

ONE MORE FEMINIST MANIFESTO  
OF THE POLITICAL

Meike Schmidt-Gleim  
Mieke Verloo

IWM Working Paper No. 2/2003  
Vienna 2003

---

**IWM Publications**



## **IWM Working Paper No. 2/2003**

© 2003 by the authors

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact Klaus Nellen at IWM, Spittelauer Laende 3, A – 1090 Vienna, Tel. +(431) 31358-360, Fax +(431) 31358-30, e-mail: nellen@iwm.at

*Preferred Citation:* Schmidt-Gleim, Meike and Verloo, Mieke: *One More Feminist Manifesto of the Political*. IWM Working Paper No. 2/2003: Vienna.

---

### **Meike Schmidt-Gleim**

*is a research fellow at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She is currently working in Paris. In 2001 she was a Junior Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. She prepares a dissertation on democracy. – E-mail: msg@t0.or.at*

### **Mieke Verloo**

*works as a lecturer in political science and women's studies at the University of Nijmegen and as a Research Director for the MAGEEQ-project at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. Her work focuses mainly on feminism and on equality policies, more specifically on gender mainstreaming. – E-mail: m.verloo@nsm.kun.nl*

## **One More Feminist Manifesto of the Political**

## **PART I.**

### **FEMINIST THEORY AND THE LOGIC OF THE POLITICAL**

In 2000, a team of young editors from the Dutch feminist journal LOVER claimed that feminism needed a new manifesto. Too silent to remain a promising site for itself, the Old Feminist House needed renovation, they decided, or maybe reconstruction altogether. The team initiated a contest with an award for the best manifesto that was sent in. To everyone's delight, 30 manuscripts were submitted and each of the team members found a favourite piece among these. Expecting a resounding success, they were disappointed when the expert jury finally decided that none of the manuscripts was good enough to be honored by the award.

One more illustration of the sad story of feminism's decline?

Not at all. What was presented as a failure of the manifestos, as a lack of quality is, in fact, a struggle around the definition of what feminism is. Triggered by the controversial turn this project took, many debates were stimulated. Although this is certainly not a happy end, the LOVER editors claim that "feminism is an ongoing investigation" and that it is still alive. They announce that it "consists of individuals who might have nothing in common except shaking rusted positions around boundaries and truths about women and men". Their final call is to let the debates flourish.

Feminism haunts feminism as if a spectre is hidden underneath its surface popping up once in a while and disturbing its the otherwise smooth surface. The spectre pushes feminism into paradoxes, causes traps and disappointment all around. It appears in different guises, cloaked as a lack of quality, as a paradox within feminism, as the missing true feminism or the death of feminism altogether.

The Unawareness of its mechanisms and of its reasons to haunt feminism sets traps (leading to misleading discussions concerning quality) that tend to weaken feminism. To avoid dead-ends in the future, we will try to locate the spectre, find out what it is and give it its well-deserved role within feminism. Let us then bring the spectre to the surface.

#### **THE SPECTRALITY OF THE SPECTRE....**

##### *Feminism and Theory*

How can we possibly get a hold of the spectre? We have initiated an experiment by putting Feminism on a stage where we confront it with other actors to see what happens, hoping the spectre will pop up in one of these encounters.

Starting with feminism and theory, we face the difficulty that our experiment can only help us to find out what feminism is once we know what theory is. But what is called theory is a highly diversified subject matter that one can only define by reducing its complexity.

For the present we will pick two broad categories of theory.

First we choose a concept of theory in the tradition of rationalism, which defines universal laws of history, politics, etcetera. In this tradition, theory establishes an objective discourse depicting the cycle of relations in their unchangeable underlying laws: It tells the truth.

But why would it be interesting at all to come back to this dusty notion of theory? We believe that contrasting this tradition of theory with feminism can still give us a clue about the latter. It can explain precisely what feminism is not: Feminism does not provide us with any kind of universal laws, and it is definitely not an objective discourse.

So what is feminism instead? Feminism is a political movement, which includes a number of different practices. Apart from its current shape and present topics, feminism is always inherently constructing, analyzing, thinking about and struggling with a political problem or, let us call it, a political subject. Whether its preferential interest is the gender bias in society, identity politics or sexism, feminism's primary concern is change. It is a production of knowledge around a political question, around change, along with an analysis of how to achieve change and along with action for change. So generally speaking it is a struggle for change but not at all in a general sense. Its interest in change is always a partial one guided by a particular perspective whether it be the position of problematizing gender-biased societies, boundaries or truths in a state of disagreement with the status quo. Even if the essence of different feminist waves, schools or approaches differs fundamentally, it cannot but remain partial. This also means that feminism does not tell a universal truth but is a partial concern. Can we assume that this partiality points to the political as the foundation of feminism?

