

## Review Essay; 1915 - 2015, One hundred years of women's rights

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## REVIEW ESSAY

### 1915-2015: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

*Laneth, Pia Fris: 1915 – Da kvinder og tyende blev borgere. Gyldendal, 2015, 349 sider.*

*Pris kr. 349,95*

*Borchorst, Anette & Dahlerup, Drude 2015:*

*Før og efter stemmeretten – køn, demokrati og velfærd, Frydenlund, 2015, 247 sider.*

*Pris kr. 299*

In November 2015 two books were published with almost identical titles both referring to the 100 years anniversary of women's parliamentary rights. But they are far from similar. The first is a popular history book, focusing on persons, events, and class relations, whereas the other is an academic anthology focusing on the more structural change and including a number of researchers, who themselves have carried out the empirical and theoretical work behind the articles.

#### A STORY OF CLASS STRUGGLE

The book *1915 – when women and servants became citizens* by Pia Fris Laneth basically deals very little with the 1915 amendment to the Constitution but rather with the earlier social, cultural, and political showdown after the 1849 adoption of the Constitution and the defeat in 1864, which in 1915 led to the result that all adult women and men over the age of 25 got the right to vote and stand for election.

Before the 1915 law only 14 per cent of the adult population had those rights, since the rights assumed that one was a man over 30 years of age, married, and able to support himself and his household. Thus Pia Fris Laneth argues that the fight prior to 1915 was more of a class than a gender struggle.

On June 5th 1915 a huge procession of women marched to the King to celebrate women's suffrage, although Christian X, as

Queen Margrethe at the anniversary parade in 2015 could recall really rather would have preferred that the ladies went home to make coffee for their husbands.

Pia Fris Laneth recounts in return for the significantly larger star-shaped demonstration held the same day by the Social Democrats with 27 music corps and 20-30,000 participants that later gathered in Søndermarken. At the time, the working class was organized in labor unions, the women particularly in the Women Workers Union, and thus established itself as a class through the Social Democrats with representatives in the political assemblies.

Several chapters of the book are built around the 7 f's, which until then had been deprived of rights: women, criminals, servants, foreigners, poor people, travelers, and fools (*fruentimmere, forbrydere, folkehold, fremmede, fattige, de færende og fjolser*). The book deals particularly with the first f, women (*fruentimmere*), and therefore the struggle for women's rights in the labor market, political rights, and rights to social services.

Already in 1870 the Danish Women's Society was established by the couple Matilde and Fredrik Bajer. The year before Georg Brandes translated John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* into Danish, and this book inspired both the couple Bajer and Brandes himself to start a new debate about women's emancipation. However, the Danish Women's Society, according to Pia Fris Laneth, was partly established to fight the socialist scare that echoed through Europe in connection with the the Paris Commune in 1871.

Accordingly, the Danish Women's Society formulated a more moderate feminist struggle for better schooling and the education of girls and women, while the struggle for political rights was initially downplayed for fear that the Women's Society would interfere in the struggle between the political parties. One of the groups that was most important to the early women's emancipation were the female teachers. Natalie Zahle was a pioneer

woman, who created the first girls' school and later high school. Thus, she paved the way for women to go to university- the first in 1877, Nielsine Nielsen, who became Denmark's first female doctor, and Anna Hude, who later became known and imprisoned for having fired several shots at a male family doctor who had raped her, but she also became Denmark's first female Doctor of Philosophy.

The book also follows the development of the socialist movement and the labor movement, in this context the Gimle program from 1876 that demanded free and equal rights and equal pay for women and men. The socialist leader, Louis Pio, and his mistress Augusta Jørgensen, herself a marked socialist working woman, were some of the founders of this program, and again a prominent political couple played a vivid role in developing socialist feminist politics. Pio himself had noble roots and a close relationship with a Swedish baroness, who had also financed a large part of his political work. After that, Pio was imprisoned and later deported to the US, where he died. Augusta still played an influential role in socialist politics.

It shows well that although the world at that time was highly class divided, there was also space for social mobility, and especially among the enlightened and politically active women and men this mobility was often associated with romance.

