Flapper Girls – Feminism and Consumer Society in the 1920s

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Abstract:
Flapper Girls were young women in the years after the First World War who acted explicitly as apolitical individuals. First and foremost, one associates a certain style of fashion with women during the twenties: the bob, rouge on the cheeks, powder on the knees, and short skirts. This is the typical flapper-like behavior: smoking in public, driving in cars, dancing the Charleston or the Shimmy, excessive consumption of alcohol in times of prohibition, nightly celebrations in jazz clubs and at petting parties, where men and women had premarital sexual experiences. These women's hedonism is highly marked by consumption: consumption of mass industrial products, consumption of mass culture and mass media, consumption of urban nightlife, consumption of sexuality – 1920s consumer society in Germany as well as in the United States received a noticeable boost. The phenomenon of the Flapper and its image in the public sphere will be taken into consideration in regards to its connection to consumer culture with its various facets. In particular the question will be discussed to what extent the Flapper Girl phenomenon has feminist potential.

1 The Jazz-Age, the *roaring twenties* in the USA, the golden twenties (*Goldene Zwanziger*) in the Weimar Republic were characterized by economic prosperity, cultural blossoming and many social changes: the foundation of the Weimar Republic 1919 granted the right to vote to both men and women and hence granted the possibility of political participation to women; in the USA, women were granted suffrage in 1920. Nearly every schoolbook deals in this context with the presence and the phenomenon of the *New Woman* during the decade following the First World War. According to her representation in the media, the *New Woman* is the embodiment of cultural, social and technical progress: besides the newly gained right to political participation, women increasingly had the opportunity to find their way into employment; technical home appliances facilitated the 'modern' housewife's daily routine with the hope that she would have more leisure time and liberty. It is always that one image of the woman of the 1920s, being more self-confident, more independent and more emancipated, that is transported from then until today. These images of course are to be considered critically. In a more realistic view, women's suffrage appears not as successful as it should have been: the political groups and parties that emerged in most instances from the suffrage movement did not overcome the disjunctive lines of class and race. Therefore, it is not possible to distinguish one kind of women's politics in that era (Dumenil 99-111). Furthermore, in 1920, only one-third of the women entitled to vote actually did go voting (cf. Dumenil 107; Boyer Sagert 14). Whether this is a high or a low percentage could be disputed.

2 Young women in the years after the First World War who acted explicitly as apolitical individuals are, for instance, the so-called *Flapper Girls*. First and foremost one associates a certain style of fashion with women during the twenties: the bob, rouge on the cheeks, powder on the knees, short skirts and 'objectively' cut clothing (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) (Kessemeier 32). Primarily contemporary celebrities like Olive Thomas, who acted the leading role of Genevieve King in Alan Crosland's movie *The Flapper* (1920), is along with other film stars like Louise Brooks or Colleen Moore not only a role model in reference to the aesthetic appearance but also to a whole lifestyle (Boyer Sagert 5). In this context it is equally necessary to mention the couple F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, who personified the spirit of hedonism of the Roaring Twenties in the public sphere like nobody else (Boyer Sagert 23-33). Especially Fitzgerald's texts like "Flappers and Philosophers" (1921) or "Bernice Bobs her Hair" (1920) are literary evidences for the obviously typical flapper-like behavior: smoking in public, driving in cars, dancing the Charleston or the Shimmy, excessive consumption of alcohol in times of prohibition, nightly celebrations in jazz clubs and at petting parties, where men and women had premarital sexual experiences [1]. These women's hedonism is highly marked by consumption: consumption of mass industrial products, consumption of mass culture and mass media, consumption of urban nightlife, consumption of sexuality – 1920s consumer society in Germany as well as in the United States received a noticeable boost. The impact of the flourishing economic circumstances on the phenomenon of the *Flapper Girl* can be seen in its ending when the global economic crisis began in October 1929, as well as in the political measures within the German labor market after 1933, and the reforming measures of the New Deal in the USA between 1933 and 1939 – these deep incisions in consumer culture and society put the end to the public appearance of the *Flapper* and to the phenomenon itself. [2] In the following, the phenomenon *Flapper* and its image in the public sphere will be examined in regard to its connection to consumer culture with its various facets. In particular the question will be discussed to what extent the *Flapper Girl* phenomenon has feminist potential.