Let us, for a moment, assume that this is the case, that the partiality of feminist positions is related to the political. Would this not explain why none of the submitted manifestos seemed to be good enough to be honored? What appeared to be a lack of quality, a disturbing incident in feminist practice would then be due to the partiality of feminist positions. The disagreement on the manifestos would reflect the reality of political struggle, and this would mean that the spectre that is haunting feminism is the political.

### *Feminist Theory*

In creating a new character for our spectacle by joining up feminism and theory, we face a paradox. Feminist theory is a conjunction of antagonistic characters: partiality on the one hand, universality on the other. How to create something of universal validity that takes a partial position towards reality, and therefore towards history and politics, something that forces, from the very beginning, a political perspective on the object one chooses? Inevitably tensions will arise.

Any objections? Yes, of course. What we just presented is an outdated concept of theory which has been contested by many other concepts of theory ever since. The second category of theory we choose for our experiment takes up these critical positions summarized under the three labels of post-modern, post-structuralist and post-marxist theory. All of them deconstructed in one way or another the foundations of the classical objectivity of theory.

The emergence of feminist theory is linked to these critical approaches towards the traditional notion of theory. Only within a context of contesting universal laws could feminist theory possibly have come about as an autonomous discipline of its own. Feminist theory, like its allies (in post-modern, post-structuralist theory...), is not only a challenge for the subjects involved but for theory itself. Theory has to be transformed into a radically new concept. Feminist theory then does not constitute a paradox anymore but a field in which to construct new forms of knowledge, new forms of theory.

The old notion that theory is objective is dusty by now – yes, that is taken for granted. But we would claim that this notion is still relevant – although in a shifted way – because of the context of practicing feminist theory.

For ages the notion of theory as objective played a hegemonic role and hence it still dominates the institutional context. Feminist theory, struggling for institutional acknowledgement and for a status in the system, is therefore compelled to adopt dominant theoretical rules, which are still connected to objectivity and universality. Consequently feminist theory gets caught in an insidious demand that stems from the contradiction of being rooted, on the one hand, in the tradition of a political movement and, on the other hand, in the history of canonized western theory and its institutional mechanisms.

Moreover, it is not only the institutional framework of feminist theory that demands a tribute to this traditional notion of theory, it is the rules of hegemonic struggle in general that require universal claims. Once again feminist theory gets caught in the insidious demand to connect partiality to universality.

### *Theorizing the Political*

Emphasizing the partiality of any feminist discourse cannot solve the paradox either. Neglecting the rules of theory in an institutional framework will lead to a loss of institutional recognition and to a weak position in the struggle for hegemony.

So when we now turn to how feminist theory actually resolves the depicted paradox, one can detect that it more often denies than problematizes any paradox. It thus deals with the dilemma in a one-sided way, engaging in a struggle for universal validity without reflecting on its partial preconditions. This practice, which is intended to strengthen feminism, weakens it in the end.

Theoretically the unawareness of the political results in two unconscious patterns occurring regularly within feminist theories: First there is the expectation of finding a consensus among feminists once one comes up with a solution that would get rid of the gender bias. Secondly, the political position gets masked behind an epistemic object. The effect of both practices is a fixation of feminism on the underlying assumption that there is one true feminism. The result is depoliticization. Contesting positions in feminism that could be a driving force for its development seem only to limit it in this context.

One can depict feminist theory as seen from some assumed distant point – one that of course might never be real – as a struggle for hegemony. Its partial perspective is handled as

universal covering the political dimension under thick layers of a presumably epistemological process. What we need to do is uncover the political dimension in order to make productive what otherwise only inhibits.

We claim that feminist theory can only show its potential when it problematizes and understands the underlying political. The political is inherently connected to feminism and hence plays a role in whatever relation feminism establishes with other objects. Theory is affected by the political once it engages in feminism, and feminist theory is not at all immune to the political. The political is the spectre that haunts feminist theory whenever it tries to escape from it, entering for instance into a connection with theory. Feminism will only stop being haunted if we allow the political to enter onto the stage, to become one of the protagonists.

Theorizing the political allows for a different perspective on the combination of feminism and theory, understanding theory in the role of clarifying the political as the very foundation of feminism. Knowledge about the mechanisms of the political can make the political productive for the feminist movement instead of having to hide it by propagating universal principles. So let us bring the political to the surface.

### *The Political in Feminism*

To clarify what we mean by the rules of hegemonic struggle and the logic of the political, we would now like to turn to some examples of struggle within feminism outside of the theoretical discourse: the struggles around motherhood and around the issue of prostitution. The struggles show similar mechanisms.

