

A Motherly Society: Scandinavian Feminism and a Culture of Sexual Equality in the Works of Ellen Key, Elin Wägner, and Alva Myrdal

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The mother is the most precious possessions of the nation, so precious that society advances its highest well-being when it protects the functions of the mother.—Ellen Key

If women, at the bottom of their being, have constant qualities, hidden under a surface of adaptation, now is when they are needed. The highest authority among people used to be the mother's authority. That is lost.—Elin Wägner

The risk is great that society will proceed so slowly in solving these problems of woman's existence that new and even more desperate crises may invade the whole field of women, family, and population.—Alva Myrdal

Why is motherhood not acknowledged as a subject position in constituting gendered identities? Why do we not see maternity as an interlocking structure of oppression as we do with race and class and include it in our gendered analysis of oppression and resistance?—Andrea O'Reilly

Introduction

As a key polemic figure in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Ellen Key (1849-1926) established the concept of “collective motherliness” (“*samhällsmoderlighet*”) and extended the meaning of motherhood from a biological category defined by the birthing of a child to a female societal force, thus bringing forth (or giving birth to) a new and better society. A few decades later, Swedish author and activist Elin Wägner (1882-1949) developed a theory of matriarchy in her pivotal work *Alarm Clock* (1941), and that same year, Swedish sociologist and politician Alva Myrdal (1902-1986) proposed government policies that would promote the welfare of mothers and their children in her book *Nation and Family: The Swedish Experiment in Democratic Family and Population Policy* (1941).

These three Swedish feminists—Ellen Key, Elin Wägner, and Alva Myrdal—influenced the cultural landscape of Sweden in the late-nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth century, and helped create a foundation for the Swedish welfare state and its women and family friendly policies. Although their ideas often overlapped thematically, they sometimes had conflicting ideas about women's roles in society and their roles as mothers. My aim, however, is to show how their work, despite these differences, contributed to the Scandinavian culture of sexual equality in general and to a culture of respect for motherhood (and by extension parenthood) in particular. In addition, I aim to elucidate the lasting relevance of their work as well as the guidance it offers for a path towards a better Scandinavia and a better world. This article is part of my ongoing book project on Scandinavian feminism. It is therefore open to constant revision, rethinking, and rediscovery of the impact of Key, Wägner, and Myrdal.

Ellen Key and “Collective Motherliness”

Ellen Key was born into an upper-middle-class family on 11 December 1849 at Sundsholm mansion in the Swedish province of Småland. Her father, Emil Key, was a local politician, a landowner, and the founder of the Swedish Agrarian Party. Educated at home by her mother and a foreign governess, Ellen grew up reading Camilla Collett and Henrik Ibsen, both Scandinavian writers whose work tried to improve social equality and gender relations. Key’s mother, Sophie Posse Key, came from an aristocratic family and often disagreed with the political views of her husband. Thus, Ellen was exposed early on to her parents’ disagreements, and as a result, she became an analytical thinker and a prolific writer. Her earliest notable work, the pamphlet “On Freedom of Speech and Publishing” (1889) addressed questions on individualism and freedom of speech (Lengborn). A few years later, Key turned her attention to women’s position in society and published “Misused Female Power” (1896). This essay (originally a lecture) created massive public debate and even outrage in the Swedish women’s movement. In the essay, Key argues that women, in their quest for equality, had misplaced their innermost feminine being to the detriment of themselves and society as a whole. Provoking heated debate and anger among her fellow suffragists, Key argued that the women’s movement had lost sight of the peculiar spiritual, emotional, and physical reality that pertained to women. A few years later, in her groundbreaking and internationally acclaimed book *The Century of the Child* (1901), Key claims that children need to be educated by their mothers—the real leaders and creators of a better world (Arnberg). Professing that motherhood was “the most perfect realization of human potential that the species had reached” (Taylor 2), Key “called the mother-child bond the purest of all human relationships and [defined] motherhood [as] ‘the most perfect human condition, where happiness consists in giving and giving is the greatest happiness’” (qtd. in Taylor 187). In her works, Key addresses women on both a national and international scale, and she engages with women as mothers within the working classes as well as the middle and upper classes.

