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Iris von Roten as a Feminist: Observations, Interpretations, and Impact of *Frauen im Laufgitter*

Regina Wecker

Introduction

When Iris von Roten published her book *Frauen im Laufgitter. Offene Worte zur Stellung der Frau (Women in the Playpen. Plain Words About the Situation of Women)* in 1958, it caused a scandal. Her analysis of women's present social status and their political and economic situation in Switzerland was repudiated, von Roten and her book were showered with scorn, hatred, and ridicule, and even made the subject of a carnival farce in Basel (Köchli 1992: 101–118). *Frauen im Laufgitter* and its author were called “cold” and soulless, though it was rumored that in many respects the book described Swiss reality as, for instance, in the journal *Die Staatsbürgerin* (1958).

Why did this book and Iris von Roten's demand for equal rights cause so many negative and angry reactions? Reactions, moreover, which were also shared by members of the women's movement? Trying to answer this question, I shall first introduce the book, its contents, and the Swiss situation it describes, then explore its present-day implications, and tentatively define why it is from a feminist point of view still of interest.

The Book and What It Is About

“One can't just go off and write a 564-page book full of bitterness that does nothing but attack the male world. That is simply unacceptable”, the *Basler Nachrichten*, a daily newspaper of the city of Basel, wrote in October 1958. The book, which was accused of doing “nothing but attack the male world,” analyzed the situation of women in Switzerland in five parts:

1. Women's Employment in a Male World.
2. How Women Fare in Love and All That Which Belongs to It.
3. Motherhood – Burden without Dignity.
4. Household-Drudgery – Love's Reward
5. A Folk of Brothers without Sisters.

1. Work: The keen analysis of the situation of women in the workforce starts with the statement that despite all that talk about “modern woman”, who is considered an equal professionally, independent, and successful, reality proves to be quite different: the percentage of gainfully employed women had decreased as compared to the end of the nineteenth century, especially in respect to married women. Women did not conquer new domains in the professional world, and men still defended their wages – she uses the word “Pfründe,” sinecure – against women. The idea, that modern husbands admired

the success of their wives, turned out to be an illusion. Von Roten explored the situation of the 1950s on the basis of statistical and economic studies that had been undertaken in Switzerland and abroad by scholars such as Margarete Gagg, Käthe Biske, and Alva Myrdal. She also surveyed contemporary newspaper articles that dealt with women's issues, described society's expectations of their role, and predicted developments of the future. Describing a variety of women's occupations or, to be more precise, the tedious sameness of the exploitation of the female workforce, she ridiculed the continuity of what she called "Fräuleinberufe," unmarried women's occupations. In her opinion, two main principles determined women's work: first, that men decided what was an adequate occupation for a woman, which actually meant work that they did not consider appropriate for themselves – von Roten calls it "Abfallarbeit," waste work (95) – and, second, that the salary determined whether an occupation was considered women's work. In her view, poorly paid work automatically became women's work. The difference of the nature of work, of position and income did not result from the supposed "natural" difference between men and women and their intellectual capacities, but derived from the social construction of this difference by allocating tedious and unqualified work to the female sector of the labor market and by paying men a higher salary for the same kind of work (111).

Only young women who lived with their family and were able to profit from family housing and the concomitant network had an adequate income that enabled them to save for their dowry. However, a woman's salary did not suffice to lead an independent life. Although already in the pre-industrial economy women's work may not have been highly esteemed, industrialization had worsened their position. Iris von Roten gives three main reasons for this development: first, the lack of political rights; second, the fact that traditional inheritance laws privileged men and, although this was no longer factually the case, the male heir was still considered more important; and third and most important, marriage was considered as an impediment. In the industrial labor market, built on the division of paid labor and unpaid household work, the role of a mother and wife was considered inconsistent with the requirements of the labor market, despite the image of the "modern girl". The latter may have been well educated and was even allowed to get a university degree, but adult married women and especially married mothers were kept away from wage labor. The stereotype of the household as women's traditional and proper sphere, and motherhood as women's actual duty, legitimated their discrimination. Von Roten mentions yet a further reason for women's inferior standing, that is the "fairy tale" (139) of men's intellectual superiority and thus men's "natural role" as breadwinners (174).