In the beginning of the 1980s a German feminist researcher decided to engage in the empowerment of mothers by writing a Mother Manifesto (Muttermanifest) and initiating a net of Mother Centres (Mutterzentren). She was aggressively attacked by the leading German feminist magazine "Emma". Her actions were excluded from further discussion, and the initiative was labeled anti-feminist, as the dominant feminist perspective was to conceive of motherhood as a social constraint, a hindrance for full participation in public life. The later success of these mother centres (inside and outside of Germany and within a UN context) are still kept quite invisible in the feminist mainstream.

The issue of prostitution divides the opinions in a similar excluding way. While liberal strategies make a distinction between forced prostitution that should be abolished and sex work that should be regulated so as to assure good labour conditions for sex-workers, so-called radical feminists advocate a war against prostitution through criminalizing its clients. Within the UN again, the liberal perspectives were represented as the feminist position in the beginning of the 1990s, while at the end of the 1990s all of their representatives were pushed off the stage, and the official feminist position was taken over by the advocates of restriction.

In both cases (and many others), one particular part of the multiplicity of ongoing discussions within feminism is presented as the universal feminist position. Each feminist position claims to be the one and only true Feminism. One might object that this is what politics is all

about, but as long as feminism does not recognize the functioning of these mechanisms, it weakens feminist positions and movements. Exposing this hegemonic logic should be one of the main mandates of feminist theory. Why? Because it hinders feminism to engender new empowering forms and contents that might otherwise clarify existing problems more precisely and produce a free stream of ideas. In addition it has the effect of reducing the movement. If feminism is restricted to only one position at one time, it excludes everything else that is happening within feminism at that time. It therefore makes the movement appear much more limited in its dimensions than it actually is. The exclusion of deviant positions dissolves what could give feminism its drive. Another danger of this exclusionist attitude towards the struggling grounds of feminism is that it makes feminism vulnerable to co-optation by conservative forces as happened in the case of the advocates of criminalizing prostitution.

### DIVING DUMPING DOOMING....

Diving more deeply into some segments of feminist theory that explicitly deal with the political should allow us to clarify where and how the political is disintegrating. Which fragments of the political are grasped? What are the mechanisms concealing the political foundation of feminism in cases that pretend to represent it? Can we see how the fragments could be used to construct a more complete picture?

#### *The Political Agent*

We would like to distinguish roughly between two kinds of relevant theoretical approaches. One approach puts the question of the political agent at the beginning of the feminist programme to change the gender-bias in society. It is the old question of the feminist *we* that drives feminist theory as a supposed solidarity that creates a political agent. What seemed to be simple at the beginning of second wave feminism became a highly complex problem over the years, as the notion that the common experience of repression tied women together was fundamentally contested. Feminists started to struggle with the question of how to imagine and produce solidarity among women if there is neither a general ground of experience nor a common identity, and thus no essential femininity or sisterhood that would connect women to each other. How can one think a political subject if the subject has been convincingly deconstructed? A whole range of beautiful neologisms were designed to provide for different reflections on (the possibilities of) solidarity among women: coalition, seriality, strategic essentialism, affinity, reflexive solidarity, affidamento – to mention only a few of the newly created categories that promised a potential escape from the constructed sameness among women so as to allow them to act as political agents for feminist goals.

While some of these efforts try to find a way out of the trap of essentializing the identity of women, they get trapped in their own question, not contesting whether the question is relevant to the dynamics of the political. In all its forms, the question of defining *we* determines the question of the political. It suggests that it is *the* essential problem to be solved. The political

itself thereby remains unproblematized. Moreover, a further problem with this approach is its assumption that identity comes prior to the political, instead of being an ongoing struggle within the political. In separating the struggle around the question of identity from that which should become the “real” struggle, any assembled identity cannot but lose its dynamic potential.

Butler’s statement that politics and power exist already at the level on which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible, that therefore, “identity” as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement, has not received the attention it deserves. Too often the problem of identity is conceptualized as an epistemological object that can be studied as separate from the political. As Butler puts it: the epistemological model that offers us a pre-given subject or agent is one that refuses to acknowledge that agency is always and only a political prerogative. Instead, we should take the construction of the subject as (part of) the political problematic. The category “woman” should be understood as an open site for ongoing potential contest that is crucial to the feminist struggle.

