

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lynn Abrams, Elizabeth Harvey, eds. *Gender Relations in German History: Power, Agency and Experience from the Sixteenth Century to the Twentieth*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996. x + 262 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1896-5; \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1904-7.

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Published on H-German (December, 1998)



The conference on gender relations in Germany sponsored by the German History Society in Lancaster in 1994 brought together some of the foremost historians of German women and/or gender relations. Unfortunately, the collection of essays based on its proceedings does not do justice to what is now a lively sub-field, nor does the book quite live up to the high quality of the previously published work of many of the contributors. It strikes me that many of the essays, while introducing readers to promising new research projects, were published a bit prematurely.

The chronological span of the collection is broad; there are two essays on the early modern period, two on the nineteenth century and five on the twentieth century. Thematically and methodologically speaking, there is less diversity. Topics such as marriage, abortion and domestic culture are represented, but there is almost nothing on work, mothering, education or political organization. The editors do broaden the picture a bit by including notes in their introductory essay as well as a bibliography as a guide to some of the historical literature not included in this collection.

Two of the essays are overviews rather than research articles. Heide Wunder's essay is a sketchy overview of gender relations in early modern Germany, based on her own research and that of other early modernists. As such, there is nothing new here for historians who are familiar with the field of German women's history the field, but the essay does provide a useful introduction for an English-reading audience of relevant works in both English and German. Lynn Abrams's analysis of nineteenth century marriage also presents a rather general argu-

ment about continuity and change, and about tensions between the ideal of companionate marriage and contradictory laws and practices. The essay poses interesting questions which Abrams will no doubt address more fully in the book she is writing on this subject.

Two of the essays focus on abortion as viewed through the evidence of trial records. Ulinka Rublack's essay takes on one of the those "golden age" theses that sometimes creeps into the rhetoric of women's history—in this case, the view that in the early modern era "a subversive and exclusively female culture, partly dependent on midwives' participation, established women's autonomy over reproductive processes—an autonomy that obstetric scientists and midwives are supposed to have extinguished during the eighteenth century" (p. 58). Using evidence provided in the records of abortion cases in southwestern Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Rublack instead documents the extensive and increasing intrusions into the course of pregnancies not just by midwives and medical authorities but also by representatives of the state, by clerics, and by judgmental neighbors. Her argument is, for the most part, persuasive; the concluding anecdote about the case of a woman giving birth to frogs is, however amusing and intriguing, a bit beside the point. (It does beg for comparison with the roughly contemporaneous birth of a rabbit to an English woman!)

Cornelia Usborne takes a "grassroots" look at abortion by again going into court cases, in this case from the Weimar era. She advocates an anthropologically-informed reading of the case testimony. Her results, however, are very preliminary and it is not yet clear what

is going to be added to our understanding of gender relations in Weimar from the proposed analysis. This particular essay centers on the presentation of as yet relatively de-contextualized cases. Eventually, the investigation could lead to some interesting comparisons with studies of other periods such as Rublack's.

Dagmar Herzog's chapter on feminism and religious dissent, like Rublack's essay, represents a very specific point of revisionism. She wants to alter, or at least add nuance to, the usual portrayals of *Vormärz* religious dissent as a source of gender egalitarian ideology or proto-feminism. Herzog builds a convincing case that the interest of many dissenting men in female emancipation was, for the most part, understood and argued from the perspective of masculinist concerns about sexuality and clerical domination of women. Her provocative arguments are more fully developed in her recent book *Intimacy and Exclusion*. Her findings also suggest interesting parallels with contemporaneous gender battles in England and France that took place in the contexts of milieux defined by Utopian and Christian socialism. However rooted the German discussions were in particularly German religious and political culture, the ideological positions that Herzog illuminates bear striking resemblance to the positions taken by the men involved in movements such as Owenism or Fourierism.

The remaining essays are mostly brief or preliminary explorations of topics the authors are beginning to research or have written up more fully elsewhere. Regina Schulte's essay brings her into a new era and focuses on the nurses of WWI and their postwar fates. This essay poses some interesting questions, but the research on which it is based is preliminary; the reading of memoirs upon which it rests is quite casual and as yet unconvincing. Claudia Schoppmann's contribution is quite brief

and centers on a counterfactual. She speculates about the Nazi disinterest in the persecution of lesbians, which contrasted so strongly with their stance toward male homosexuals. Kate Lacey contributes a tantalizing but inconclusive essay on the radio broadcasts directed by Nazi propagandists toward women. Her book on the subject is apparently soon to appear and promises to add a new dimension to our understanding of Nazi culture and official views of gender. Finally, Katherine Pence's chapter is an interesting and pointed comparison of the role of consumption in both gender relations and political reconstruction in East and West Germany during the postwar era. The place of consumption in GDR society is certainly a topic of considerable interest among German Studies scholars. Pence's research promises to be an important contribution to this scholarship. She argues that despite very different policies and practices regarding female that distinguished East from West, consumption in the two postwar Germanies was gendered female. Although in this article the eastern case is better developed than western one, the comparative design of the project is well justified by the results presented here.

Overall, the value of this collection lies mainly in the questions articulated and explored in what are for the most part preliminary presentations of research projects. It does not either address the question of intersections between gender relations and other dimensions of German history; nor does it go very far in addressing the interesting questions raised in the editors' introduction about the particularity of German gender relations.

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Citation: Mary Jo Maynes. Review of Abrams, Lynn; Harvey, Elizabeth, eds., *Gender Relations in German History: Power, Agency and Experience from the Sixteenth Century to the Twentieth*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

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