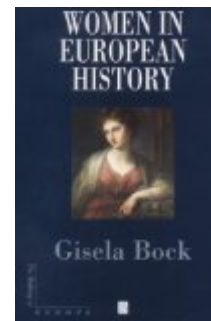


Gisela Bock. *Women in European History*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. x + 304 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-631-23191-2.



Reviewed by Tammy M. Proctor

Published on H-Women (December, 2002)

Are Women Human? A Continuing Dispute

Gisela Bock's latest contribution to the six-hundred year *querelles des femmes* not only details this historic series of disputes over the meaning of women, but also provides a new chapter in the struggle. The short, well-written English translation of Bock's work provides a broad general framework for understanding the political, ideological, and legal questions facing women in European societies since the Renaissance.

Organized around the changing *querelles* regarding women's essence, rights, citizenship, work, and domesticity, the book covers these questions in six broad-ranging chapters. Bock establishes her subject by exploring the ferocious disputes over women's nature that emerged particularly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These debates among men, and some women, over the primary question of women's humanity set the tone, she argues, for a continuing debate among European intellectuals and for the struggle to define women's rights as human rights. In the first chapter, Bock examines both the misogynistic denial of women's basic humanity and the at-

tempts to use marriage as a vehicle for expressing misogyny. Most interesting in this discussion are her investigation of Christine de Pizan's role in the fifteenth century debates, and her explanation of the ways in which both humanists and Protestant reformers sought to promote marriage in the face of attacks on its importance as an institution. Bock also touches briefly on the issue of women's political power in the early modern state.

In continuing her theme of disputation, Bock turns in chapter 2 to the French Revolution. Here, female intellectuals such as Germaine de Stael and Mary Wollstonecraft enter the fray alongside French fishwives and peasant women as the civic excitement and disorder of the revolution create opportunities for women's voices to be heard. Bock does an excellent job of detailing the varieties of women's participation in the revolution and counter-revolution, looking at political clubs, literary figures, assassins, marchers, rebels, and amazons. She argues that although the revolution initially provided hope of a change in women's status and some early liberalizing legislation, the ultimate result of the revolution and the subse-

quent Napoleonic code was an even stronger patriarchal definition of the political as a male preserve.

From the French Revolutionary prisons and salons, Bock moves on to the nineteenth century "woman question" as her third series of *querelles*. Here Bock departs from many other authors by devoting a whole chapter to the question of women's civic and social rights apart from the debate over suffrage. Bock rejects the separate-spheres model as a monolith that hides the more nuanced and complicated experiences that women faced in nineteenth-century Europe. She notes that many "'models' circulated, coexisted, competed and overlapped with each other" (p. 88), and she reiterates her central thesis that a continuing series of debates better describes women's understanding of their roles in the nineteenth century. In this third chapter, Bock examines women's work, utopian communities, literary work, and demands for social change. In particular, she sees women in a variety of settings clamoring for educational and employment opportunities as well as legal reform in the areas of marriage, inheritance, and sexuality. Bock sees this concern with social issues facing women as a continuation of the earlier debates over their nature, their roles and responsibilities.

Bock devotes the fourth chapter to the question of women's access to political opportunities, examining the central question as to why some women got suffrage earlier than others. Again, she sees the suffrage movements of Europe as yet another *querelles des femmes* but with a twist, since it is now women who dominate the debates. This chapter looks very closely at the connection between liberalism and suffrage (both for men and for women), and Bock notes that in countries where class was a barrier to suffrage for men, women got the vote soon after universal male suffrage passed. She argues that the struggle for men to overcome class prejudice created allies for women seeking the same rights, and that women's

movements could ally themselves with socialist and labor agitators in countries such as Germany and Britain. In contrast, she sees female suffrage coming late to countries such as France and Switzerland not because of Catholicism, but because of republican anti-clericalism and the lack of a struggle for universal male suffrage. As Bock writes, "France and Switzerland were late-comers, not although they were the oldest male democracies in Europe but because they were" (pp. 156). After her discussion of suffrage, Bock looks further at women's roles as citizens by beginning to examine their relationship to state welfare provisions, which she continues in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 5 seems a bit out of place in the larger study of disputes over women's nature partly because of its organization. Here, Bock explores the precarious position women found themselves in under the dictatorships of the early twentieth century. Part of the feeling of disjuncture comes from the emphasis on social policies regarding women and the treatment of women in Nazi Germany, which feels like a departure from the largely political overview of the earlier chapters. Despite that reservation, the chapter is an insightful reading of the mixed blessing of civic participation, female employment, and state family policies of the early twentieth century. With an emphasis on Germany, but with discussion of Italy, the Soviet Union, Portugal, and Spain, Bock seeks to examine how women fared in the period from 1914 to 1945. From an investigation of demographic change and population policies to the realities of war and genocide, this chapter touches on the major issues of twentieth-century European society.

The short concluding chapter of the book raises anew the question of women's rights and duties within the larger question of their role as humans. Bock notes the new *querelles* emerging from second-wave feminism, the civil rights issues, and the international debates over human

rights fostered in United Nations forums. Here, she revisits welfare provisions for women and rates of political participation while also exploring the cacophony of oppositional voices emerging in the 1970s to question women's continuing struggles: the double burden, poverty, prostitution, and violence against women. Her ultimate conclusion in this chapter and indeed in the book itself is that the old question "Are women human?" has not been fully resolved as we enter the twenty-first century.

Bock's book is a sweeping study of western European women over a six-hundred-year period. She draws on a wide range of literature from French, English, Italian, and German scholars, and the book's narrative incorporates examples from many European countries, not just England, France, and Germany as is the case in some histories of women. In this, Bock's book follows the lead of Bonnie Smith's *Changing Lives*, which appeared well over a decade ago but which also incorporated voices of women from Sweden to Poland to Belgium to Portugal. This is a useful addition to a growing literature on European women's history primarily for its breadth and its clear narrative. As an overview of the questions raised about women's lives and natures, it is unique in the literature available. The book's strengths are this breadth of subject matter and Bock's careful explanation of the complexity of these *querelles* over time. She situates each dispute in the larger socioeconomic issues and national contexts, suggesting both the connections between questions across these lines and the specificity of some women's situations.

The book's weaknesses grow out of its strengths. Because of its ambitious coverage of time and place, often the reader is left with an unsatisfied feeling that much has been ignored. Bock is setting out a vision of history as a changing, yet constant, debate, and so her examples often seem hurried or arbitrary. However, she offers ample evidence to support her claims, and readers could

certainly use this as a starting point for further study. For those hoping to use this book for teaching undergraduates, I offer two cautions. First, Bock incorporates an astonishing array of names and short quotes into her text (including some untranslated French and Latin phrases), which American students may find difficult to digest. Second, the book assumes prior knowledge of general European history, and students without that background may struggle to understand her discussion of the French Revolution, for instance. Beyond those cautions, however, I would add that the book is written to be accessible and that it is remarkably jargon-free for such a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of philosophical debate, social history, and political change. In particular, this will be useful to graduate students studying for examinations in European women's history as it provides a most clear framing of the central questions of this field. Bock's book was a delight to read, and I would highly recommend it to scholars.

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Citation: Tammy M. Proctor. Review of Bock, Gisela. *Women in European History*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. December, 2002.

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