This implies that even the cyborg – as introduced by Donna Haraway – gets trapped in a dead end. Yes, though still caught in an identity based metaphor, it is indeed an intriguing vision of an alternative beyond gender. But as convincing as her cyborg is as an image beyond boundaries and rules of inclusion and exclusion, it is also a category that moves beyond politics, for the very same reasons that deconstruct the dimension of gender in the first place. Politics is dissolved, because Haraway presents the cyborg as a signifier that contains all possible partial positions: The cyborg absorbs everything no matter what is at stake. Hence there is no potential for further struggle, no need for further struggle, as any line of confrontation along which a struggle could be constituted has lost its ground. Haraway’s attempts to move us beyond gender prove to be only another way of ignoring or expelling the dimension of the political.

### *The Political Realm*

A different approach takes the question of access to the political as its starting point. It assumes that the problem is not that women do not build a force together, but that the conception of the political is connected to the construction of specific bodies that cause the exclusion of women as “others”. This approach often defines the political as spatial or topological. It is depicted as a field, a realm or a space that distinguishes itself from other fields, realms or spaces through a specific set of attributes. The political as a field then tends to be depicted as the realm of the public, of equality or freedom. Along with it come inclusion and exclusion rules. To enter this field subjects have to meet specific requirements, such as the domination of necessities, or autonomy with regard to bodily constraints, or a status of equality – all sorts of requirements that, due to current gender configurations, mainly men fulfill. Agency in this field is seen as requiring a specific set of characteristics that belong to the historically constructed male subject as well: to dominate, to be autonomous of necessity, to have a competi-



tive spirit, or to take the risk of losing one's life in the battlefield. Additionally, the boundaries of the realm of the public have been drawn so as to incorporate men's concerns, whereas women's concerns are seen as part of the private, and hence as non-political.

To summarize, the feminist critics who conceptualize the political as a field are focused on the exclusion of women from this field, and on the exclusion of women's needs in politics. The underlying assumption seems to be that once the construction of the political realm changes or includes a different set of features, women will automatically be part of it. Again, in the efforts to present a different conceptualization that would open up the political field for women and women's concerns, the political is covered up in the assumption that it is possible to outline a set of features that all women have in common. Consequently, a common identity is assumed. This approach furthermore presents representation by women as an unproblematic goal, equalling identity with feminist agency. As we have seen before, where the old identity question rears its ugly head, the spectre haunts us once more.

Even if not all feminist theories that start with the question of "access" accentuate the very same qualities of the realm of politics, they do regard the specific construction of the political sphere as an obstacle for women's entrance, or as an obstacle for taking women's needs into account in politics. In any case, they finally get trapped in the same old question of identity as well. Feminist theory struggles with the problem that whenever it wants to discuss feminist political practice it seems to get trapped in identity questions, which rejects the political in the end.

A move away from the trap of the identity discourse is to interpret conflicts about the boundaries of the political sphere as crucial and constitutive of the political. The boundaries of the political are then seen as a temporary hegemonic configuration that can be contested by struggle at any time.

### *Struggle*

A number of helpful ideas and insights on the political can be found in Nancy Fraser's work. While addressing the question of what happens to feminist political issues if they are discussed in a language of needs – in the final chapters of "Unruly practices" – she also offers a thorough analysis of the political. To us her work matters in particular where she transcends her own question and claims that at the core of a debate on needs one can detect a struggle around interpretations of needs. She shifts her analysis to the processes of struggle instead of clinging to the possible contents of the needs discussion and therefore escapes what we called the identity trap. Mentioning the dimension of struggle leads us in the direction of the political and makes her a thinker of the political.

Unfortunately, however, instead of discussing the consequences of a concept of struggle as the core of the political, Fraser again opts for a normative perspective on these struggles: Can there be a preferable configuration of struggles, a preferable set of rules for struggle, and how is it possible to distinguish better from worse interpretations of needs? In addressing these questions, she seems haunted at first by the old objectivity demands of theory where she ar-

gues that this can be done through the consideration of consequences, comparing alternative distributive outcomes of rival interpretations of needs and their resulting disadvantages. Installing this rule of a non-discursive equality, she does not seem to realize that her question points in the direction of an inevitable next struggle, i.e. the struggle over rival interpretations of outcomes, or of consequences.

The second part of her answer is more promising, because it points in the direction of procedural considerations. In concentrating on procedural considerations, on a dynamic – on struggle – she seems to be able to avoid having to present a conclusive answer. Here her analysis stops too early. Although her focus on procedures implies a focus on the dynamics of struggle, on ongoing processes of exclusion and inclusion of various rival needs discourses, she does not give a theoretical account of the dynamics of struggle and does not seem to dare to invent a new form for struggles. This means that she has to depend on current and already problematic practices of democracy, and that she leaves the institutionalization of struggle to institutions that are insidiously gender-biased.

