

Feminism from a new perspective: the single girl and bachelor phenomena

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Abstract:

In this article we argue that the phenomenon of the single girls can be seen as feminist. The factor of consumption is an important link to other feminist movements, further we try to involve the *Playboy* magazine as a part of the sexual revolution. Hugh Hefner and the single girls claimed the right to enjoy their sexuality further they struggled against patriarchal society. In this paper we will show that against different feminist positions, the *Playboy* magazine in the early 50s initiated the creation of the so-called new bachelor who can be seen as the counterpart of the so-called single girl. Besides, the article links the American bachelor and single girls to the solitary women in Germany. All of them were searching for strategies to disengage themselves from the patriarchal construction of society.

1 The state of being single among women and men is not new. Even 100 years ago, the American and German populations included singles or people who lived alone. Publicly they were associated with mostly negative images. However since the 1930s, several terms – including *the bachelor and the single girl* – emerged in which singles were connoted positively within mainstream discourse (Chudacoff). The emerging playboy of the 1930s belongs to the category of the bachelor, as well – that man who prefers playing and consuming to working and getting married (Kimmel 255). He prefers “consuming” his counterpart, the working, urban young woman, the Single Girl. From a popcultural standpoint, the icons of this phenomenon would be the movie-couple Rock Hudson and Doris Day. Throughout history this phenomenon can be located before the global economic crisis of the 1920s in the shape of the so-called *flapper girls*. After World War II there was a resurgence for the verve of tough women. It was the era of the single girls, who demanded, like Rosalind Russel in *His Girl Friday*, “take me as I am instead of changing me” (Faludi).

2 However, was this single girl phenomenon just a temporary fashion, does it represent movie characters of the post-war era or was it a social movement that we can consider feminist? There is no general definition of what a so-called single girl represents – besides the fact that she lived on her own – as she is defined by heterogeneity. If one takes the socio-scientific state of research into consideration, the scientific community is at odds and three terms can be found to describe the *state of living alone*. According to Bachmann, the terms for being single and living alone seem to exist as semantic metamorphoses which are rarely comprehensible, and that everyone can apply when it comes to the subject of a “disengaged life”. In this essay, the term single will be applied for any form of a solitary life. Even though the more neutral word “single” substituted the terms *Bachelor* and *Spinster* from the 1960s

onwards, the term Bachelor will be used for solitary men, as we want to place the phenomenon of the single-girls as well as the Bachelor in a historical perspective. Further we use the term phenomenon for solitary women within the USA and we will be discussing at least briefly about the German solitary women as a social movement. Sidney Torrows claims that social movements are characterized by people who do not participate in the political and public sphere are now involved in the active shaping of the latter. According to this claim, one could argue that the single girls in Germany after World War II were a social and to some extent feminist movement, whereas one has to speak of the US single girls as a phenomenon since social phenomena are only to be understood within their process-related structural frame, according to the sociologist Norbert Elias. Within these structures the participants form constellations that are within and in relation to society subordinated to a mutual alteration. This way of looking upon single women from a historical perspective is neglected in academic literature so far. Disengaged women, who in a way can be considered to be marginalized in society to date, are a global socio-cultural phenomenon. Their history reaches far into the past. Within historical discourse, these women were confronted with several stereotypes. At the turn of the century it was above all the self-dependent immigrant women in the USA who caused the American women of the Victorian era quite a headache. Using a racist morality, the latter fiercely fought the former. At this point it is crucial to mention that this marginal group possessed the power to constitute an independent community. After World War II, white middle-class women moved into the discourse of an independent and consumption-oriented femininity. Here in the discourse, consumption primarily refers to the consumption of sex.

3 In Germany the situation was a bit different. Here it was the women who supported each other to secure their existence as well as the existence of their relatives within the devastated landscape of the post-war years, all of that completely self-determined and without any men. Within this community, it was possible to live in lesbian relationships for the first time without having to face legal or social repercussions. Hence the women had a responsibility not only for themselves but for their relatives and friends, as well (Schulze and Meyer 30-43). Already during the last years of war, many women moved together into apartment-sharing communities, voluntary or not, and often remained there after the war. Women-households can be seen as a consequence of the war. As a result of living together it became possible for the women to secure their existence and to start the reconstruction. After 1945 it became an urgent necessity for the women help each other and reconstruct the destroyed nation, due to the fact that many men did not return from war or were captured by

the allied forces. At that time there was no distinction between single women and wives, neither conceptually nor socially, – as many lived without a man. They were just referred to as women. Nevertheless discrimination against self-sustaining women existed. In contrast to the USA, it is of interest for the German post-war situation, that a difference was made between the so-called *Trümmerfrauen*, or women of the rubble and the so-called American *sweethearts*. The former were reconstructing Germany through hard work whereas the latter were sustaining their existence through contact with soldiers of the allied forces. Both practices were a reality for everybody during the post-war years, one had to work, one exchanged things, one organized, one celebrated. But there was a distinction between the working *Trümmerfrauen* on the one hand and the consuming *Fräuleins* or *sweethearts* on the other. While within official discourse the former group became the icons of the recovering Germany, it could happen very fast to a *Fräulein* to get denounced by a neighbor, to get attacked or even to get their head shaven as a so-called American prostitute (Bauer).