3 The *Flappers'* contemporary German counterpart is the so-called *Gretchen*, *Girl* or *Garçonne* (Frame 21-58). This typification comes along with a certain hierarchic order by questioning each attitude to and function for the progress-oriented society: the virgin pigtailed *Gretchen* merely is an obstacle, the *Girl* of American origin is utterly primitive, and the *Garçonne* has that kind of virile spirit of progress, but she runs the risk of becoming too inconvenient (Frame 21f). This pattern seems absurd of course, the more so as this should apply to all European women. Yet, this leads to the essence of the medical and eugenic

discourse of the Weimar era. Lynne Frame points out precisely in what way the *New Woman* of the time and all her types of appearances have been analyzed and reviewed by a large number of popular-scientists and health professionals, foremost gynecologists among these, considering the degree of femaleness of their appearance and behavior: “die Angst, daß mit dem langen Haar und der Beschränkung auf Heim und Herd auch die Weiblichkeit selbst verschwinde oder sich zumindest zurückgezogen habe und unter dem jungenhaften Äußeren und dem freizügigen Benehmen der sogenannten Neuen Frau immer schwerer zu erkennen sei” (Frame 25). The consequences of this biological valuation procedure are quite easy to comprehend. The less ‘feminine’ a woman’s appearance is, the less ‘marriageable’ she is considered to be. She might be a great danger to a pontential husband – he might end up unhappy in this marriage. In case of an unhappy marriage, the following is at stake: “die geistige und körperliche Gesundheit nicht nur des Individuums, sondern auch der Gesellschaft” (Frame 28). On the one hand the phenomenon *Flapper Girl* or *Garçonne* appearing as an androgynous woman, in a superficial view, is a phenomenon of temporary fashion, on the other hand the *Flapper* is within the bio political discourse of the time as a proper threat of the ‘racial hygiene’ and for the entire society. The short hair, the objectively cut clothes that leads the attention from the ‘feminine curves’ to the legs, the sportive and slim body – all these outward attributes are not only a hype of fashion; it is the expression of a blurring of gender roles. The contemporary gynecologists diagnosed that as *intersexuality*, a high percentage of assumed male characteristics in a woman (Frame 28). The criticism of the *Flapper Girl* was aimed beyond the condemnable trend. In 1922, when Hedda Hoyt published her article “Long Skirts Mean That the Saucy, Little Bobbed Head Must Go” in the Daily Democrat-Tribune, she did not only affront some kind of girls’ look:

> In accordance with the evolution of dress, flappers are destined to be relegated [sic] to the junk heab of forgotten pasts. The little knee-length skirts and saucy hats are doomed to rest in the garret with the hoop skirts and bonnets of other days. The same bobbed head-dress is to receive the same fate of the spit curls of yester-year. The household cook is to fall their heir to the low-heeled sandals. (quoted in Boyer Sagert 212)

The lecture of these explicit lines reveals that Hoyt, who is obviously interested in fashion, wishes the young women’s fashion to go back to the type of the *Gibson Girl*. This type of female fashion existed since the end of the 19th century and marked a certain kind of a *new* woman; she was chic, fancy and glamorous. The desired comeback of the *Gibson Girl* after the First World War was not to come (Boyer Sagert 1ff). The question of class is crucial in this context. Indeed, *Gibson* as well as *Flapper Girls* were the embodiment of the self-confident ‘modern’ woman. Yet, the *Gibson Girl* represented this with her elegance in the *upper class*, whereas the *Flapper Girl’s* image was *white* and *middle class*. To what extent the *Flapper* was actually only a *white middle class* woman is questionable and will be discussed later.