In later work, where she criticizes actually existing democracy and the pluralist concept of a single democratic public sphere, she introduces the notion of “subaltern counterpublics” as an alternative.

After consulting contemporary feminist theory, it seems that we cannot answer our questions about the political yet, although we have come across interesting ideas for further exploration. We have been led to the concept of struggle as essential for an understanding of the political. More specifically, it has become clear that we have to conceptualize struggle as an ongoing process, and that the form chosen for struggles may provide the means to escape the current gender bias of democracy. But we still do not have an adequate conceptualization of the political itself? So let us ask again: What is the “political”?

## AGONIZING AGORAS....

### *Political Theory*

The claim that the foundation of feminism, what we call the political, should be theorized alludes to the idea that the political is an object that can be depicted in its universal logic. If this is true, this expected universality must be inscribed in theories in such a way that one can find parallel or at least comparable statements on the political in different texts from different backgrounds. So maybe a brief excursion to the work of some classics of political theory can inform us about the political. In our partial selection, after pioneer Niccolo Machiavelli, we chose Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe.

In Machiavelli’s works the political is what is at stake in the enterprise of installing a nation state. It is found in the struggle for this political vision, which is only achieved once one unites the people and the territory. This means that the political agent, the imagined prince, has to be able to deal with all sorts of struggles within society among the *umori* (in which

Machiavelli conceptualizes antagonisms between different classes) and on its edges with other states and societies.

Carl Schmitt's main political agent is the sovereign state. He wrote that the existence of the state is a political existence. The "political" aspect lies in the friend/enemy division that a state has to draw in order to achieve and maintain its sovereignty. Only through a clear decision about what is inside (included) and what is out (excluded), can the state gain an identity. This decision brings with it a risk of going so far as to declare a war. Again the political is connected to struggle, here one that finally leads in the direction of war. Yet for Schmitt, this struggle is reduced to one over the boundaries of the territory of a nation state, as the state is the only actor who can decide over war.

Chantal Mouffe calls antagonisms as such the political. Her interest is to develop a theory of radical democracy. She distinguishes between the two levels of antagonism and agonism, and replaces the vision of the enemy (where she refers to Schmitt) in the framework of the second concept by that of an adversary. What is a distinction between friend and enemy in the image of antagonism, an exclusive opposition that becomes crucial in war, is mediated in its agonistic form. In the case of agonism s/he (this enemy) is understood as an adversary within a shared political language-game. For Mouffe, agonism (and politics in general) becomes our democratic way of representing and relating to the irresolvable, that is to say, the ontological condition of antagonism (what she calls "the political"). Struggle becomes the democratic form of relating to the "war" at the core of society.

So where is the universal logic of the political to be found in these so different conceptualizations? We could focus on their parallels and comparable statements, but the differences seem to be more striking. All these different fields of struggles show little or no similarities. Have we come to the end of our quest empty-handed? Is the political a completely contextual phenomenon that has no universally valid logic at all, is it merely constructed in specific contexts?

### *A Concrete Political Object*

We can see that we did learn something else from our search. Most importantly, it has become clear to which extent a political theory is formed by its object.

In all of the above-mentioned theories the object, the political, is not connected to universal history but to a concrete problem, to the formulation or articulation or expression of a political problem that has relevance at a specific moment and within a specific context. In this sense, theory is a voice for a particular problem. The interests shift from the creation of a nation state over the preservation of its sovereignty finally to the struggle for radical democracy. These different interests are what affect and structure the very conceptualization of the political.

Instead of claiming that there is something like a universal logic of the political, we have to be more precise now, correcting whatever universality might be underlying the principle of the political, it is never to be grasped completely. What the political is, is not discovered in

text but constructed through text and thereby unavoidably connected to language and hence to systems of the symbolic and representation. Furthermore, the conceptualization of the political is embedded in the situated knowledge of a specific moment in history and in the partiality of the position of the author. The gap between the real and the theoretical object on the one hand, and the author's partial interest on the other hand, transforms the object.

Since theory constructs its object rather than that it illustrates reality, for feminists to accept the notion of a logic beyond historical context that is already conceptualized in political theory is to step into a trap. Whatever logic might be the underlying text of history always escapes conceptualization and is inscribed in specific historic developments and dominant power relations. Since all attempts to conceptualize the political are already captured within a hegemonic logic, it is unavoidable that a "patriarchal" logic is deeply inscribed in political theories.

Hence it is also unavoidable to criticize, challenge and contest dominant discourses on the political from a feminist point of view. We will have to choose our own partial feminist object and we will have to construct our own partial theory of the political. A strategic affirmation of our partiality by choosing a concrete political object is our only escape from the trap of "patriarchal" or any other dominant discourses.