Influenced by contemporary thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and his idea of the will to power, Key asserted that the desire for achievement and self-determination was the fundamental driving force of human existence; they defined and legitimized each individual’s right to self-development.² Key firmly believed that women’s will to power (or maybe more correctly will to become) was different from that of men. According to her, women’s peculiar ability for love, synthesis, and devotion made them invaluable in the process of building a better society. Criticized for her seemingly essentialist approach, Key maintained that society would not be changed for the better by a women’s movement that fought for women’s rights to behave and be like men.³

As Claudia Lindén points out in her article on Ellen Key's motherliness and its relation to Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas, Key viewed women as the new superior beings—the *Übermensch* of the twentieth century. Nietzsche called for the new human being, and Key heard him more clearly than many others. As a result, she built an entire feminist theory in which woman as the collective mother had become the new superior human being for the new times (Lindén 48). Highlighting the concept of motherliness in Ellen Key's writing, Lindén points out that Key's concept of motherliness transcends the narrow confines of the essentialist-constructivist dichotomy (48). Inspired by Nietzsche's deconstruction of the body-soul dichotomy (in Christianity as well as in the rationalist-empiricist tradition), Key formulated an argument for understanding motherliness, rather than motherhood, as the apex of personal fulfillment and cultural empowerment for women. In Key's writing, collective motherliness becomes the perfect metaphor for the self-actualization that was necessary not only for women's personal fulfillment but for the fulfillment of society as a whole. Challenging such enlightenment thinkers as Rousseau and Descartes—and their ideas about the mutual exclusivity of nature and culture, body and soul, emotion and reason, women and men, etc.—Key (and Nietzsche) understood nature as inevitably integrated and intertwined with culture. Lindén points out that Key uses Nietzsche's thoughts on women, motherhood, and pregnancy (also denoting the fertility and fruition of the ideas of the philosopher/writer) and infuses them with cultural significance for women and, by implication, for society in general.⁴ Motherliness, for Key, is not confined to biological motherhood. Instead, it is an expression of the peculiarity (*egendomlighet*) of women—a peculiarity that will be lost if engaged in a thoughtless competition for equality with men. According to Key, collective motherliness is the most authentic and, therefore, most desirable state of being for women. In her view, women could not become fully developed and contributing citizens without becoming fully themselves as the collective mother (*sambällsmoder*). In marriage as well as in public life, women's peculiar ability to love was necessary to produce a higher reality, a next stage in the evolution of a better, freer, and more harmonious society.⁵

In contemporary feminist studies, Ellen Key is commonly referred to as a maternalist because she propagated for the implementation of motherliness into the public apparatus through the engagement and involvement of women as mothers.⁶ But the reach of Key's concept of collective motherliness goes deeper than the mere implementation of motherly principles (such as care, love, and nurturance) into public policy and government. In her worldview, women's ability to love, care, and nurture stem from and are conditioned by the innermost being of their authentic selves. Women's authentic selves are inextricably rooted in their natural and cultural manifestation as collective mothers. Ellen Key's maternalism is, thus, steeped in the desire to enable

women to be authentic and in the belief that the transformation of society towards a higher goal could only be accomplished if women became authentic to themselves.

Key uses the metaphor of a living organism—the human body—to describe society. In this analogy, the government is the brain and the people, or constituents, are the cells of the nervous system. Individually, each cell communicates important information and its needs to the brain (the government). Key's point about authenticity is that whole system can only work well if the cells communicate their real authentic needs. For Keys, problems arise in patriarchal society because it only listens to the needs of men. In patriarchal society, women's needs and mothers' needs are co-opted and redefined into acceptable needs by a patriarchal filter. In other words, in a patriarchal society, the brain (the government) is getting the wrong information (Arnberg 115). As a result, there is a lopsided government and a lopsided world. The only remedy to this situation is that women become authentic human beings and that they are heard when they communicate their authentic needs. As Key herself put it: "But what the organism's health to the highest degree demands is that the female cells maintain and keep their peculiar (female) character, because otherwise, society will not reach its highest stage of development" (qtd. in Arnberg 115).

