arguments that traditionally-oriented women cited against suffrage were congruent with the role of women they fostered which reduced women to servants. More progressively oriented women had the justified concern that if the women voted, they would support the conservative parties which had opposed women's suffrage, because their vote would be influenced by the church. Consequently, Victoria Kent as a representative of the Partido Republicano Radical argued against women's suffrage along with Margarita Nelken, who represented the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), as well as María de Maeztu, representative of the Partido Radical Socialista. Clara Campoamor from the Partido Radical was the only one to fight for women's rights including suffrage and spoke vehemently against her comrade in the ANME, based on a principle of equality. This liberal humanist perspective was also supported by women who were not feminists. The house of representatives gave women the right to vote in 1931. Progress and liberalism were advanced in the Second Republic, leading to new laws concerning the family and women's rights as well as women's equality in civil and economic law. María Zambrano, a student of José Ortega y Gasset, was allowed to teach at the Central University of Madrid as well as at the "Instituto Escuela" and the "Residencia de Señoritas". In 1936, the "Mujeres Libres" established themselves as an anarchist society of women and held their first international congress in 1937 in Valencia. Two years later, women were silenced once again when the Franco regime came to power. They were robbed of their integration into society and their international networks, and restricted to their biological functions. The complementary nature of the genders was upheld as an unquestionable theory in almost all circles of society and also given credence by philosophers such as José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955). The regression of women's status and their subjection was absolute.

### **A breakthrough in feminist thought**

Spain's industrial weakness and its strong emphasis on the family as a means of securing social services are both major components of traditional gender roles. It was difficult for women to maintain a feminist orientation during this period. In Isabel García Lorca's circle, to which Lola Pardo (Physician) and Teresa Casares (Philologist) belonged, the "Spanish Association of University Women" was revived in 1953 to foster liberal thinking. The economic upturn of 1960 brought about a change in labor laws which was advantageous to women, and at the same time new consideration was given to the topic of the family

which included perspectives from international literature. María Laffitte, Condesa de Campo Alange, opened the "Seminario de Estudios Sociológicos sobre la Mujer" in 1960, thus paving the way for modern women to follow. Lidia Falcón, who later became one of the most famous ardent feminists, published her book "Los Derechos Laborales de la Mujer" in 1962.

The experiences and economic successes of migrant workers and the effects of tourism both helped counteract Spanish isolation. In spite of this, however, feminist groups had no hopes of being visible in the public forum while Franco was alive. Only a few dared to form groups and sometimes did so under pseudonyms, such as "Amas de Casa", a federation of housewives as well as the Association of the Friends of the United Nations which served as a front for women working on behalf of democracy. The remarkable history of Spain must be kept in mind in order to fully understand the immense change and the explosive burst of new thought that occurred there from the mid-70s onward. This transformation was known as "la movida", and its wide-reaching effects were felt not only in political, economic and legal spheres; they also had an impact on the philosophical orientation as part of a process of self-awareness in terms of individualization and discovering the self.

A discussion about the role of women in society did take place to some extent before the year 1975, as can be seen by the foundation of "El Seminario de Estudios Sociológicos sobre la Mujer" in 1960, or of the "Asociación Española de Mujeres Universitarias" before that in 1953. At the end of the 1960s several underground women's groups formed generally in Madrid and Barcelona and studied Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. However, a breakthrough in feminist thought did not truly occur until December 1975, when the first major feminist event "I Jornadas por la Liberación de la Mujer" was held under semi-legal conditions in Madrid. The fact that the United Nations declared 1975 to be the International Year of Women gave Spanish feminists the inner strength to present themselves publicly for the first time to discuss their marginalization and oppression in society. The success of this forum encouraged feminist scholars in their perspectives and led to a powerful phase in which many new women's societies, initiatives, clubs and autonomous groups were founded.

After 40 years of a dictatorship, early feminism in Spain faced many challenges. Its first steps were made



more complicated and conflict-laden by numerous factors. These included the prevailing influence of the church, a lack of political experience in democratic action, and a poorly established feminist tradition, which in turn meant that women were not very approachable. Further points of contention were the deficient knowledge and inadequate enlightenment even among leftist parties about the androcentric state of society combined with great pressure to take action. When the Socialist party came into power in 1982, women initially responded by turning their attention to creating acknowledged institutions for women such as counseling centers, women's shelters, family planning centers. The main priority, however, was establishing an "Instituto de la Mujer" with a national focus, followed by similar institutions later in most of the 17 autonomies. Its goal was to promote equality and non-sexist education, to initiate international contacts and increase the number of feminist studies while documenting the status quo and the progress. There were two conflicting positions: a) those who wanted to strengthen women's positions by working within political parties towards a joint process of democratization, and b) those who worked independently of parties in autonomous women's groups or their own women's party (Línea Barcelona). At universities, a period of academic reflection took place parallel to this consolidation of the first political, legal and social changes. Most studies on women were conducted by female professors who, in a variety of different fashions, were confronted with the marginalization of women in the early 1970s and 1980s. This mostly involved how women were affected, whether due to the difficulties they had in accepting the feminine integration process or the space they had been granted. As a result, new attention and focus was paid to topics which turned the domestic sphere into the object of intellectual interest as well as topics which examined women's education and access to paid work. In the meantime feminist studies have reached a broad spectrum of positions, theoretical foundations and methodical orientation.

## Endnoten

<sup>1</sup> This contribution is a modified version of the foreword to „New Women of Spain: Social–Political and Philosophical Studies of Feminist Thought“ edited by Elisabeth de Sotelo. LIT Verlag 2005, Transaction Publishers USA and London.

## Abstract

In den letzten 30 Jahren hat sich in Spanien die feministische Theorie in rasanter Form entwickelt und die spanische Gesellschaft in manchen Bereichen Fortschritte hinsichtlich der Gleichstellung erzielt, in Bezug auf einige Errungenschaften sogar andere europäische Länder übertroffen. Das ist umso bemerkenswerter als die Emanzipation von Frauen kaum auf historische Wurzeln zurückgreifen konnte und sich zu keinem Zeitpunkt eine starke Frauenbewegung formiert hatte. Elisabeth de Sotelo gibt einen Überblick über Entwicklungen und Konzeptionen des Feminismus in Spanien seit 1868.

## Zur Person

**Elisabeth de Sotelo**, Prof. Dr., studierte Pädagogik und Psychologie in Köln und an der FU Berlin. Seit 1991 ist sie Professorin für Frauenforschung und Weiterbildung an der Universität Koblenz-Landau, Campus Koblenz, Fachbereich Bildungswissenschaften. Von 1993 bis 1998 leitete sie das von ihr initiierte Koblenzer Frauenstudium. Sie ist Mitglied des Deutschen Akademikerinnenbundes (DAB), der Sektion Frauen und Geschlechterforschung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft (DGfE) und der International Association of Women Philosophers (IAPH). Ihre Arbeitsschwerpunkte umfassen u.a. Gender Studies, Frauenforschung in Europa sowie Bildung und Beratung von Frauen.

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