## **PART II.**

### **ACCOMMODATING THE GENDER STRUGGLE**

#### *Gender Struggle*

For our feminist approach to the logic of the political, written in 2001, we choose the political object to be the *gender struggle*. Numerous feminist thinkers have drawn our attention to different sites where this particular struggle takes place, though they might not have called it a part of the gender struggle but rather feminism, the women's movement or patriarchy. Catherine MacKinnon analysed the gender bias as constitutive for the state. Carol Pateman concentrated on the unjust specificities of the marriage contract. Monique Wittig made us conscious of the dominance of heterosexuality and the suppression of deviant sexual practices. bell hooks raises questions on the complexity and interrelatedness of sexism with racism, class suppression and other antagonisms.

We could continue listing feminist projects contributing to the examination of the complexity of the gender problematic. Yet this small selection already clearly shows that linking these different sites of feminist problematics through the term gender struggle gives this concept the meaning of multidimensional antagonisms that construct numerous notions of gender and sex in a field of power relations. It is neither to be defined as one clearly delineated antagonism nor as a struggle on specific interpretations of gender but as a proliferation of struggles and sexual differences. It is an overdetermined antagonism embedded in a diverse set of other antagonisms, a struggle on struggles that can even detect an adversary in itself.

#### *Why Struggle?*

We have no ambition to be the Last Feminists. The gender struggle has always been and will always be. The alternative of choosing gender inequality – or any concept that refers to the unjust situation, such as patriarchy or gender configurations – as the object of a feminist theory of the political would inevitably lead us in the direction of defining the just situation, the feminist paradise. Being basically a problem definition the concept of gender inequality for example would force us on a track towards formulating a solution and thus would put an end point to feminism.

Any attempt to find a conclusive answer ignores and finally abandons the political and with it the possibility of change. It denies the absence of a political foundation for feminism, it substantializes feminism and installs one gender configuration that might be better but with that we forever lose the possibility of questioning it. What we need is quite the reverse. We have to start from the assumption of a multitude of feminisms, in which Feminism remains nothing but an empty signifier that can only temporarily be given a specific position and therefore will be the object of an ever-ongoing process of struggle.

But then the notion of struggle is not only essential in relation to the notion of a never-ending process. In order to avoid depoliticization – the fate of another empty signifier, the cyborg, as we described it – struggle relates to the fact that the political not only originates in a multitude of partial positions but in the competition and exclusivity of these positions. This process of struggle cannot be conceived of as a deliberative procedure aimed at finding a consensus but, to the contrary, as a process aimed at domination. Any attempt to reconcile positions is inevitably depoliticizing. Struggles are the very prospect of feminism and we do not want an end to it, not even to gender struggle.

### *Why Not Feminist Struggle?*

On the one hand we do not think that every contribution to the gender struggle is feminist. We do not want to legitimize the indiscriminate use of the label of feminism. Yet establishing normative requirements and rules for feminist action even though it may be seen as part of a political strategy, depoliticizes feminism. Any attempt to present the acceptance of such requirements and rules as final leads to the exclusion of further challenges. Therefore any attempt at pinning down what is feminist and what is not cannot be but substantializing feminism again, and should be avoided within a feminist theory of the political. The feminist position has to be a result of rather than a starting point for struggle.

On the other hand we want to recognize and include rival positions: Our earlier discussed cases of motherhood and prostitution showed how struggles for the appropriation of the label feminist and accompanying attempts at hegemonization are fundamentally political. Post-feminism, judged by many feminists to be a backlash activity, is in this sense very much part of gender struggle as the object of our theory, as are also the anti-feminists (on whoever's definition), though this does not necessarily mean that we regard it as feminism. We do have a position within feminism. But our crucial point here is that feminism is not endangered by a specific content, or by specific opponents but by the end of (possibilities for) struggle. Silence is the ultimate threat.

### *Political Practice*

Now that we have defined the object of a feminist theory of the political we should turn to questions about agency.

Political practice can hardly be conceived of as free from agency around specific subjects; in Machiavelli's work it is the prince, in Schmitt's work the sovereign state, and, as we have seen, in some texts in feminist theory the question of agency leads us into the traps of "identity politics". Hence it comes to no surprise that the question of agency caused most controversy in critical texts on the construction of identity like Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble". Feminists remain unsatisfied with her deconstructive position towards identities because they fear the dissolution of feminist agency. Butler herself of course disagrees, explaining that agency is always implied in what it opposes.

Given the choice of our object – the gender struggle – how can we outline our *political subject*, how can we theorize agency without falling into the traps of identity politics again? We propose to shift the concept of the political agent away from the subject, to the form of the political, and then contextualize political practice in this form. What matters is that we imagine a form of the political that theorizes agency without conceptualizing political subjects as preceding the political.