Elin Wägner: Alarm Clock

Elin Wägner was born into a middle-class family in Lund on May 16 in 1882. Elin's father was a teacher of philosophy and the principal of a private upper level secondary school. Her mother, Anna Wägner, who was the daughter of a minister in Tolg, in Småland, tragically died in childbirth when Elin was three years old. Despite her young age at the time of her mother's passing, Elin would grow up and feel the utmost affinity with the maternal side of her family, spending much time in the home of her maternal uncle. When Elin was sixteen years old, her father had no plans for allowing her to study further (although he later supported her journalism, and helped send her to Germany to learn the language). In a lecture to female undergraduates, Wägner would later refer to her upbringing by saying: "I believe that I have grown up among the most proper and charming contempt for women imaginable, one that was hardly aware of itself and therefore, with the infinite naturalness and the obvious way in which it was manifested, hurt so much more" (Leppänen, *Elin* 18).

In 1903, when Elin was twenty-one years old, she won a prize for a short story, and as a result, she started to work as a writer at the daily newspaper *Helsingborgs posten*, where she published under a pseudonym. Subsequently, Elin would go on to write political pamphlets, articles, and fiction. In 1908,

she published *Norrtullsligan*, a novel about the lives of underpaid female office workers in Stockholm who decide to go on strike to call attention to their exploitative working conditions. Her next novel, *Pennskaftet* (1910), became her most famous work of fiction. Readers follow the story of Penwoman, a journalist involved in the Swedish suffrage movement of the early 1900s. After women in Sweden won the right to vote in 1920, Wägner established the Fogelstad School—a citizen school for women, where women from all societal levels enrolled to learn more about their political and civic rights. Always a prolific writer, Wägner would go on to publish several novels, short stories, and social commentaries about patriarchal society and its effects on the lives of women. *Alarm Clock*, published in 1941, was Wägner’s arguably most important but least understood work. In it, she discusses the lost authority of the mother in Western civilization and traces this loss to the historical denial of the existence of former matriarchal societies. Calling the book her “polemical pamphlet,” Wägner experienced disillusionment upon its publication because of the lack of recognition and interest it received, both from the public and from literary circles (Leppänen, *Elin* 20). Elin Wägner passed away in 1949.

Alarm Clock was published fifteen years after Ellen Key had passed away in 1926. When it came out in 1941, World War II was raging around the Scandinavian countries, and the presence of war greatly contributed to the book’s sense of urgency. In *Alarm Clock*, Elin Wägner means to awaken us to an impending ecological and humanitarian catastrophe. Well ahead of her time, Wägner makes the connections between peace, respect for the earth, and gender equality that would later become the trademark of ecofeminist studies. *Alarm Clock* is for Wägner an urgent call to action linked to the survival of the planet, democracy, and peace. For Wägner, just as for Ellen Key, this urgency is due to women’s lost authenticity and selfhood—a loss so deep and pervasive that women themselves fail to realize its destructive consequences. *Alarm Clock* presents a dire situation in which women’s reclaiming of their self-efficacy and political agency is inextricably linked to saving the world from the patriarchal destruction of war, poverty, and environmental degradation.

In *Alarm Clock*, Wägner wishes to “make a contribution to women’s self-assessment, [and to provide] an analysis of our situation ... summing up our problems and our possibilities, our dreams and plans for the future” (qtd. in Clareus 98). Using the alarm clock as a metaphor, she contends that “there is a thought which can get you up out of bed in the morning, and it’s this: time is short, and the contact can be broken at any moment” (Clareus 98). She further states that “what has to be said before we are cut off is first of all this: Women have every reason for reassessing how far most of what they accept as natural, and have bowed to as inevitable, really is natural and inevitable. That

