Elaine Chalus (1956) is Professor of British History at the University of Liverpool. She is particularly interested in women and politics in eighteenth-century England. Her book * Elite Women in English Political Life c. 1754-1790*, published in 2005, was groundbreaking for the concept of ‘social politics’ that she established. “The politics of that time was not only about parliament and politics; politics also had a social dimension, in which women were social actors as well. The broadening of the concept of politics that I advocate has wider implications for historians of all periods, and raises questions about the way we conceptualize politics itself. This is not only important for a better understanding of the past; it also increases our understanding of the problems facing our democratic system today.”

You were born into a farming family in Canada. What path have you taken to eventually become a professor of history in a British city at the age of sixty? My career has indeed not gone in a straight line. I originally trained as a secondary school teacher in Canada. I taught French and English in the northern Canadian province of Alberta for ten years before returning to university to pursue postgraduate studies in history as a mature student. I completed my Master’s at the University of Alberta in 1990 with a gender-oriented cultural-historical study of the nineteenth-century correspondence of British middle-class men, who drastically changed the social structures of the local community with their fur trading company (the Hudson’s Bay Company) in Canada. Including in terms of gender norms, in part through relationships with indigenous women. I was lucky because my work was seen as innovative and awarded a Doctoral Fellowship Award by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This award allowed me to move to Oxford, where seven years later, in my forties, I completed my dissertation at Wolfson College under the excellent guidance of (the late) Professor Paul Langford.

During this period I had a job as a university lecturer at Bath Spa University. There, I led research that used the spatial turn perspective. This is a cultural-historical approach that has increasingly gained ground in recent decades, partly under the influence of the work of the French thinker Michel Foucault. This perspective assumes that space is more than just the setting for events. The place where something happens also influences the course of events.

My research focuses specifically on the experience of urban space. The physical and material environment of our European cities is shaped by topographical, temporal and technological influences. But the residents of a city also assign meanings to the locations of their city. Spaces can therefore also be regarded as social constructions. They emerged from what we imagine specific spaces should look like. Gender always plays an important role in this. Gender views consciously or unconsciously influence the built environment, they underlie the possibilities and meanings of how men and women move through space or their own neighbourhoods: what do they look at, whom do they meet? It is an essential part of street culture and neighbourhood life. It also has everything to do with po-
While you were working at Bath Spa University you made an accidental discovery, which gave your career a huge boost. What did you discover?

I was at the Priddy Folk Festival in Somerset when I came across a battered paperback copy of extracts from the diaries of Elizabeth Wynne Fremantle (1778-1857), the so-called ‘Wynne Diaries’, in a bookstall there. Elizabeth, known as Betsey, began the first volume at the age of eleven in 1789, just weeks after the outbreak of the French Revolution, and kept her diary until her death in 1857. As a child she lived with her family in Switzerland, together with political agents of King Louis XVI and other French migrants fleeing unrest in France. The Wynne family later fled Napoleon’s conquest of Central Europe and ended up in the Italian port city of Livorno, where they found shelter with the British Navy. Elizabeth married the British Royal Naval Officer Thomas Fremantle in 1797. Most captains’ wives stayed at home, but she was adventurous and sailed into war with her husband aboard his ship, in Horatio Nelson’s fleet. When Nelson lost his arm in a battle near Tenerife, she nursed him on the return journey. Captain Fremantle later fought alongside Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, where the English defeated a Spanish-French fleet of Napoleon Bonaparte. Admiral Nelson was killed in this naval battle. Fremantle survived the battle. A small number of Betsey Fremantle’s diaries were published in the 1930s, but the vast majority remained unknown.

All this time they were in the possession of the family in Buckinghamshire, where I tracked them down. I was given unlimited access to the diaries and to an extensive private family archive. Drawing on Fremantle’s diaries, I examined the construction of the Victorian ruling elite through a feminine lens, beginning with the cosmopolitan world of expatriates and emigrants in the early years of the French Revolution.