Maybe another look at Chantal Mouffe can help us here. Her conceptualization as antagonism of ongoing struggles in all sorts of arenas within society and along different lines of confrontation, is related to the conceptualization of another struggle, that represents the first struggles symbolically in a shared-language discourse: agonism. Due to the distinction between antagonism and agonism, the relation to the conflicts within society depicted as antagonism becomes crucial, rather than the struggles as such.

Returning to our object, the gender struggle, we think that the relation between the multiple antagonisms on gender at the core of society (the gender antagonisms in dimensions as diverging as labour, love, law, wealth or war) and the struggles that are actually taking place in the political arena are essential in defining political practice, because the truth of these antagonisms can never fully be grasped or solved. Hence what we are looking for is a kind of representation that is aware to the impossibility of fully recognizing and representing the conflicts mentioned above. Its failure is always already inscribed in the process, and thus ongoing struggles for an eventually but not necessarily better representation are the only way to escape dead ends.

We are in search of a political practice that is not connected to specific identities constructed before the political struggle even started and not connected to any content to be pursued, but a practice that recognizes the political as performative. This political practice can be understood as installing mechanisms of politicization. It designs a form for the political, a form in which the gender struggle receives symbolic representation.

Our question is: how can we think of a representation of the gender struggle? What should be recognized or denied, and by whom?

### *Principesse*

With reference to Machiavelli we would like to introduce a contemporary prince, a new Principe, called *Principesse*. This is, one might object, again an identity based metaphor, but what we want Principesse to be is rather a principle than a prince. Principesse is engendered by virtue of a principle rather than by the virtue of the prince. It is a form that can eventually take the form of subjects but does not do so necessarily. It is rather the form of the political problems at stake than a solution to them in the form of an identification of an agent.

### *Representation*

Principesse follows the principle of giving gender struggle a form of representation, representation understood neither as mirroring the real nor as a certain number of representatives deciding what is feminist and what is not. It is a way of coming to terms with the gender struggle as found at the core of every society. Principesse constructs a shared form for the struggle, a shared political discourse, a form of accommodation of the gender struggle that gives it the highest visibility on the (political) stage.

Principesse is the name of a form or a forum collecting struggles, parallel struggles, nested struggles. In a sense principesse is just another interpretation of reality, an imagined, symbolic form, but a very powerful one, because it allows us to see all fragmented parts of the gender struggle as potentially contributing to principesse. Hence it leads to another structural order, opening up possibilities to ask new questions, to imagine new parts. It is a dispositive that points on the one hand to the materiality of discursive practice itself and on the other hand to its material effects.

*Its principles are the recognition of rival positions in the gender struggle, their legitimization, and the construction or identification of arenas, media or publics through which these rival positions can struggle for the construction of their partial perspectives as well as for their materialization, including struggles over the rules of the struggle, and over the appropriate arenas, media or publics.*

### *Process*

Principesse materializes the ongoing process of politicizing. This makes it a form that is constantly under construction. Because it is not about what is to be put on the agenda but about the process of mise en scene and mise en forme itself, the process of giving the struggle a quasi-representation. Principesse cannot be fixed once and for all but has to remain a constantly contested form. Only this principle can ensure a continuous process of countering the inevitable attempts at hegemonization.

This instability with respect to the form of principesse – the principle of ongoing change and continuous reconstruction – is also a consequence of its underlying universal principle of the recognition of the gender struggle. It is therefore a necessary disposition that it adapts itself to the changing agendas and guises of the gender struggle. What seems to be a paradoxical connection at first is in fact a causal connection: The ongoing recognition of gender struggle can only be conceptualized and guaranteed in an ever-shifting framework, in a transformative form.

### *Institution*

A reference to institutions as a site of imagination for principesse seems to point in the wrong direction because an institution is usually conceived of as a system of rules that build a context of agreement and consensus. We would dare to take a slightly different approach to



institutions. When political theorists complain about the inefficiency of institutions in reconciling opposing parties, we would claim that once one shifts the expectations of an institution towards giving struggles a symbolic representation instead of finding a consensual solution, this lamented inefficiency dissolves. The institution is then seen as a site to stage struggle rather than solving it. Contrary to procedural deliberation, *princesse* does not reduce differences by reconciling them through compromises but articulates them.

What is left and what can be made fruitful in our terms, is the strong ability to survive that institutions usually have. In this sense *Princesse* is about inventing repetitive rules that will always allow recognizing gender struggle by means of an iterative process of transforming its form. *Princesse* as an institution is a form that can never be fully anticipated because it needs to match the never-ending gender struggle. Change is the very condition for giving the gender struggle a symbolic representation.