4 Like her American counterpart, the German women consumed as well as worked. But in contrast to the USA, the destruction of the war led to the opening of structures which lead to a society of independent women. That this society can be understood as a movement as well as a realization and not only as a lifestyle, is shown by the public debates within the print media of the 1940s read by women. Instead of cooking recipes and fashion advice, alternatives to the common family model were openly discussed. For instance, in 1948 the women's magazine *Constanze*, which was later called *Brigitte*, was published for the first time. While *Constanze* was promoting the emancipation of women and the abolition of marriage during the late 1940s, a backlash occurred during the 1950s: traditional values were on the agenda again. The status of being a mother and wife was again the focus of the time. After the collapse of the Nazi regime a strong wave of emancipation took place. This “new” woman considered herself to be innovative and broke away from old role models, in private as well as in public life (Schlaffer). Not until the further process of the post-war years and with the return of men did the situation change and people began discussing the solitary lifestyles of women again. The men who returned saw their social normality threatened – nothing was as it used to be. Where they had had control over their families and wives years ago, they were now confronted with emancipated women who did not want to give up their newly gained freedom. One can see this discrepancy between the genders by the rate of divorce which increased drastically. In 1948, every sixth marriage ended in divorce, in comparison to that it was only every twelfth right after the end of the war. Especially the so-called war marriages were breaking up quickly. Realizing that not only the cities and streets

were completely destroyed but the gender order was destroyed as well seemed to completely humiliate the men in their gender role. Just as there were no women anymore who were conforming to traditional gender roles, the nation of men did not exist after being propagated by the Nazi regime for the last 13 years. Not few men that returned refused to talk about what they experienced in war and insisted on taking their old position as family provider. As they already felt humiliated through the war years and the defeat, they wanted to reconstruct the old rules within the strange and unknown world. The women who had done everything on their own for the last years were now asked to give up their new positions and go back to the kitchen.

5 In public life and in all four sectors the *Überparteiliche Frauenausschüsse* were founded. At first they were a contact-point for the allied forces; they were also responsible for the organization of help for the hunger and housing crises. After 12 years of an autocratic one-party-landscape that had revoked women's right to vote, the whole spectrum of women within the committees was represented, among the women were lawyers, teachers and so on. In the beginning these committees supported the needy and helped them with the absolutely necessary. Later they became politically active. They dealt with the questions concerning the reconstruction. For this reason they founded working teams in different German cities. These teams were concerned with health and nutrition as well as questions of economy, housing and construction. Soon the number of members reached 5000 and represented a serious political movement.

6 The women who participated in these committees were not confronted with the problem of being discriminated against concerning their marriage status. During the post-war years these women had learned to be responsible for themselves and their families, which meant making important decisions without their men. Now the value of support by other women increased. A lot of young solitary women had developed great self-esteem and were no longer tempted by marriage (*Emma*). Due to the lack of men there was no real variety for the women to choose from. Approximately three million men were killed in war. With this figure in mind, one soon spoke of women as being in excess (Schubert and Kuhn), which can be seen as a discriminating moment in history as the term excess already implies an unnecessary amount of women. However one can assume that the women living in these household-communities did not think of themselves as being in excess. This term leads to the men's anxiety, for had it not been them, the former world's heroes and conquerors, who thought of themselves as being useless in this new society of women?

7 The solitary women's movement, which was insulted by the term *being in excess*, can be called a feminist one due to their self-determined living. However the movement was seen as being problematic in a way by other political parties. Hence the bourgeois ideal of marriage was much propagated among the population. German politicians wished to see the women in the kitchen again soon after the balance between the amount of women and men was re-established. Particularly the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) saw families without a male provider as a relic of the dark past whereas traditional families with a male provider functioned as representatives of a better future. Women were discouraged from political activity and the party executives prohibited their actions in the women's committees. While solitary women were accepted, an interest in a return to the old values and old normalcy increased among the population. To date the fact that the women accepted their old roles quickly and without protesting is still a phenomenon which is not understood by women's historiography.

8 The negative connotation of being single in Germany from the 1950s onwards has its counterpart in the American anti-communist containment politics, in which above all the nuclear family, with the father as provider and the mother as the household manager, and its sexual morality should be secured. Nevertheless the picture of the consuming and not preserving woman asserted itself. One of the representatives of this change is the journalist and later editor-in-chief of the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, Helen Brown. Her book *Sex and the Single Girl* represented a guidebook for the lives of many women. In the book Brown draws attention to the old-fashioned beliefs regarding the perception of women. By depicting the Single Girl as sexually active, attractive, admirable and able, within private as well as public sphere, Brown provoked a scandal in American society (Cargan 200-208). Even though the book was not seen as a feminist one, it is in our opinion much more radical than one of the classic feminist books, *The Feminine Mystique*, which was published one year later and written by Betty Friedan. Brown's call for a self-determined, sexually aggressive and fulfilled life with changing partners can be interpreted from a present-day view at least as feminist as Friedan's book about "the problem that has no name". In contrast to Friedan, Brown postulated a fulfilled sexual and career-orientated life with a lover even after marriage.