Why, after all, von Roten asked, did women – apart from those few "amazons" (195) who fought for independence – accept their situation? Obviously, because of their ambivalent and contradicting role as individuals and as members of the female sex. While as an individual a woman wanted to be economically independent and carry out satisfying and interesting work as an accepted member in the world of labor, as a woman she also wanted to have

children and a fulfilling partnership. For a woman, and only for a woman, to have both seemed to be impossible. The claim of the incompatibility of a woman's "proper role" with the requirements of the labor market made it difficult for women to stand up to discrimination. Such a claim sealed the difference of opportunity between men and women as to position, compensation, and advancement in the world of labor.

It is not that the tasks as such were incompatible, but it was the way society had arranged reproduction that made them incompatible. A way out was only conceivable by a fundamental change in the arrangements that now dominated society. One means would be financial compensation for those who give birth and raise children. To bring about the necessary change, a majority of women would have to be prepared to fight for it (113). The chances were better than they used to be in former times, especially where political and legal equality had been or was to be achieved at least to some degree.

In von Roten's opinion, the fight for equal rights and equal pay in the labor market was absolutely central because depriving women of their occupational opportunities and success in the world of work was neither a minor nor a marginal aspect of discrimination. On the contrary, it was the pivotal point. To keep women away from employment opportunities meant to deny them the "Lebenselixier," life's tonic (139). Iris von Roten viewed the position assigned to women in the world of work as the very basis of most of the other problems. Discrimination in the labor market destroyed women's capacity, potential, energy, and talent, and it also deprived them of their right to self-determination and to freedom of choice.

2. *Love and Sexual Relations*: The second part, the analysis of love, marriage, and sexual relations, started with the remark that in this field the difference was most obvious because it was based on a physiological difference. But astonishingly enough, the author claimed, it was least perceived and accepted. In most other fields the "fairy tale" of fundamental differences between men and women was upheld and supported by pseudo-scientific arguments in order to legitimize economic discrimination and the denial of political rights. The physiological difference she was talking about was the fact that physiologically men do not have to bear the consequence of sexual intercourse, while for women sex was always linked to the chance of becoming pregnant.

Only the development and supply of contraceptives would make a change possible: if women would not have to fear an unwanted pregnancy, their sexual relations might change, their sexual desire grow, and they could, and undoubtedly would, sample the pleasure of their sexuality more freely, within and outside of marriage. "The possibility of contraception loosens male-dominated standardization of female sexual life," reads one of her chapter headings (286). Although von Roten does not deny that marriage has its advantages, she advocates free love and is a fiery opponent of the double moral standard imposed on women by men.

3. *Motherhood*: In the part on motherhood Iris von Roten analyzed both the physiological and the psychosocial side. She identified just a short time

when both coincided, the time of breastfeeding (310). Only then the psychological and the personal relationship formed a unity. The rest of society's understanding of motherhood, motherly love, and duty was a construction formed by legal provisions and male-dominated customs and concepts (310). This view of motherhood and motherly duties as well as the idea that mother and child formed a lifelong unit was a way for men to escape their obligations. But that construction of motherhood did not only form another chain for women, it was also harmful to children and a hindrance to their autonomy, especially if motherhood became the only concern of women in life and, as a result, made them greedy and possessive (381). The then current concepts of motherhood and motherly sacrifice, she claimed, ruined the relationship between mother and child, spoiled children, and turned them into parasites (388).