### *Hegemony*

Are we full of ignorance of the mechanisms of hegemony here? Is our dream of a representation of the gender struggle just one more dream of a site that is impermeable to hegemonising effects? Did we finally just ignore one actor on our stage in order to give the other one the space it deserves? No, hegemony is still at work, and will always be. Striving for hegemony one day was exactly what triggered us to undertake the effort of writing this manifesto. But where is hegemony now? The existence of *princesse* would be contradicted if hegemony were defined as a kind of domination of the signifier that is accepted as natural and cannot be put into question. Once hegemonised, feminism would no longer remain a site of struggle, an empty signifier. *Princesse* as an institution would no longer have a task. So in order to gain Hegemony in society one has to adjust and direct its powerful impetus. The lines of confrontation have to be diversified and specified. And this is exactly what happens within the framework of *princesse*. It distinguishes the struggle about the signifier feminism from the struggle about the position of feminism within society and it treats these struggles as distinct.

The goal of *princesse* is achieving hegemony for the existence of gender struggle, and the necessity to fight for its hegemony. We claim that its major premise is to prevent the hegemonisation of the signifier feminism. Of course there will always be attempts to overrule *princesse* and take over this institution in favour of one particular position, but if *princesse* is well designed these attempts will always be straightforwardly counteracted. We would claim that *princesse* as an institution, through its articulation of opposing positions and its staging of struggles, will enable hegemony of the gender struggle, raising “unwanted sisters” to the status of “necessary sparring partners”, continuously questioning the hegemonising boundaries between self-declared and assigned feminists, non-feminists and anti-feminists. *Princesse* will fill the void of silence that now destroys feminism, preferring productive struggle to unproductive false solidarity. The target of *princesse* remains hegemony, but as an institution it is more precise in choosing its enemy and differentiating between en-

emy and adversary. In a certain way, principesse functions like a filter that chooses the right time and the right space for whatever struggle is put on the agenda.

### *Materialization*

Instead of the obvious question “how can principesse become reality?” we would rather ask the question to what extent it already exists, although probably hidden, weak and maybe even invisible.

Similar to the complexity of the gender struggle, feminism nowadays exists in very diverse and different contexts, forms and modes. The spectrum of practices ranges from a highly institutionalized existence to traditional movement-leftovers from the 1970s or incidental “nouvelle vagues”. It created so-called NGO initiatives, manifests itself in everyday culture and became part of university structures and governments. This fragmented existence shows a high degree of flexibility and an ability to adapt to different contexts.

But what is often lacking is a discourse, forum or stage that encompasses all of these different initiatives and forms of existence. A stage that allows them to operate as contenders, rivals, and honours them for that, invites them to the stage for precisely this reason. Principesse does not neglect conflict within feminism, but makes it productive, and thereby binds the strength of different groups and adversaries together. By claiming hegemony for the gender struggle, and by presenting the broad spectrum of rival positions struggling to define feminism, principesse creates a larger space for feminism and allows it to multiply.

Let’s imagine a nomadic discourse embedded in conferences (like the Women’s World Conference in Beijing), publications (like the Feminist Contentions volume), traditional institutions (like feminist theory faculties) or marches (like on 8 March). It is a discourse created always as a potential space, not restricted to a set of institutions or a specific location. Once in a while it can be identified with specific events, concrete sites like buildings or media but it would not vanish once a site is taken apart.

The task now is to create a relation between these fragments, to stage them as part of the discourse, and to show where principesse is already present.

---

The authors are solely responsible for this text, but they have been inspired by the work of Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, Drucilla Cornell, Hannah Arendt, Donna Haraway, Chantal Mouffe, Iris Young, Mary Dietz, Sophie Watson, Rosemary Pringle, Monique Wittig, Catherine MacKinnon, Carol Pateman, bell hooks, Diotima, Claude Lefort, Nicolo Machiavelli, Carl Schmitt etc.

The authors thank the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna and especially the members of its Gender Studies Group for their support and their active engagement in the discussions from which a first draft of this Manifesto originated: Cornelia Klinger, Jodi Dean, Waltraud Ernst, Kamila Kulik, Abigail Gillmann, Tatiana Zhurzenko, Veronika Wittmann, Miglena Nicholchina, Anita Traninger, Klaus Nellen, Margit Leuthold, Jyoti Mistry etc. Further significant and stimulating comments were generated in discussions at the staff seminar of the Center for Women’s Studies in Nijmegen, and at the Women and Politics seminar in Dubrovnik in 2002. The authors want to thank especially Marcel Wisenbourg for help with English language text editing.