4 It is no wonder that Hedda Hoyt saw the culmination of the ‘non-female’ and therefore the height of moral and social evil in the length of a woman’s skirt. She went on to say: "And the culprit who wished all of this on us is-the long skirt. There is no use arguing about it, the long skirt is coming back" [3] Clothing, fashion, make-up and hairstyles were a ubiquitous issue in the public discussion and this is celebrated in detail. Ellen Welles Page opens her article “A Flappers Appeal to Parents”, published December 6, 1922 in the Outlook, by describing elaborately and extensively her outward appearance:

> If one judges my appearance, I suppose I am a flapper. I am within the age limit. I wear bobbed hair, the badge of flapperhood. (And, on, what a comfort it is!) I powder my nose. I wear fringed skirts and bright colored sweaters, and scarfs, and waists with Peter Pan collars, and low-heeled “finale hopper” shoes. (Welles Page 607)

It is remarkable that Ellen Welles Page writes about her style of clothing, her make-up and her hair before she says anything else. Again, it is obvious at this point that fashion is one of numerous emblems for the mass culture and industrial mass production in the twenties. The access to fashion was not only permitted to the upper classes. The textile industry’s mass production grants lower prices for fashion. [4] According to this the first definition of the type operates strongly by applying the requirements in fashion. Not until later did the author provide information about her behavior and activities: "I adore to dance. I spend a large amount of time in automobiles. I attend hops, and proms, and ball-games, and crew races, and other affairs at men’s colleges" (Welles Page 607). Again at this point, the dependency on mass production and mass culture that marks a *Flapper’s* lifestyle is evident. Car-driving in the USA became increasingly popular after 1919. In that year alone, 6,8 million cars were on the streets, and ten years later, that number had reached 122 million (Boyer Sagert 3). This can also be seen as a symptom of economic and industrial mass production. The commitment to dancing can also be seen as a hint to the character of social changes, too: urbanity. In 1920 in the United States, the percentage of inhabitants in urban areas was higher than the ones in rural areas (54,3 million versus 51,4 million) (Boyer Sagert 3). It was the big city that held the possibilities of dancing in bars and nightclubs. This example shows that all attributes defining the *Flapper Girl* depended on material consumerism. It seems only fair in this list of flapper attributes if Ellen Welles Page admits in her text that she was not following some of the contemporary trends of the time:

> I don't use rouge, or lipstick or pluck my eyebrows. I don't smoke (I've tried it, but I don't like it), or drink, or tell "peppy stories". I don't pet. And, most unpardonable infringement of all the rules and regulations of Flapperdom, I haven't a line. (Welles Page 607)

These lines seem almost apologetic; the author is virtually embarrassed that she stated at the beginning she might be a Flapper Girl. However, Lynne's explanations show that this typification by ascribing certain outward and inward attributes is an inherent part of the bio political discourse of the time. Conversely, this practice offered the possibility of orientation and self-regulation for women: "Gleichzeitig waren die Frauen selbst deutlich auf der Suche nach Vorbildern und Maßstäben, mit deren Hilfe sie ihre eigene Stellung – und ihre Möglichkeiten – in der Gesellschaft beurteilen konnten. […] Indem Typologien Frauen mit neuen Identifikationsmustern versorgten, erlegten sie ihrem Verhalten doch auch gewisse Restriktionen auf." [5]Ellen Welles Page is a manifest example for the USA, for what Frame states for Weimar Germany. Her different degrees of flapperdom that she brings up a little bit heavy-handedly fit in this "Klassifizierungsmanie, diesen 'Furor des Rasterns'" (Frame 22):

> But then –there are many degrees of flapper. There is the semi-flapper; the flapper; the superflapper. Each of these three main general divisions has its degrees of variation. I might possibly be placed somewhere in the middle of the first class. (Welles Page 607)

Besides the act of self-regulation, at this point, the interpretation for her own identification is obvious. It is remarkable that she classifies herself somewhere in the range of the *semi-flapper*, which appears obviously not as offensive and scandalous as the *superflapper*. Apparently, she wishes to clarify in the first place that she is not dangerous for the society. That is eventually in line with her concern that she points out in the following. Instead of searching the confrontation with those who criticized Flapper Girls like Hedda Hoyt, she asks for understanding. She recognized in this affair a part of the generation gap and often stresses the otherness of this "Younger Generation" and the "older generation" (Welles Page 607). In this respect, she tries to end her article in a conciliatory way:

> Oh, parents, parents everywhere, point to us the ideals of truly glorious and upright living! Believe in us, that we may learn to believe in ourselves, in humanity, in God! Be the living examples of our teachings, that you may inspire us with hope and courage, understanding and truth, love and faith. […] Is it too much to ask? (Ibid.)