4. *Housework*: The definition of housework as "socage, forced labor", and the fee for love, "Haushaltfron – der Liebe Lohn," as she put it, on which Part 4 focuses, signals von Roten's understanding of what is wrong with housework: it imposes many duties on women, but does not confer any rights; it is necessary but despised, it will never get women anywhere, and it is not deemed to be labor (412). But there are astonishing class differences: the better the social situation, the less the housewife is involved in housework. The less housework she has to do because she can afford a maid or help, the better is her social situation and the esteem of her position as housewife. But even when she is free of this type of work, she is not released from the nimbus of being a housewife, she becomes the proverbial bird in a gilded cage. Housework is women's destiny, even if the economic situation forces women to do wage labor. She may take it less seriously and slacken the reins – the only way to alleviate her situation – but this will spoil her reputation. There is the constant fear of a household falling into disrepair, becoming filthy, with badly educated children and the threat of a husband who seeks a way out of the sad situation by drinking and going to saloons. Whenever married women's wage labor is discussed, the threat of the loss of all what makes family life agreeable is marshalled against it, and the neglect of the household becomes the basis of all that is wrong with modern society. The doubly burdened housewife is "doppelt geprellt, doubly cheated" (417): she earns less money, because she is considered inferior to a housewife and at the same time reproached of being a bad housewife because she is a worker. Here von Roten takes up the argument of the first part on wage work and shows the vicious circle of society's constructions.

An outsourcing of housework – von Roten sees real chances in the domains of child care, cleaning, cooking – is not accepted and dismissed by the notion that this would impoverish life and level the differences between men and women (449). "Why free woman from housework if that is her destiny", she sums up. The only way out of the dilemma and to liberation is a boycott of products manufactured by those enterprises that pay low salaries and exclude women from career opportunities.

5. *Political rights* The absence of political rights, analyzed in the last part

of the volume, is the “Schulbeispiel der Unterdrückung,” the prime example of the oppression of women, von Roten claims (469). The more male democracy has evolved, the more obvious women’s subjection, their “Untertanenschaft” has become. “Piquant,” she calls the fact that democracy was best in distinguishing between the male and female, and that among all democratic systems, the direct Swiss form was the most distinctive and paradox example (469, 471).

Iris von Roten ridicules the denial of the vote to women and considers attempts of its legitimation in Switzerland as a “salad of pretexts,” as playing always the “same song,” as superstition, imbecility, and as a clumsy way of telling women how mediocre they are (511). The vote is a fundamental human right and no constituency is legitimized to withhold it from anyone. Von Roten also analyzes the low number of women parliamentarians and the small influence women have in those countries where they have the vote like in Germany or Great Britain (541). One reason for the slow advancement of women’s influence or actually its diminution, was that men continued to elect men and that women did not elect women, partly because they did not have a lobby comparable to that of men: there are no women’s parties, no women’s interest groups, no women’s lobbies, she observed, nor do women become members of the existing political parties. Although they may be bubbling over with individual self-confidence, they lacked “self-confidence as to their belonging to the female collective.”

Why did Frauen im Laufgitter Cause a Scandal?

It has obviously much to do with the time when the book was written, that is, with the 1950s. It is worthwhile therefore briefly to consider the development of society during that decade. Historical research has shown that, in respect to gender roles, the year 1945 does not constitute a clear break from what went on before, but that developments that had already begun during the war or even in pre-war time, resurfaced with greater force. Beneath the seeming continuity, social change was nevertheless taking place. Such change was not welcome. That the continuity of familiar habits and the acceptance of social conditions could no longer be taken for granted, disturbed people. Switzerland had managed to keep out of the war and had not suffered from its ravages as had other European countries. And as in most other European nations, but under much better conditions, people wanted to go back to normal. But there were disturbing developments. The struggle for political rights, especially for the right to vote, which had begun in the 1920s with cantonal plebiscites, continued shortly after the war and was, once again, taken up on the federal level by parliamentary initiative. The women’s movement expected to get the right to vote because of women’s immense voluntary work and patriotic commitment during the war. But they were disappointed. In cantonal plebiscites, women’s suffrage was turned down by a vast majority of the exclusively male voters, and on the federal level, the question was simply postponed.