Another 'f' that the book deals with are the prostitutes. Prostitution in the time was legal, but only in the brothels controlled by police and doctors. Both Erik Scavenius and the young Stauning were caught visiting prostitutes outside of brothels, in Stauning's case related to a party meeting in Aarhus. Stauning escaped the censure, while the prostitute was sentenced to 90 days of imprisonment.

The Morality Feud (*sædelighedsfejden*) that Brandes was heavily involved in, was a long fight about sexual freedom versus fidelity in marriage, but in reality it was also the women's showdown with married men's

right to go to brothels and then infect their wives and children with the venereal diseases that proliferated at this time. Brandes advocated for sexual freedom whereas Elisabeth Grundtvig, for a period of time the editor of the Danish Women's magazine "Woman and Society", spoke out against sexual encounters outside of marriage, for both women and men.

#### AN ENERGETIC AND GOOD READ

The book is a pleasure to read. It is easy flowing and cheerfully narrated with many details and anecdotes about personal history, which quickens the reading of the historical material.

Pia Fris Laneth's goal with the book has clearly been to put feminism into the class-related and broader historical perspective in which it is often forgotten. It also illustrates, however, how sexuality, in the form of women's romantic relationships and marriages with influential men, helped carry many of the active women forward, and how influential men could freely use prostitutes, while the female prostitutes themselves had little legal power and were seen as dangerous and sexually obsessed.

The 1870s with the violent political and social change was a particularly intense decade. In many ways, one can also see the decade as a parallel to the 1970s, at least regarding the feminist engagement.

In the 1970s, the feminist movement was thus also a showdown with the 'bourgeois' feminism of the previous generations, although the movement itself had the same bourgeois origins. The alliance with the women workers succeeded only partly, and you can ask whether feminism today, often rightly or wrongly accused of being academic and elitist, actually has been able to bridge the gaps between the social classes, or whether a class contradiction that can match the run-up to 1915 continues to exist. One might also wonder whether romantic relationships with influential men today still

play a role in women's success in a still predominantly patriarchal and heteronormative society.

Pia Fris Laneth has managed to put together the whole puzzle with the large gallery of persons, organizations, and events to make ends meet. The result is, in my view, a tale of a heroic feminism that probably appeals to a wide variety of Danish women today, subscribing to a more up-to-date version of the 1970's feminist movement.

The writer does neither consider herself bound by the call of historians to work systematically with sources or chronology, nor with precise credits, which seems a major weakness compared with Borchorst and Dahlerup's book, given the fact that some of the researchers presented in the other book actually has produced some of the analyses and archive work that Fris Laneth's book relies on.

Pia Fris Laneth rather prefers to add a little fiction in order to tell a contingent story. This lack of references may well offend me a little, since the book is based on 30 to 40 years of diligent and academic women's history research and the associated laborious archive and source work. But the book provides an energetic and promising dissemination of the material for a wider audience.

#### WELFARE STATE FEMINISM

The second book, *Before and after the right to vote* by Dahlerup & Borchorst (eds.), which distinguishes itself by being written by researchers, deals with the same subject from both an empirical and theoretical approach. The anthology contains a number of very informative and well written chapters. Each chapter focuses on very interesting and new analyses supporting the overall thesis that the 1915 law did neither provide women with equal representation nor equal rights in relation to political representation, family law, or the labor market before the 1970s or even today.

The internal coherence between the chap-

ters is, however, quite low, although the introductory chapter by the editors intends to form a common thread. It is dealing with the interconnection between the building of the welfare state and the development of women's rights in a number of different policy areas. It thereby also argues for a feminist standpoint connecting feminism in Denmark to the structural development of the welfare state. It could be called welfare state feminism, rather than what it has previously been referred to as – state feminism.

It is far less easy to read than Fris Laneth's book, but it also entails several new insights based on thorough scientific work also outside of the overarching theme of women's rights. For example, Niels Finn Christiansen notes that it was lawful to sterilize women and men for eugenic reasons up to 1968, and that 5779 persons, mostly women, were sterilized in the period 1934-1968.