I received an award for this project, ‘The Admiral’s Wife: An Intimate History of Family, Navy and Empire’ (British Academy Research Development Award Scheme). The project is still ongoing. I have been working at the History Department of the University of Liverpool since 2016. I still need to write a monograph, for Oxford University Press, based on the forty surviving volumes of the Fremantle diaries. I hope I’ll have time to sit down and work on it soon. I really enjoy working on such a case study. It still fits with my research interests, which have now expanded further and include various political and cultural aspects of European history. For example, I am now mainly concerned with topics such as early nineteenth-century sociability of the British elite and English cosmopolitanism in European cities, especially Florence and Nice. At a more meta-level, my research concerns larger thematic and longer-term questions about place and space, power and identity, patronage and corruption, and influence and interests.

Your oeuvre is very extensive and remarkably rich in innovative historiographical perspectives. The core of your work and interests can nevertheless be defined by your many articles and publications about the interaction between gender and politics, or the gendered nature of politics. Your book Elite Women in English Political Life c. 1754-1790, published in 2005, was groundbreaking because of the concept of ‘social politics’ that you introduced.

Yes, it is my firm belief that we need to expand our understanding of politics, who practises it and in which places it happens, to include the social side of politics. The interplay between the notoriously diffuse arena of what I call ‘social politics’ and the traditional arena of institutionalized ‘high politics’ is constantly changing, but by downplaying the importance of the former we limit our ability to understand the operation of the latter.

The social side of politics covers an enormous area. I include the activities of women in the sphere of eighteenth-century sociability, in physical spaces, such as the well-known salons and societies, but also palace complexes and country estates. I also include themes such as political rituals and the material culture of politics. If we seriously include such themes in the analysis, then relatively small micro-historical details such as clothing and colourful decorations also become meaningful. Women – at least the British ladies I examined – thus politicized public spaces. The definition of politics must therefore also include non-institutional forms of politics. Politics did not just happen between the walls of the parliament buildings, but also during soirees, balls and dinners. The wives of the statesmen and diplomats played the role of hostess. They determined who were eligible to be invited guests and who was introduced to whom, when. Nowadays we call that networking and lobbying. I would like to define...
politics as 'the art of the possible'. Politics defined in the broadest sense, applied to historical research, therefore also brings women into the picture. And other groups too that did not belong to the top of society at the time, such as Jews and Catholics.

Women's emancipation as a movement for equal rights is known as a phenomenon that began in the nineteenth century. Your social definition of politics implies that women practised politics before the fight for suffrage.

My studies of the role of women in eighteenth-century British local electoral politics show this very clearly. It is a common misconception that women's emancipation has been linear. If we measure the degree of their emancipation by the degree of their political influence, then the emancipation of women has not been a development from bad to a little bit better. Women have of course made progress in legal, economic and political areas. But the appreciation of female politicians is currently in dire straits, given all the media attacks they have to endure in the UK, America, and I now hear even in the Netherlands. I don’t want to say that everything was better in the eighteenth century, certainly not. Even then, politically active women were held to the applicable conventions. As long as their political tasks could be seen as subordinate to and supportive of those of their menfolk and the local community, there was nothing to worry about. But woe betide them if they emerged as leading political actors in a cause that was already too far removed from their own family or community interests. Then they violated an unwritten law and often, as now, became the target of sexualized criticism.

