

CfP: Supportive Practices? Letters to Social Movement Activists

In historiography, social movements are considered a phenomenon of modernity. They differ from older forms of protest in their orientation towards a media-generated public, the emergence of highly committed political leaders, and the formation of a code of values and behaviour that bans outbreaks of violence. At the same time, a certain degree of “democratisation” in a society is considered an important prerequisite for the emergence of social movements.

The importance of communication in social movements – also communication mediated by the media – has been emphasised repeatedly. The focus of this conference is on a hitherto neglected source for the study of social movements: Letters to prominent activists from people previously unknown to them. Letters belonging to this category can be found in the decades around 1900 in the archives of well-established activists of the women’s movement and authors who had made a name for themselves with publications on the women’s question. Women wrote letters to a leading figure of the international women’s movement around 1900, hoping for a response from her. In these letters, concerns were formulated that often revolved around the topics of women’s education, women’s occupations, and a self-determined life.

The aim of this conference is to define this particular communicative practice in more detail within the framework of a comparative approach to social movements. Does this phenomenon of letters to prominent activists from people hitherto unknown to them exist only in the international women’s movement around 1900 or also in other social movements? What are the similarities, but also the differences, transnationally and across historical epochs between this particular practice in diverse social movements from the beginning of the modern era to the present? What stylistic features distinguish such letters? Is it a genre of letters in its own right and what umbrella term could be established for it? Applications are welcome that focus on letters from women to prominent women’s movement activists, as well as those that focus on such epistolary practices in other social movements. Applications on this phenomenon in social movements outside Europe are strongly encouraged. We would also like to keep an open mind with regard to scientific disciplines and therefore also invite researchers from neighbouring disciplines of historical studies such as communication studies, literary studies, cultural studies, political science, sociology, etc. to participate. The following questions can be discussed during the conference:

1. On the Resonance of Social Movements

Literacy, the absence of letter censorship and simply to have an address to contact a person were prerequisites of this kind of letter writing. What other preconditions did it require? Is the existence of this kind of correspondences an indicator of a social movement emerging or that one has already emerged? Were these correspondences a mobilisation resource for the movement? Do they allow us to make statements about the reach or resonance of a social movement?

2. Letters to/from Movement Activists as Supportive Practices

How can these epistolary relationships be characterised? Are there signs of a mutual give and take in the correspondence? What are typical concerns formulated in them? Are the writers of letters supporters of the movement who at the same time asked for advice and support? What did the exchange of letters mean for one party and the other?

3. Letters to/from Movement Activists as Part of a Celebrity Culture

The addressing of prominent activists can also be analysed as part of a celebrity culture, as it began to spread in the mid-19th century, starting in the United States. What sort of practices promoted the prominence of activists? Did the prominent activists send and distribute their own texts in their correspondences, or did they have portrait photographs taken of themselves that they enclosed with their reply letters? Before someone wrote a letter to a famous person, he or she had already imagined the other person and had related oneself to him or her. Which kind of imaginations of the famous person are visible in the letters?

4. Letters to/from Movement Activists as an Interface between the Personal and the Public

What is the relationship between letters to prominent activists from people previously unknown (to them) and media-mediated publics? Is it, as Michael Warner puts it, a relation among strangers united by the circulation of a discourse? Was the exchange by letter with a prominent person preceded by an organisation, for instance in associations of the movement, or was it sometimes a consequence of the correspondence?

5. Letters to/from Movement Activists and Auto/biographical Narratives

Part of the discourse of the women's movement was the call for women to elevate themselves, to emancipate themselves. Can autobiographical narratives in letters to prominent women activists be understood as responses to the imperative of self-emancipation? What motivations are cited for writing a letter? Is there a specific occasion for writing? What narratives about one's own past life history, present situation, and future plans are integrated into the letters?

*Researchers are invited to submit an abstract in English or German (max. 350 words) and a short CV (max. 100 words), summarised in one PDF document, to the following address by **April 30, 2023**: event.zeitgeschichte@univie.ac.at*

A publication of an edited volume from selected contributions is planned for 2024.

The conference will take place on 27.11.2023 in the Old Chapel on the campus of the University of Vienna (Courtyard 1). The organiser is the Department of Contemporary History of the University of Vienna.

Organisers:

Dr. Corinna Oesch, University of Vienna

Dr. Dóra Czeferner, Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of History (Budapest) und Universität Wien

Mag.^a Clara-Anna Egger, University of Vienna