During the war many women had done unpaid voluntary work or taken over men's jobs. Although sent home immediately after the war, the number of women who sought and took up employment rose decisively soon after and continued to do so throughout the fifties. The model of the male breadwinner and the female housewife was again made the norm despite economic growth and increasing numbers of working wives and mothers. This model formed the basis of legislation in the post-war period, especially in regard to laws dealing with pensions and employment as well as concerning the debate on women's suffrage and equal pay for equal work. The gender-specific allocation of roles in general, and of work roles in particular, was justified by reference to woman's nature being close to and "in tune with nature." But discussions challenging such claims had intensified in the context of the debate on the vote and, it seems, impending change had already become feared. The more the transformation of women's daily life in the household, that is, its progressive mechanization by refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners was welcomed, the less the demand for a structural transformation of relations in the context of marriage was willingly considered, correctly feared as a change of the very basis of society. In the Cold War era, furthermore, the demand for social change, especially for gender equality, could be branded and rejected as communist ideology.

This was the general situation and the emotional state of the Swiss people who faced Iris von Roten's strident analysis. Switzerland had not exactly been waiting for such a book. But could the author have anticipated a scandal? Her analysis was well documented, her sources were carefully identified, and her study was undoubtedly of scholarly value. Her claims were not completely new, and even corresponded to official statistical surveys, especially the book's data concerning the economic situation and the discrimination of women in the labor market. The fight for women's political rights had a long tradition in Switzerland, and the discussion in Parliament had at last resulted in a first Federal plebiscite which was taken place shortly after *Frauen im Laufgitter* was published. The question of women's suffrage had always led to heated and emotional discussions in Parliament and in public, while a parliamentary majority had actually accepted it. But the Federal Council, the Swiss government's executive body, had insisted that women's suffrage implied a constitutional change and was therefore subject to plebiscite, that is, to the decision of all male Swiss voters.

Sexual relations and the fact that reproduction and sexual intercourse could and should be separated was not an unheard of idea since Zurich psychiatrist Auguste Forel had published the book *The Sexual Question (La question sexuelle)* in 1905 that went through many editions. Theodoor Hendrik Van de Velde's 1926 book *Het volkomen huwelijk (The Perfect Marriage)* made him an instant international celebrity. The book advocated knowledge and sensuality in erotic life. Published in German as *Die vollkommene Ehe*, the book reached its 42nd printing in 1932, while the English edition *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique* remained the best-known work on the subject for several decades, was reprinted 46 times, and sold well over half a

million copies. The book could also be borrowed from libraries despite the fact that it was on the Catholic index of forbidden books. So why was Iris von Roten's work such an offence? One may identify at least four major reasons:

First, Iris von Roten dealt with all these topics in one book and showed that, and how, they were linked: housework and a mother's love as fetters in respect to women's free choice; bad working conditions in employment; a lack of political rights; housework as an argument for salary-based discrimination; housework and its connotation as a sign of love for husband and children; sex and marriage as power relations; women's supposed smaller intellectual capacities and the way that incapacity was construed; arguments against women's better formal education; and motherhood as a refuge for women. While von Roten's Swiss sources, such as the survey of statistician Käte Biske or the findings of economist Margarete Gagg, a researcher in the Federal Office of Labor, focused on a single topic and just hinted at the overall effects, von Roten explored them all in their interrelatedness. And thus she went beyond what might be considered her field of expertise, the legal situation of women. Physicians and psychiatrists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, August Forel, and Theodoor H. van de Velde had dealt very cautiously with the topic of sex and reproduction, always trying to avoid any semblance to pornography. The reader of the 1950s would not allow a lawyer to write openly and without apologies on so discrete a topic.

Second, Iris von Roten was a lawyer and, given her own family background and university education, a member of a privileged class; and above all, she was the wife of a lawyer who belonged to the aristocracy of the Canton of Valais and was a Member of Parliament representing the Christian People's Party (CVP). Her status, therefore, made her analysis of women's oppression less credible. It was easily rejected as coming from those who had everything, but were never satisfied. Upper-class society disagreed with von Roten's analysis, working-class people viewed it as coming from the wrong side, and people from the lower classes and the Left claimed that she offered wrong solutions. For in the 1950s Social Democrats as well as trade unions considered better wages and social security for everybody matters of prime concern. The idea that "everybody" might be male was not thought of. Thus Iris von Roten was caught between a rock and a hard place.