Nevertheless, I challenge the all-too-common assumption that women’s political opportunities in the past were necessarily limited and indirect. Their gender determined the degree of women’s participation, but so did context and class, ethnicity and the political constellation. That is why I attach importance to the concept of intersectionality. It is complex, it involves overlapping systems. You could say that throughout history, women’s opportunities alternately shrink and expand, depending on their socio-economic position and the nature of the regime in which they operate. Compared to other eras, the conditions of late eighteenth-century British politics were surprisingly favourable to women. Indeed, this century offered women a greater variety of opportunities for involvement than ever before. A very well-known name is Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, published in 1792 (recently translated into Dutch).
But my point is that politics back then was not just for exceptional women like Wollstonecraft. The nature of British politics also favoured their participation more generally. Politics was not yet a strictly defined area, and not as professionalized and bound by established rules as it is today. Characteristic of late eighteenth-century British politics is its personal, social and, above all, family character. That was an environment in which women could also come into their own politically. Not only the most exceptional women that biographers love to highlight, but also those from ‘ordinary’ noble and patrician families. The book *Elite Women in English Political Life* specifically examines various forms of their political involvement. This had a very wide variety and ranged from the top of the aristocratic elite even to women from the lowest strata of society. I’ll say it again, I take a very broad view. While there were always some women with personal influence over their husbands’ political decisions, at all levels of society, women could also be involved in politics as political hostesses, through their involvement in patronage as clients, brokers, or even patrons, or via their involvement in electoral politics. While some elite women inherited electoral influence through inheritance, and others controlled family political interests as widows, or as mothers of underage sons, women lower down the social scale could also be involved in electoral politics. There were numerous different franchises in England prior to the electoral reform in 1832 and some of these gave women more electoral privileges than others. In some freeman boroughs (where the vote lay with men who had been granted freeman status), the widows or the eldest daughters of freemen might have the right to pass on the eligibility to vote to a subsequent husband. This was as valuable as a dowry! In one other small group of boroughs – burgage boroughs, where the vote came with ownership of the burgage, which was a piece of property, and not with the person – women who owned burgages legally had the right to vote. Although eighteenth-century practice was that they didn’t vote themselves, they had the right to appoint proxies to vote for them — and as a result they were often canvassed repeatedly for their influence when there were elections. Finally, there were women in numerous boroughs who served as witnesses at elections (and later at parliamentary trials, when an election outcome was petitioned to parliament). They used their personal knowledge of local people and houses to attest to whether voters actually had the right to vote. As such, they contributed formally to the outcome of elections.

__Does your research also argue against the thesis that the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable female political behaviour became sharper with the rise of more formalized democratic politics from the end of the eighteenth century?__

No, I also see that trend in my own research. At the same time, I see that eighteenth-century women who were willing to work creatively within the family model were able to remain politically active. Research into whether they still did this to the same extent in the nineteenth century is in full swing. Last September, I spoke about this at the two-day symposium on ‘Informal Spaces and Practices of Diplomacy, 1750-1850’ in Oxford, organized by the Danish historian Kristine Dyrmann. She traced forms of political sociability even in European spa towns, such as Bad Pyrmont (in the present-day German state of Lower Saxony). Very interesting. My ideas about gender and social politics are closely aligned with the innovative trends that have recently come to dominate the historiographical agenda of New Diplomatic History. Diplomats’ wives and the wives of politicians and princes maintained a social network, which often overlapped with the political, by writing letters. We had a discussion about ‘epistolary diplomacy’, a theme that you [the interviewer] introduced in your presentation. The archives are full of testimonies of this. Political historians had little interest in it for a long time. So many letters from women, almost always filed under the heading ‘private’ or ‘family material’ – what could be politically relevant about that? But women passed on all kinds of social and political information to each other, and that can also be regarded as politically relevant. This is especially true in the case of correspondence between wives of political figures at historically important moments such as revolutions and wars. The study of diplomatic processes on the basis of the transnational networks that were partly maintained by the correspondence of ambassadors’ wives is also of exceptional importance for today’s world. I myself am now studying the Congress of Vienna from the perspective of how peace is actually made. In 1815 in Vienna, hundreds of European heads of state and their diplomats negotiated the future of post-Napoleonic Europe. Women advised the organization of the congress in letters and were publicly visible in the social activities surrounding it, at informal gatherings, such as the many balls with dancing and music. As I also noted during the symposium in Oxford, partly in response to the keynote talk by Australian professor Glenda Sluga, that it increasingly appears that women’s political involvement continued at least until 1815, and probably well beyond.