means examining the society we live in, our situation there, and the attitudes we adopt to it" (Clareus 98). To reassess their authentic selves, women must reevaluate their history. Using the natural world as an analogy, Wagner asserts that "nowadays, most people drink water from lakes they have never seen" (Clareus 99). Commenting on the ignorant consumer who is unaware of the origin and quality of the drinking water, Wagner draws a parallel to the female citizen who only knows her own place in society through a distorted or polluted sense of the past. History, she says, is a "synthetic product" in which reality is "broken down into its component parts, and put together again" by historians in male-dominated institutions (99). In this process, the reality "which contains the [real and true] history of women" is "discarded as irrelevant": "Men's and women's history is as closely interwoven as the warp and weft of a piece of cloth. But a history has been created which only uses the weft. The result of this is pressure on women on such an enormous scale that it virtually makes history itself" (Clareus 99). The exclusion of women's experiences from historical accounts of the past brings about all the more devastating consequences, according to Wagner, because it is "not recognized by anybody" (Clareus 99). Indeed, it is so pervasive that "nobody is aware of its existence" (Clareus 99). Comparing the eradication of women's experiences from historical accounts to the manipulative rewriting of history in Germany's wartime propaganda during World War II, Wagner claims that "psychology these days is very much concerned with the importance of suggestion. Yet, history radiates a suggestion which makes women insecure, docile, scared of intervening even when their most basic interests are at stake, and nobody notices" (Clareus 99).

For Wagner, the remedy for patriarchy's erasure of women's self-agency is to create an impetus for a feminist vision of the future through education about matriarchal societies of the past. Thus, she believes that one can "restore the balance" (Clareus 100) that had been lost in patriarchal society by challenging the notion that women's natural and inevitable place has always been a submissive one and the idea that male leadership in the development of culture is inevitable. After researching ancient Crete and Minoan matriarchy, Wagner concludes as follows: "For me it is conceivable that women could abandon their submissive role, because my views have been influenced by the glimpse I have had of the period in which women were the creators of culture. But I would never have had that glimpse unless something that had been hidden was exposed" (Clareus 100). In Wagner's view, "exploitation of nature is connected to the oppression of women and ... this in turn affects women's ability, and desire, to become full political citizens" (qtd. in Leppanen, "At Peace" 38). Prehistorical matriarchal societies, governed by a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, had as their objective to "preserve life" (Leppanen, "At Peace" 38), whereas patriarchal civilizations continuously

subjugate and exploit both women and nature. Wägner writes that “Men are strongly engaged on all fronts: to keep women down, to conquer the universe by their thought, to subjugate nature step by step, to keep each other at bay” (Leppänen, “At Peace” 38). A healthy balance can be created only through the reclaiming of women’s history, leading to the formation of women’s personal and political self-agency and a more peaceful world.

To reclaim women’s authenticity means to reclaim the authority of the mother. Wägner emphatically claims: “If women, at the bottom of their being, have constant qualities, hidden under a surface of adaptation, now is when they are needed. The highest authority among people used to be the mother’s authority. That is lost” (Leppänen “At Peace” 39). Women must “emancipate themselves from the repressive weight of patriarchy—they have to unlearn what they have been taught” (Leppänen, “At Peace” 39), not to go back to another golden era, but to get through to a better world. Only through the “pooling of female resources” could women “make the bridge on which the train of history will be carried over to the other side of the abyss” (Clareus 100). A “breakthrough of female influence is necessary to restore the balance” in the world (Clareus 52).⁷

Alva Myrdal: Nation and Family

Alva Reimer was born into a middle-class family in Uppsala on 31 January in 1902. Alva’s father Albert was involved in local politics, and she grew up in a house full of political conversations. However, despite the progressive nature of her father, Alva had to fight for her education. Her mother, Lowa, who was a traditional woman, did not think that girls needed an upper level education. It was not until Alva got a job and offered to pay for her education herself that her parents let her go to upper secondary school. Alva eventually continued her studies at Stockholm University, from which she graduated with a BA in 1924. Later on, she would go on to study early childhood education at Yale and at the University of Geneva, before she went back to Uppsala University and received her master’s degree in 1934.