9 Equivalent to the Single Girl phenomenon, one of the most important magazines for men emerged in 1953: *Playboy*. Since the release of the first US issue in December 1953, the magazine has had a high male readership, but at the same time it was rejected vehemently by the majority of the population. In fact Hugh Hefner was initially seen as a part of a masculine rebellion against conformity (Cuordileone). This rebellion was connected with the early

stages of the sexual revolution. The propagated adultery was combined with articles on African-American music, literary extracts from the Decameron as well as contemporary works and left-orientated political debates (Hefner). The vehement response that followed can be positioned within the *Playboy's* historical context in the Cold War. The magazine opposed *the return to morality* propagated by the government. Particularly the Single Girl was preferred to a wife or in the words of Barbara Ehrenreich "Playboys loved women and hated wives" (Ehrenreich). The magazine represented an attack on the rigid, American post-war era dominated by sexual-, social-, political and gender-norms. It transformed the traditional American husband and father into a Playboy (Preciado 57). Now, a counterculture emerged for the first time and was completely new in its way for the USA, as there was no kind of Boheme or Beat-Generation yet (Preciado 18). During the global economic crisis, the image of the consuming instead of working man had taken a back seat, but after the end of World War II it emerged all the more.

10 From a feminist point of view, the Bachelor, as well as the Single Girl can be understood as a destabilization of normative gender relations. Depicted in historiography as a crisis of masculinity, it rather represented an adjustment as well as a struggle for new concepts and forms femininity and masculinity. The magazine initiated a re-organisation of sexual – and gender codes, so that one can identify two models of masculinity for the 1950s – one the one hand the figure of the charming playboy, here we think of James Dean for instance, and the figure of the "hypermasculine man" on the other hand (Kimmel). The *Playboy* stands for a constructed masculinity that was a result of a series of image - and information technologies (Preciado 31), and it opposed a naturalistic image of manhood. The fact that the stereotypical white, white-collar middle-class husband did not conform to either of the two models only increased the pressure on men. This opposition was favored by the new economic conditions of the post war era, which let the original body image of man become more and more a memory. The *Playboy* tries to define the turning to the interior space of the private life as a "process of masculization of the home and not just as a feminization of the urban bachelor" (Preciado 30). Through the re-distribution of traditional spaces, which were attributive to the feminine and the masculine, a breaking of normative society constructions could take place. Within these counter-spaces, which can be defined as heterotopic, the moral codes are invalidated. In the case of the single girls, bachelors and playboys, this restructuring of normative codes can be found at the margins of society. However the phenomena of the single girls and bachelor managed to come out of the margins into the middle of society.

11 Through the emerging comfort and the possibility of individual consumerism, the masculine body changed. Now consumerism meant a new way of identity construction and offered a way to shift hegemonic codes of society. From the 1960s and 70s onwards, self-gratification within the new bachelor subculture was brought into focus. The emotional as well as material satisfaction had its roots in the anxiety and insecurity due to the political climate, the economy and the thread of a nuclear catastrophe (Andrew 38). Thanks to the so-called sexual revolution, which harshly criticized the bourgeois forms of living, books like Brown's appeared to be very old fashioned and magazines like the *Playboy* were defined as hostile against women. In fact the way women were depicted changed in the magazine towards the well-known and sexist bunnies. Furthermore one can see this change in the transformation of the journalistic articles. Now, the reader will not find literary abstracts or articles with a political message, but more and more depictions of playmates and pin-up girls. While the reader was supposed to get the impression of a voyeuristic gaze into the private and interior of the neighborhood at the beginning of the 1950s, through the depiction of lightly dressed ladies in a domestic environment, the depiction of playmates and pin-ups was meant to function only as entertainment and satisfaction of the masculine reader. The depiction of women was intended to protect the bachelor from being called insinuations of homosexuality by his environment. However it is remarkable, that particularly these images were taken and constructed not through a male gaze but by a woman, the photographer Bunny Yeager.

12 To conclude, one can see the point of intersection between single girls and bachelors or playboys in a historical perspective. Both sides rejected the patriarchal-constructed society and developed a counter-model for their own identity construction. This counter-model of both sides is similar in their main features. Both groups defined themselves with the means of consumerism, as they consumed sex and material goods. The motivation of the single-girls as well as bachelors had its foundation in the becoming of subjects in their own history and the counteracting of old patriarchal structures of society.

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