As conciliatory and obviously well behaved Ellen Welles Page appears at this point, she does not fail to stress on the seriousness and – even this – on the intellectual requirement and character of *flapperdom*:

> It requires an enormous amount of cleverness and energy to keep going the proper pace. It requires self- knowledge and self-analysis. We must know our capabilities and limitations. We must be constantly on the alert. Attainment of flapperhood is a big and serious.

Again, here she brings up the necessity of self-knowledge and self-analysis, which seemed to be a valid and important topic for women after the 'Copernican turn' brought about by Freud, and which concerns in this respect, of course, one's sexuality.

5 The seriousness of *undertaking flapperhood*, that Ellen Welles Page emphasized, is evident considering the economic circumstances of 16-to-29-year-old women. In the United States as well as in Weimar Germany after the First World War, women's employment rose significantly. First and foremost, women worked in white-collar occupations such as secretaries or saleswomen. Saleswomen, for example, were considered to be more distinguished than industrial workers. They had to take care of their outward appearance and had to deal with customers from the upper classes when they worked in retail sales. They were deemed to have "größere Identifikations- und Mobilitätschancen" (Frevert 517). Fashion and cosmetics were at the same time commercial calculation to increase the profit in sales. Thus, the research mainly points out the exploitative situation of women's employment in the 1920s: repeating mechanic and other directed works, requiring lesser qualifications, and offering a lower salary of 10 to 25% in comparison to men, and shorter professional life. It is plain that women began to have increasingly better chances to gain employment, but it is also pointed out that opportunities for economic and social success were rare (Frevert 512ff). Due to the low salaries, unmarried women often were bound to their parental home in spite of being employed. While stating this disadvantage and discrimination, women's role as consumers at that time also must be seen. They had their own money and they decided how to spend it. Thus, they were not only underprivileged objects, they were in the same way acting and consuming subjects. This, of course, took place in the public sphere that could also be seen in the media: *Flapper Girls* often appear often appeared on magazine covers or in advertising.

6 Moreover, it has to be stated that women's limited economic independence were also limited temporally:

> Die unübersehbare Tatsache der weiblichen Angestellten bildet den Boden, auf dem sich die Vermutungen und Anschauungen über das standardisierte, unromantische

> Girl erheben. Die Statistik spricht eine deutliche Sprache: Mitte der zwanziger Jahre gibt es fast 1,5 Millionen angestellte Frauen – Verkäuferinnen, Stenotypistinnen, Sekretärinnen –, 1907 war es nur ein Drittel davon. Die überwiegende Mehrheit der weiblichen Angestellten ist jünger als 25 Jahre, über 90 % ledig. […] Wenigstens gibt es einen geringen Freiraum zur Selbstdarstellung, zumindest ein kleiner Schritt in die Öffentlichkeit ist getan; zudem öffnet sich dank des wenn auch knappen eigenen Gehalts für die ledige Angestellte eine Zeit lang ein begrenztes Experimentierfeld (und ein größerer Phantasieraum), bevor sie Ende zwanzig als Ehefrau in die Küche zurückkehrt. (Hecken 155ff)