In her book, *Nation and Family* (1941), Alva Myrdal addresses problems of a shrinking population and increased poverty in early twentieth-century Sweden. The aim of the book was to discuss and introduce new social and economic policy reforms that would benefit Swedish families as well as the nation. Interestingly enough, in an interview later in life, Myrdal explained that her visit in the United States in 1929 and 1930 served to radicalize her views and deeply influenced her stance on gender equality and children’s welfare. Early on, Alva came to “identify with the downtrodden in general”:

Although it began women first, I did not develop into a militant feminist. The identification became broader, more social, with the poor. Of this I became more conscious ... when we were in the United States [in] 1929-30. Seeing the difference between millionaires and slums shocked me and ... my husband [so much] that we became socialists.... From 1930 to war, and really to 1947, when we went abroad ... it was [a] period filled by preaching the social gospel ... for the workers against capitalism, for the underdeveloped countries against the industrialized, and of course, for the children against all that hampered their well-being and growth. (qtd in Herman 333)

One of Myrdal's goals in *Nation and Family* was to elucidate and seek to remedy women's loss of empowerment in the industrialized nuclear family. In her earlier book, *Crisis in the Population Question* (1934), she describes three developmental stages of family life in Sweden since the early 1800s: the agrarian family, the early industrial family, and then the industrial family. According to Myrdal, the late nineteenth-century women's movement could be viewed as a protest against women's gradual loss of power in the industrial family. In the agrarian era, women maintained a certain amount of economic power, as they themselves were responsible for production (as workers in the fields or as producers of food). However, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, production moved out of the homes and into the factories. The home became a commodity, and women became unpaid workers in the home or underpaid workers in the factories (Myrdal 298). It is against this backdrop of social and historical development that Myrdal outlines and proposes much needed reforms and policy changes for Swedish society. According to Myrdal, transferring the responsibility of childcare from the family to society was a direct way of remedying a lopsided dynamic in which too much power belonged to the male breadwinner at the expense of women and children (298-99).

As an advocate for children's rights, women's rights, and human rights, Alva Myrdal promoted both Ellen Key's and Elin Wägner's ideas about empowering women as mothers and creating a more egalitarian and peaceful society. Early on, her role was vital in the establishment of an egalitarian welfare system in Sweden through the implementation of policies concerning social equality in the school system (Herman) and universal affordable daycare for all families.⁸ Later, in 1982, Myrdal won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with disarmament at the United Nations. Myrdal's view of women's gradual loss of power in the industrialized family is an example of a feminist reassessment of history by centering women's experiences, as advocated by Wägner in *Alarm Clock*. Additionally, Alva Myrdal was in many ways the epitome of Ellen Key's vision of collective motherliness. Although Key had envisioned a world in which the state would support mothers' care for their own children (rather

than subsidized daycare centres as promoted by Myrdal), both of them highlighted women's need for independence and children's need for individualized care. As a politician and thinker, Myrdal advocated for women's freedom as individuals as well as for the welfare of children and families. The emphasis she placed on the importance of care, cooperation, nurturance, and women's need for authenticity made her an advocate for the very principles that Key viewed as foundational in women's peculiar will to power.

Myrdal pursued her objectives with a rational approach. As Sondra R. Herman points out, Myrdal was "known for a 'scientific approach' to children with a consistent commitment to rational upbringing ... [she] never worshipped the domestic goddess of a warm, traditional ... isolated home" (332):

Instead, she believed children constituted a public as well as a parental responsibility. She wanted knowledgeable teachers applying the principles of developmental psychology in the classroom. Her cool rationalism expressed both her personality and her reverence for the values of the modern Enlightenment and social science. She had no second thoughts about applying reason to the emotion-laden area of family relationships. Not even World War II destroyed her faith in the ability of ordinary people to mold society for the good. Social scientists should join with political activists and the public in democratic planning. Such planning, she was convinced, was fully compatible with individual freedom, even in areas most people considered private, such as childrearing. (332)

As a scholar, politician and thinker, Alva Myrdal in many ways exemplified Elin Wägner and Ellen Key's vision of the ideal woman as a "self-sustaining educated woman," and her vision of the future demanded that all women in society be able to reach this kind of self-reliance. Myrdal's critical leadership in the United Nations with nuclear disarmament as well as her work to lay the foundation of the Swedish welfare state both epitomize Ellen Key's vision about societal collective motherliness and Elin Wägner's ideas about the new woman's vital role in creating a better and more peaceful society.