The women's movement, which one would expect at least to understand and support her ideas, saw her endangering the coming referendum. They may have been more understanding once the referendum was defeated. Political correctness and prudence had led those who wanted to win the referendum to be cautious. They attempted to persuade the male voters of the justice of their demand for women's suffrage, but without ever reproaching them for having it denied for so long and without ever attacking them.

Third, but that was exactly what Iris von Roten did, not only by her arguments, but also by the way she wrote. Her style was witty, sarcastic, ironic, polemic, and sharp. Sentences like the following may serve as examples: "The prerequisites in order to define men as the legitimate candidates for all coveted positions in community life changed in the course of the times. They were

always taken from the domain that enjoyed the most authority at the time” (159). Or: “Why there are no lady cooks in executive positions is pretty obvious, once you look at the entirely un-amusing panorama of female professions” (162). Or: “After copulation the two partners have problems of very different orders of magnitude: she wonders whether she’s going to have a baby, he, at most, where he’s left his bus pass” (162). “You were afraid and actually feared that, along with political equality and the concomitant hope of women’s equality along the whole line, a fly would settle on the pacifier, like a poster of the opponents of women’s suffrage showed quite clearly, once and for all, even for the opposition 100 years ago and in all countries. But basically it’s not a matter of thinking of an infant’s pacifier but of one’s own, that is, of the pacifier of a giant infant who thinks women simply exist as the self-sacrificing providers of an oasis and the spiritual and material comfort of childhood in the midst of a hard life. They are concerned about the well being of that big baby, not actual babies. The giant baby wants its pacifier” (532).

And further: “... without the political equality of the genders, you are worth more as a man than a woman, and you get at their expense more out of worldly life and, thus, want to continue getting more out of it. For whatever is granted to women in the manner of dominance, you yourself are apt to loose, no matter whether it be power, influence, money and other assets, self-confidence, prestige, and convenience. And, of course, you don’t want that. Nobody wishes to disintegrate, loose either power, self-esteem, money, or convenience, only so that women now get more of all that (507–508).” And: “Bearing children is, no doubt, a woman’s talent. She is creative, even if only physically so. Men do not have that ability. It is rather difficult to accept this deficit. It can only be hidden by the illusion of being superior to women in other areas.” (353). Finally: “Pointedly enough, no other form of government is able to illustrate the repression of women in their function as members of the female sex as clearly as the democratic one, if it denies political rights to them.” (469).

Although Iris von Roten enclosed a long and impressive list of references, she did not cite them in what I would call the humble gesture of the scholar who tries to convince by quoting other important authorities. It is the I-gesture of *Frauen im Laufgitter* which adds to the image of a political tract and of the author as a selfish, dogmatic, and narcissistic person.

This vehement, astute, and ardent work was not written in a style people were used to in the Switzerland of the 1950s, and especially not by a woman writer. This was not the kind of book that wanted to win over an audience, and the author was not a humble petitioner. The book was aggressive, it attacked male dominance, it attacked patriarchy, – and men – did feel attacked.



Courtesy of Plakatsammlung der Schule für Gestaltung, Basel

Fourth, there was a further reason for the fierce reaction the book caused. Iris von Roten asserted that women would have to fight if they wanted to change their situation: she spoke of strike, boycott, and fight. The mere idea that women had to fight was abhorred by male readers, even by those sympathetic to the demand of political equality as was Prof. Werner Kägi. It also frightened women who had decided to win over male partners to their cause. Although during the long years of their struggle for political equality the women's movement had been showered with mockery and ridicule, women still believed in the merit of being inconspicuous: if women could only show their achievements, be it by their commitment and suffering during the war or by a display of woman's work such as at the SAFFA exhibition, they would finally win.