And Nina Javette Koefoed emphasizes that women in a kind of domino effect first gained the rights to join the church councils, then to the local councils, and finally to parliament. The debate often focused on the "special female competencies (as care givers and educators) as the main reasons for allowing women into parliamentary boards rather than fairness or gender equality. Anette Nielsen and Anette Eklund shows that there was actually more cooperation between right-wing and left-wing feminist politicians than it is suggested by Pia Fris Laneth. Finally, Drude Dahlerup shows how the political parties both at local and national levels acted as gatekeepers only letting few women run for elections and thereby keeping a low quota of women in representative boards. The other main editor, Anette Borchorst, records for the development of the Danish dual-earner family and the distinct use of public daycare for the very young children rather than maternity leave. She argues that this model developed in unanimous agreement between social classes and political parties. I tend to disagree. Especially in the 1970s a lot of second generation feminists arguing for

women's right to attend higher education, being active at the labor market, and giving birth to children entered the very active parent's movement and quite militantly demonstrated and fought to make the municipalities build new daycare institutions. At that time this was regarded quite a revolutionary socialist strategy. Thereby Borchorst seems to me to underestimate the social movement activists that influenced political decisions in many policy fields for at least two decades. In her analysis, political agency tends to stem merely from parliamentary debate and decision making.

There is a certain contradiction between the perspectives of the main editors' more political science-oriented and theoretical perspective on the one hand and the more empirical view of the historians, who contributed to the anthology, on the other. The historians tend to emphasize the agency of particular persons and constellations, whereas the main editors tend to emphasize overall structural and political change.

However, the main editors reject the currently predominant social constructivist claim in gender studies that we are *doing* gender rather than *being* gender. Such a perspective could otherwise have been an interesting way of mediating between the social constructivist claim for a more fluent view of gender performativity and the popular, more biological focus on maternity and women's reproductive and political rights and the linkage between these both then and now.

The weakness of the book is that it fails to include a conclusive summary chapter taking up the threads from the different writers. Seen from the researcher's perspective, such a task is not easy, and the researchers are probably more inclined to dig even further into the details and forgotten events, persons, and incidences than to try to provide an overview or to deconstruct popular views. It is the strength of Fris Laneth's more popular and narrative book that it dares to make conclusions that perhaps later will be proved wrong. On two different levels, both books

contribute very positively to the writing of hundred years of women's political narrative.

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## DOES FAT FIT IN THE DISABILITY CATEGORY?

*Deborah Lupton: FAT. Routledge, London & New York, 2013, 123 pages, price 115 DKK*

Lupton's book *FAT* is an introduction to the critical research field concerning overweight and obesity research. The book is part of the series *little books on big issues*. *FAT* addresses why the fat body has become synonymous with disease and failure in the current society, and also enlightens the issues of the lived life as fat.

### A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR UNDERSTANDING TOPICS OF FAT

Lupton explains, in an accessible language, issues and subjects relating to the common understanding of 'overweight'. In the introduction chapter Lupton starts with a discussion of the use of fat as the preferred and most neutral word among 'overweight', 'obesity', 'thick' and other bodily terms. Chapter two; "Thinking about fat" addresses a sample of different perspectives, on 'overweight', for obesity science and fat research. Lupton's introduction to different approaches embraces a wide range of different perspectives. She starts with the *anti-obesity* perspective where 'overweight' and 'obesity' is considered as an 'epidemic' that must be prevented and reduced. She finishes the series with the Foucault-inspired *critical weight studies/fat studies*, before she accounts for the *fat activism* and the intentions of movements as *fat pride* and *size acceptance*. From this foundation the reader has a solid point for understanding

the topics through out the book. The last four chapters, fall in the following headlines: *Governing fat bodies*, *The Transgressive fat body*, *Being/feeling fat* and *Reframing fat: fat activism and size acceptance politics*. Lupton's accounts for the different research areas draws on existing inquiry, which is made clear by the sufficient amounts of references. Each chapter starts with an accurate header followed by a brief introduction to what questions the chapter answers or which subjects is presented. Due to its headers and introductions, *FAT* is easy to orientate oneself in. This helps it fulfil its purpose as an introductory book, which is also emphasized by the book's short glossary with explanations of (new) notions in the end.