Conclusion

In her keynote speech to her induction into the Motherhood Hall of Fame at the Museum of Motherhood in 2014, Andrea O'Reilly defined matricentric feminism as a feminism that takes as its point of departure the needs and concerns of the mother. Commenting on the frequent neglect of motherhood studies in feminist academic discourse, O'Reilly further asked "Why is motherhood not acknowledged as a subject position in constituting gendered identities? Why do we not see maternity as an interlocking structure of

oppression as we do with race and class and include it in our gendered analysis of oppression and resistance?” She concluded by stating that a mother-centred feminism is urgently needed and long overdue because mothers, arguably more so than women in general, remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism. Keeping O’Reilly’s astute observations in mind, it is interesting to note that the works of Ellen Key, Elin Wägner, and Alva Myrdal all address the crucial importance of including the needs and perspectives of mothers in any progressive action plan aimed at creating a better and more just society. In fact, the works of Key, Wägner, and Myrdal emphatically insist that including the mother’s subject position as a point of departure is a condition of possibility for any theory that claims to promote empowerment for all people (not only women) and progress for society as a whole.⁹ The mother, or motherliness-as-subjectivity, is inextricably linked to women’s authentic selves, and women’s authenticity is indispensable in a healthy society.

In their work, Key, Wägner, and Myrdal call for a holistic approach and a paradigm shift towards a transformed society in which motherliness (past, present, and future) have a legitimate place at the centre of all feminist theory, public policy, and democratic family planning. In my ongoing research on the impact of Key, Wägner, and Myrdal on Scandinavian feminism, I aim to further explore their work in the context of matricentric feminism.

Endnotes

1. Key did, however, note that Nietzsche’s philosophy left too little room for important qualities such as empathy and co-operation, and her use of Nietzsche’s ideas were also adapted to her own understanding of the special and important role of the mother-child relationship in society and the female principle. As Thorbjörn Lengborn points out, it is “important that she recognized the weakness in his system: its complete recklessness. She agreed with Nietzsche’s strong emphasis on the rights of the individual and of the personality. But at the same time, she alienates herself from his lack of feeling and consideration for others” (3).
2. Longborn also says the following: “Ellen Key assumes that men and women have different qualities, determined by their nature. She speaks of the ‘female principle’ which ought to play a special role in the future aims of society.... This principle is necessary for the creation of favourable conditions for the individual’s development towards freedom and happiness. At the same time, she supports suffrage for women. Even here, she insists on equality between men and women” (5).
3. As Lindén points out in the summary of her article: “In Nietzsche, she [Ellen Key] recognizes a fellow thinker in trying to move beyond the mind/body dichotomy. At the very centre of Nietzsche’s thinking are

- metaphors of motherhood, pregnancy and birth, that speak of philosophy as a creative force. Key re-uses these metaphors in her feminist thinking when she constructs her concept of motherliness not as a biological effect or experience but as a creative force within culture” (62).
4. Eva Borgström provides an analysis of Key’s views in the works “*Missbrukad kvinnokraft*” and “*Naturenliga arbetsområden*” (*Tvenne föredrag*, Albert Bonniers förlag, 1896).
 5. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel define maternalism in the following way:

We apply the term [maternalism] to ideologies that exalted women’s capacity to mother and extended to society as a whole the values of care, nurturance, and morality. Maternalism always operated on two levels: it extolled the private virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women’s public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace. In practice, maternalist ideologies often challenged the constructed boundaries between public and private, women and men, state and civil society. (1079)
 6. In Wägner’s own words: in this new world, “bastards would be obliged to be decent, rather than decent people being obliged to behave like bastards, as at present” (qtd. in Clareus 52).
 7. However, Ellen Key had advocated against communal daycare centers. She feared that they would fail to take into account children’s needs for individual self-development and diminish the important bond between mother and child.
 8. In her book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*, O’Reilly discusses the exclusion of matricentric feminism “from academic feminism, and the ensuing confusion of mothering with motherhood, and the conflation of matricentric feminism with maternalism and gender essentialism” (186). My research aims to further situate Key, Wägner, and Myrdal in this context and to elucidate their contributions to feminist discourse.

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