Impact

Devastated by the wave of hostile reviews in the media and the reactions in public such as that at the Basel Carnival in 1959, which showed her as a tamer in a man-high and cage-like playpen, with a whip trying to drive elderly men in front of her, von Roten decided not to deal with the situation of women any more. She had expected the book to be a success. It was, as she stated in the introduction, to be the "book I would have liked to have read at 20, but could not find." Iris von Roten had worked for years on the text and was convinced that "Qualität setzt sich durch, quality would pay off," as she said in a 1989 interview. Of course, any author hopes for success or at least acceptance. It made obviously no difference that in her book von Roten had analyzed and described exactly those mechanisms that devalued the efforts and achievements of women and the fact that "quality," if produced by a woman, was not esteemed at all. She was deeply wounded. She took up traveling and in 1960 drove by herself for six months through Turkey. Back in Switzerland, she soon completed an account of her trip, but the manuscript was rejected in 1962 by the well-known publishing house Ullstein and did not appear until 1965 in a severely shortened version. Although disappointed, she continued her travels, visiting Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Sri Lanka, and Brazil.



Courtesy of *D'Studäntin kunnt*, University of Basel

Iris von Roten's book has been called the German-language "missing link" between Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) and Betty Friedan's

The Feminine Mystique (1963). Although the *Second Sex* and *Frauen im Laufgitter* cannot be compared from a literary and philosophic point of view, they may be compared as to their message and their keen analysis of women's position in society. The different reaction to the two books in Switzerland is telling. Unlike the response to de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, *Frauen im Laufgitter* was called cold and soulless, though it was recognized that in many respects it described Swiss reality accurately as did, for example a reviewer in *Die Staatsbürgerin* (1958). One key to the difference is the fact that unlike Beauvoir's work, von Roten's book was viewed as a piece of political writing and as a political program in the context of the debate on women's suffrage. Beauvoir's criticism was accepted precisely because she did not seem to ask freedom from men, as the *Staatsbürgerin* journalist put it. But that was just what Iris von Roten had to do, given the political context of her work. The political constituency was exclusively male and thus, according to the Swiss system of plebiscite, men had either to concede or deny women's suffrage. That is why von Roten demanded political rights from men. And she did it in a very straightforward way.

Thus the Swiss public willingly conceded a type of social criticism to a philosopher from Paris, a metropolis of culture, that was denied the Swiss writer who, after all, was merely a lawyer. Also the way Iris von Roten dressed, gave offence, while Simone de Beauvoir's outfit was considered in a positive light as being merely exotic. When von Roten was walking around by night in Zürich dressed in trousers, she was even arrested by the police. The difference of public opinion concerning de Beauvoir's and von Roten's kind of dress was thus symptomatic on a symbolic level.

The comparison shows that unlike von Roten, de Beauvoir was not considered politically dangerous in Switzerland. From the kind reception that de Beauvoir's book received one may conclude that in the 1950s not even feminists understood the political implications of her analysis. Laure Wyss, a well-known Swiss journalist commented on the attitude of the German-speaking women's movement. On the occasion of the death of Simone de Beauvoir, she observed in the *Wochen-Zeitung* of 16 April 1986, that they had not fully understand the political implications of the *Second Sex* and that in the fifties the book was asking too much even of feminists. A fuller understanding was reserved for the new feminist movement of the seventies, when Simone de Beauvoir's work met with an enthusiastic reception, especially in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

When the women's movement of the 1970s and historians belonging to it "discovered" women's history, Iris von Roten's book was not part of their baggage. The new generation in Germany as well as in Switzerland was far more influenced by Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, which had been translated into German in 1970, or by new research undertaken in the United States. Susanna Woodtli mentions Iris von Roten in her study of the history of the women's movement in Switzerland – perhaps the first book representing the "new" wave of women's history – as proof that underneath all that quiet surface and bourgeois decorum of Swiss society, there was some tremor in the