### FOR OR AGAINST INVOLVING FAT IN THE DISABILITY CATEGORY

One of the topics addressed in chapter five "Being *f* feeling fat" is the question of whether fatness can be seen as a disability. Lupton here mentions Coopers (1997) arguments for involving fat in the disability category, to make a proper policy that protects and helps fat people to be taken serious. The argument put forward by Cooper is that there are similarities between the two categories. Both the fat person and the disabled person "tend to be portrayed as object of pity" (p. 78). Fat people as well as disabled people are hindered by the surroundings' "lack of accommodation to their bodily differences." (p. 78). The big difference between the fat and disabled highlighted in *FAT* is that disability is often understood as "cannot help it" (p. 78), however the fat body is recognized as 'self-inflicted'.

In a Danish context, I find it appropriate to draw some parallels to gay and transgender people's struggle to be written out of the area of psychiatry. Here the intersectional categorization has led to further loss of rights. The struggle to get rid of the double layer of categories even seems as a battle that

will not necessary succeed for transgendered people. First, if 'overweight' or fat is considered as a disability, there is a danger that 'overweight' simply integrates into a community, which already has a very little voice in society (Chan and Gillick 2009, p. 242). Second, it can be hard for fat people to get rid of the category if it does not fit.

I will, with all due respect to those who on a daily basis must remain/stay under the terms, argue that 'disability' in connection to the critical fat studies, should be restricted to contribute with theoretical perspectives. The theoretical disability perspectives can help stress how the physicality is structurally limited, recognized as 'deviant' or 'normal' and articulate the loss of rights that it entails. Lupton opens for a future discussion with multiple perspectives on the junctions between the terms, with her final comments in chapter six. Here she suggests based on Shakespeares (2011) approach to disability, that the lived life may be better without 'overweight'. At least she appeals that such considerations must be openly discussed also within feminist and humanist spheres (p. 95).

#### SCIENTIFIC ESSENTIALISM IN THE FAT ACTIVISME

FAT presents in good methodical style why the topic is so dense with relevance and attention grabbing areas. Lupton presents a clear purpose with the book and offer some good explanations and introductions, some being the construction of 'overweight', the theoretically background for the use of single apostrophes and thoughts behind the application of the word *fat*. I felt safely guided through the book due to its transparency and high level of explanation. This avoids a situation, where the topic may seem unreliable and provocative, for the non poststructuralist schooled reader. Lupton hereby achieves to produce highly readable introduction to a new area of inquiry. Finally Lupton manages to debate almost every position presented in the book, so that no reader will

be left with the impression that it is straightforward to do things 'right'. For example, in chapter six in the section "Naturally fat?" she embroil with parts of fat activism's rhetoric. Fat activist Marilyn Wann, state it's not the individual's choice to be fat Wann argues that fat people are not lazy or eat more than other people. The fat body is just a natural variation in the spectra of human body. It is natural to be fat in the same manner as it is natural for to be tall (p. 83). Lupton points out that the rhetoric of this natural-discourse draws on the same scientific essentialism as the orthodox medical perspectives as Wann is up against (p. 84). It could be added that the idea of biological imperative, rarely has been an attractive predicate for others than the dominant part.

The book's readability and level of explanation is suitable for students as well as researchers from different disciplines. This is of great relevance since overweight as topic is not usually filled by trained humanists, but is dominated by medical and healthcare professionals.

In the introductory chapters Lupton manages to account a whole network of directions through which the field is spread out. As a new reader you are here by equipped to read the book from cover to cover or select specific points of impact. The book can be read just as *a shortcut* before embarking on Rothblum and Solovay, *The fat study reader* (2009), or in major search instruments to get more specific information on particular areas.

#### LITERATURE

· Chan, Nathan Kai-Cheong og Gillick, Allison C. (2009): Fatness as a disability: questions of personal and group identity in: *Disability & Society*. Vol. 24/no. 2

*Sidsel Brredder Vinther, Cand. scient. hum.  
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