__You were, and are, out to shake up our understanding of what politics is. Where does your drive to put this concept on the map, historiographically, come from?__

I haven’t thought about this for a long time, but now that I’m getting older and have an increasingly better overview of my work, I realize more than before what the origins of my motivation must be for wanting to expand the concept of politics so significantly and why I have been interested in the social and local dynamics of politics in eighteenth-century England for so long. I feel that this has to do with my earliest childhood memories of my father. He was not only a farmer, but also active in local politics. As a little girl I saw what it took to get things done on a very concrete, daily community level. The construction of a road or a gutter for the drainage of a yard, or public facilities in the countryside: my father talked to everyone and listened. I call that ‘person-to-person politics’. Very effective. I had some experience with it myself when I...
campaigned for the Labour Party by going door to door to speak to people about their problems and the elections. For my father, the farmers’ wives were just as legitimate conversation partners as the men. After all, they worked closely together on the farm, and the women were equally competent. I also see this in my historical research. It is a pragmatic form of politics, aimed at safeguarding one’s own interests and those of the community. In the eighteenth century, women were politically involved, but not always driven by lofty ideals. While some women were definitely involved in politics because they wanted to achieve power, profit or status for their families, and the correspondence of eighteenth-century politicians testifies to the fact that women took part in securing political patronage and developing and using personal connections and networks to achieve their ends, they were operating in the same way as their male counterparts when they did so. We can find other women, from much lower down the social scale – women who often leave no other trace in the records – when we study the records of controverted elections (those elections that were fought all the way up to parliament). There, women who were publicans, servants, laundresses, chimney sweeps, and others, can be found testifying about their experiences of elections and helping to prove or disprove cases that frequently rested on accusations of bribery and corruption.

You say that the politics of the late eighteenth century was not just about parliament and politicians because politics also had a social dimension and women were important actors in it. Does the broadening of the concept of politics, as you advocate, also have implications for the study of other periods?

Yes, absolutely. My broadening definition has implications for historians of all periods, because it raises questions about the way we conceptualize politics itself. My approach is ‘multi-vocal’ and inclusive. Such an approach to polyphony by also involving women in historical parliamentary research is not only important for a better understanding of the past; it also increases our insight into the current problems in our democratic system. Our system benefits from the participation of groups from diverse backgrounds. That is still not happening enough. I am very concerned about the political consequences of advancing populism and the increasing lack of polyphony in the public debate. Political illiteracy is increasing rapidly. It is the job of historians to stop this, because it endangers our democracy. Teach pupils and students democratic knowledge and manners. Political representation involves more than just high politics.

Recently, under the influence of the coronavirus crisis, I have become interested in the phenomenon of loneliness, now and throughout the centuries. Consider, for example, the wives, daughters and mothers of the soldiers who were away from home for years to fight in the Napoleonic Wars. To analyse loneliness, I also delved into the applications of emotion history. The loneliness research turned out to be fruitful. There is now a Routledge collection: *A History of Loneliness*. This is also an important political theme, now and in the future. If people, due to their loneliness, only live in their own digital bubbles and get their information from them, their knowledge will not increase and they will miss the social connections that are necessary for a vital democracy.

I met Elaine Chalus last September at the symposium *Informal spaces and practices of diplomacy, 1750-1850* in Oxford. The above text was written partly based on Chalus’ closing remarks, and on an interview I conducted during a Zoom session on 16 January 2024 Elaine Chalus leads the Eighteenth-Century Worlds Research Centre and is a member of the editorial boards of *Women’s History Review*, *Parliamentary History Journal* and the *History of Parliament Trust*, where she is section editor for the ‘House of Lords, 1660–1832’.

See also: Elaine Chalus: “My dearest Tussy’: Family, Navy and Nation in the Fremantle Papers, 1801-1814” (youtube.com)