

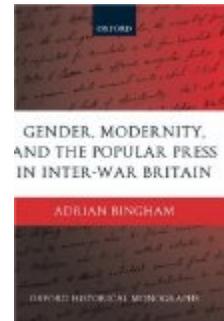
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adrian Bingham. *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004. viii + 271 pp. \$129.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927247-1.

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## The Press and Interwar Gender Relations

There is no shortage of works that consider the impact of the First World War on gender roles in the west, but Adrian Bingham has successfully mined an often-neglected resource to make an important contribution to this field of inquiry. Bingham aims to counter some aspects of previous scholarship on the evolution of gender roles in interwar Britain through a detailed examination of the popular press. Part of Bingham's agenda is methodological—to demonstrate the value of a sustained examination of the content of the best-selling daily newspapers. Bingham argues that the interwar period is ideal for this approach, as these papers were in some ways at the peak of their influence. Bingham focuses on five national daily morning newspapers—the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Herald*, and the *Daily News*. Examining papers from a variety of political perspectives and sampling widely from these papers for the period in question, Bingham hopes to provide a thorough overview of the attitude of the popular press to issues of femininity and masculinity.

Bingham argues that historians of gender have been too quick to dismiss the major daily papers as promoters of “traditional” gender roles—in particular domesticity and motherhood for women. The women's pages of these papers did devote a great deal of space to the depiction and even promotion of domestic life, but Bingham contends that this was not part of a postwar backlash against the more visible roles played by women during the war. Instead, Bingham argues, the popular press, in keeping with its general enthusiasm for “modern” life, promoted

the “reorganization” of domestic life to make it less taxing for women. This would be accomplished through scientific organization and labor-saving technology. While the labor saving devices which were central to this reorganized home life were available to only a minority of women, Bingham argues that the extensive discussion of this issue represents an attempt to come to terms with the shifting notions of femininity emerging in the interwar period. While Bingham has uncovered a lively debate within the press over this issue, his analysis of the material is not always convincing. Bingham argues that the press aspired to “reconcile” modern young women to domestic life, and it is not clear how this is markedly different from the view that the press was working to restore traditional gender relations (an argument Bingham rejects). Bingham's discussion of this issue does demonstrate that the discussion of postwar domesticity in the press was more nuanced than has generally been recognized, but the case for the “modernity” of the popular press on this subject is somewhat overstated.

Bingham is on firmer ground in the discussion of the various ways that the popular press promoted and celebrated the new modern women of the postwar world. The newspapers examined by Bingham agreed that women's lives had been transformed by the First World War, and editorial comment usually argued that the development of a new “modern woman” was a positive one. Bingham argues that the popular press did not present a monolithic view of gender relations, but was in fact an arena for vigorous debate over gender roles in society. More

“modern” roles for women were often highlighted and even celebrated in its pages, as the papers praised those women who appeared to be breaking Victorian stereotypes of women’s capacities, such as athletes and aviators. In addition, Bingham argues, the women’s pages of the popular press devoted a great deal of space not only to issues of domesticity and motherhood, but also to advice concerning careers and fashion.

The issue of fashion is central to Bingham’s contention that, while the interwar press was often more positively inclined towards “modern” women than has previously been thought, at the same time women in its pages were sexualized as never before. The women’s pages of the major papers devoted more space to fashion than to any other subject. And these pages often included images of women clearly designed to serve a double purpose—to illustrate the latest fashions for female readers while also providing often-titillating images of women’s bodies for male readers.

Bingham’s discussion of the coverage of gender issues in the popular press is not limited to the content of the women’s pages, and includes an intriguing chapter on the shifts in political coverage provoked by the extension of the franchise in 1918. Bingham examines how the major papers altered their discussion of political issues and elections to account for newly enfranchised women voters. All of the papers encouraged women to exercise their right to vote, and each attempted to connect the issues of the day with what it believed were the main concerns of women voters. In doing so, the papers relied upon a variety of gendered stereotypes as a means of identifying those issues which would be singled out as of interest to women. Thus conservative papers framed their appeals to the “prudent housewife,” while those with a more left-wing orientation spoke to the “caring mothers” of the electorate.

The majority of Bingham’s material is focused on femininity, and Bingham argues that this is simply a reflection of the fact that the press devoted more ink to this

issue. Despite this, however, Bingham’s discussions of masculinity are full of insight. Bingham argues that, in the wake of the slaughter of the First World War, the popular press (with the exception of the *Daily Mail*) turned away from “imperial masculinity” in favor of a less militaristic portrayal of the ideal male. The papers continued to celebrate male strength and virility, but more commonly in the form of sportsmen and film stars as opposed to imperial adventurers. Sportsmen in particular were held up as the new repositories of national character, possessing a kind of vigorous Britishness that was the sole preserve of men. While these individuals could still be admired for such traits, interwar unemployment did raise concerns about a loss of manliness among the general population. Strikingly, however, Bingham argues that at least some sectors of the popular press responded by promoting a redefined notion of ordinary masculinity, one that placed value on marital companionship and domestic pursuits.

Bingham’s book sets out to counter two pieces of conventional wisdom—that the popular press was largely reactionary in its content, and that the interwar period witnessed a concerted backlash against women’s new visibility following the First World War. In both areas this book has made a valuable contribution. This is not to say that Bingham provides an overly sanitized view of either the role of the press or interwar gender relations.

Although Bingham has amply documented the enthusiasm of the popular press for the effects of modernity on women, it is also very clear that the interwar press continued to envision women’s interest in politics as largely stemming from their domestic and maternal roles. And the greater attention to women and their achievements was accompanied by an increasingly sexualized view of women designed to appeal to the papers’ male readers. Bingham’s book attempt to complicate our understanding of the role of the popular press and the tenor of interwar gender relations, and in both these respects it is an admirable success.

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