Hecken brings up the term ‘begrenztes Experimentierfeld’ which leads directly to the feminist moment of being a *Flapper Girl* in the 1920s. The economic independence in the described period of time was the warrantor for young women to act as consumers. They defined themselves through consumerism, and thus assigned themselves to one particular type of woman by expressing it in fashion, hairstyling, cosmetics and sexuality. The feminist moment is the fact that for a certain time women escaped within this bio political discourse from the label ‘marriageable’ as long as their economical situation allowed them to finance this lifestyle. It is from there that the category of desire that can be applied in this case: desire for personal, individual art of shaping one’s life and also sexual liberty. Exactly this *drive*, to use the Freudian expression, would be oppressed within marriage, which had to be entered for social and economical reasons. The view on the glamorous image of the *Flapper Girls* in the media obscured and obscures the view on this part of *flapperdom*. Maybe this is what Ellen Welles Page meant by the necessary cleverness and the by the "big and serious undertaking". Consumerism and the consumer society, based on capitalism, acted and functioned as a vehicle for the *Flapper’s* self-reliance, the emancipation, at least as long as a economically necessary marriage could be postponed. The ‘birth of pop culture’ in the Twenties – which can be considered as an image of mass production, mass consumerism and foremost mass media – functioned as a stage for the *Flapper Girl* in the public sphere, and at the same time in a reciprocal way was the substructure for a medical and eugenic discourse, as shown, where the different types of the *New Woman* were enrolled.

7 Young working class women, as indicated, were often white-collar-employees, but nevertheless they struggled to earn a living (Peiss 335). One possibility to keep up the *flapper* lifestyle was the so-called *treating*: it was the habit, that in bars or clubs – in most cases – men invited women for drinks or the cover fee and so on. Kathy Peiss portrays this practice in her short but very significant study concerning working-class sexuality in New York between 1880 and 1920 (Peiss 330-340). In bars, clubs, cabarets and other places that allowed any premarital sexual approaches like flirting or *kissing-games*,[1] it was in some circles custom

that women have been willingly invited to dance, for drinks, for entrances up to jewelry and clothing. In some way as ‘return-service’, women granted any kind of erotic or sexual interaction from flirting to sexual intercourse (Peiss 333). The chosen term ‘return-service’ requires a short explanation, because the practice of *treating* could easily be mistaken for prostitution. In the discourse of the time, this was heavily contradicted and negated by the women. The line to prostitution was rather drawn by the working class women, who considered themselves to be respectable women. Their most punchy argument was that they absolutely do not take money for any sexual interaction. The fact that *treating* was a quite prevalent custom and possibility to keep up the lifestyle that was marked by some sort of hedonism and free sexuality which was a fundamental part of many women’s lifestyles, Kathy Peiss described it as following:

> Within this range, there existed a subculture of women who fully bought into the system of treating and sexual exchange, by trading sexual favors of varying degrees for gifts, treats and a good time. These women were known in underworld slang as “charity girls”, a term that differentiated them from prostitutes because they did not accept money in their sexual encounters with men. (Peiss 333)

These meetings of course took place in urban centers like New York. For example, the district of Harlem held quite an attraction also for white middle-class people. They often had the racist impression that African Americans would have a more frank exposure to sexuality. The carriers of amusement societies and clubs considered themselves lucky with this kind of ‘tourism’, given all the paying customers. The visitors had the impression that they were in an exotic milieu and, thus, in Harlem, one could behave against all social conventions. This also meant a rising homosexual community. Many women took advantage of the opportunity to practice homosexual experiences. Making such new experiences and testing oneself – this came to the fore rather than labeling oneself as homo- or heterosexual (Faderman 156ff).

8 As seen, in the working-class, young people had these more free and aperture conventions, which of course can be seen as “cultural and personal revolt against the conventionality of the American middle class” (Kay Trimberger 132). The fact that *Flapper Girls* from the middle class acquired these conventions brought the phenomenon *Flapper* Girl into the public perception, where the image of the *Flapper* was white and from the middle class. On the contrary, the real phenomenon was white as well as black, from the middle class as well as from the working class. The effect was, as shown, that within the contemporary bio political discourse, women who claimed to belong to *flapperhood* escaped in some way from male influence. Their boyish look, their athleticism made them on the one hand unable to be married, and on the other hand they stood for a glorified type of the *New Woman* in the

1920’s. The economical freedom they took in this time was not enduring, but thus they had the possibility to decide on their own how to live – at least for a certain time and without being bound to men. This is – without claiming *Flapper Girls* a feminist movement – the feminist potential within the phenomenon *Flapper Girl*.

Author's Note:

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