“underground.” She called *Women in the Playpen* a “bomb,” which was thrown onto the neat Swiss surface, and commented with an irony comparable to Roten’s that “because of the war-experience one still knew how to handle fire-bombs: put a lot of sand on it and shuffle it away quickly. Thus the fire-bomb was deactivated and did not have much effect, for the moment” (182). Woodtli realized that von Roten anticipated many of the ideas of the new women’s movement of the late sixties. If historians younger than Woodtli, who was born in 1920 and may be called a link between those who had fought for the vote and university historians of the new generation, read Iris von Roten’s study, they appreciated the verve and wit of the book and viewed the reaction to the author as an example of the way women were silenced in the late fifties.

Neither Iris von Roten’s insight into the development of historical processes like the French Revolution and its (non-) effect on women’s status, nor her knowledge of Swiss history of the nineteenth century were appreciated. It took some time till Olympe de Gouges was (re-) discovered and until Swiss historians realized how much industrialization, especially the fact that Switzerland was industrialized early, had to do with women’s labor, and that unlike in the United States, women’s employment rate in Switzerland was very high towards the end of the nineteenth century and only dropped afterwards. Nor was it acknowledged that the institution of “Geschlechtsvormundschaft,” the provision that all women had to have a legal guardian, was in some cantons not abolished until the last third of the nineteenth century, nor that the early date of male emancipation in Switzerland and the lack of democracy for women were part and parcel of the very structure of (Swiss) democracy, to mention just a few examples of Iris von Roten’s interpretations. If it was known at all, historians took her book seriously only as an analysis of the fifties and as an ardent demand for emancipation, but not as a source of new interpretations of women’s history in general and Swiss history in particular. One of the reasons may have been her style: Perhaps even university historians had learned that anger and wrath were signs of bad research.

Today most of von Roten’s historical interpretations are accepted, and focused research has been done in the field where she just dropped some sentences. But it took a long time and a considerable amount of historical research and theorizing until her view that the main structural difference between women’s work and men’s work was not the work-content but the salary, would become part of the theory of women’s work. Until the 1980s the devaluation of female work by content, for instance due to its closeness to, and connection with, housework, was still dominant. The concept of the social construction of gender, which is inherent in her analysis of the vicious circle of the devaluation of any work carried out by women as well as in her concept of sexual difference, would only be taken up in the 1980s when the “sex-gender debate” was at its height.

In those debates Iris von Roten’s study was not considered. It seems to be one of the unfortunate discontinuities of women’s history that there is no continuity in the transfer of knowledge. And she herself did not encourage such a transfer, to say the least.

On the political level some of her solutions have been realized – or at least are no longer considered “simply impossible”: Women fought successfully for the vote, women even went on strike, and motherhood insurance was realized after several unsuccessful attempts. Thus today the impact and relevance of her book does not only lie in its farsightedness as to new interpretations of historical developments, in her demands for change, or in her offering solutions for problems. Although one of her demands which she considered most important – equal pay for equal work – is still far away yet, and full equality thus remains a thorny issue.

What is most interesting from today’s understanding of gender theory and its concepts is von Roten’s interpretation of the sexual difference as gender, that is, as a social construct. Yet without revoking its social construction, she struggles at the same time with what she calls the “physiological side” (311). In light of a “new biologism” she discusses and biologizes again the bodily difference between men and women. Her keen understanding of the social side of phenomena such as menstruation, pregnancy, and motherhood is especially impressing.

But what I consider to be most significant is that Iris von Roten seemed to be perfectly aware of what in modern gender theory is being called “intersectionality”. She interpreted women’s situation in the broad contexts of historical development and of the present, and she was well aware that discrimination interacted on multiple levels. Classical models of oppression often fall short of seeing how various aspects interrelate, create a new system of oppression, and reflect the “intersection” of multiple forms of discrimination. In contrast, von Roten’s analysis was a clear-sighted answer to how gender is constructed and to how discrimination operates.

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