

Rachel G. Fuchs. *Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe.* New Approaches to European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 276 pp. \$25.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-62926-3.



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Published on H-German (February, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

In this compact synthesis, Rachel Fuchs presents the culture of crisis European women confronted and the strategies they developed to deal with it during the long nineteenth century. In keeping with Cambridge's New Approaches series, this is a survey text, with few footnotes and broad references to established works in the field of women's and gender history. Those familiar with the existing literature will easily recognize the sources of much of the work. Those with less background will find this work accessible, clearly laid out, and explanatory without being pedantic, especially when it comes to methodology and differing historiographical schools. It is an especially good introduction to the state of gender history as a whole. For those not familiar with nineteenth-century European history, Fuchs sets the work in a strong historical context, though she also acknowledges the issues raised by social and gender historians regarding the use of a traditional chronology.

Fuchs's introduction clearly spells out her histori-

ographical and methodological approaches. She explains recent trends in history and provides a good starting point for understanding the differences and uses of some of these trends for upper-level undergraduates or beginning graduate students. Fuchs lays out the challenges in the fields of women's and gender history, making it clear that the two must not be considered synonymous and that the distinction matters a great deal, in a way that will remind many readers immediately of Joan Wallach Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988). Fuchs implies with her title and says in the introduction that she is writing a gender history, but the work focuses on women and their experiences with the crises of poverty far more than it does on a more neutrally gendered analysis. The distinction between gender and women is not really resolved by the text, despite Fuchs's determination to explain it. Fuchs also raises the importance of defining the concepts of gender, women, and especially poverty, referring directly to E. P. Thompson, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. The analysis of the construction

of definitions is a consistent theme throughout the work; the questions of how and by whom such terms are defined are among the most critical historiographical trends of modern scholarship.

The Introduction further serves to present the categories of analysis Fuchs uses throughout the work. The poor across Europe lived a life constantly at risk. The "climate of calamities" Fuchs describes includes losing one's job, sickness, injury, death, and, most importantly for women, childbirth. To deal with this certainty of crisis, Fuchs says, women created a "culture of expedencies," that is, coping strategies for covering long and short term difficulties. These contingencies were based on community connections between family, neighbors, and civil and religious authorities. The first two were clearly supposed to be primarily supportive connections. Women within communities governed behavior, sanctioning or condemning their fellows for adhering to or breaking the rules of the community. The authorities, however, constituted a system to be manipulated and put to use, implying that women had political agency and activism, even if that use of power is not readily apparent.

Women also engaged in the "exchange of information" and in "reciprocity," writes Fuchs, which helped not just in a time of crisis, but in everyday life to find the best places to buy food, where to find work or housing, and critically for some, access to or information about birth control, especially abortion. The reciprocal nature of the information exchange carried with it communal judgment: those who helped others earned help themselves; those who were deemed worthy got help, those who were deemed unworthy did not. This conclusion brings to light the difficulty of defining "the poor" and "poverty." Whether it is modern social commentators, middle-class observers in the nineteenth century, or the poor themselves, some poor were considered more worthy than others. The social definition of poverty had no fixed eco-

omic parameters; the circumstance of how one crossed the thin boundary between survival and destitution, and how one dealt with the crisis, decided one's eligibility for assistance from the community or from local authorities. Beggars, tramps, and other outsiders would not receive help, but women who felt they had no choice but to engage in the sex trade in times of crisis, for example, were not beyond the pale of community assistance.

The text is divided into six chapters. Fuchs begins with a discussion of the revolutionary era of the late eighteenth century. Women's agency in the French Revolution extended from the bread riots, through the march on Versailles, and on to more formal political organization and activism, as seen with Olympe de Gouges's "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizen" (1791) and the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women. Poor women's participation was critical to the process of the revolution and has been the focus of much study. Fuchs finds that this era, however, served to frame what would be the ongoing debate in Europe through the nineteenth century: the dominant role of propertied men in terms of claims to individual rights and freedoms, and the establishment of the gendered public and private spheres for the propertied classes. The question this conclusion raises is how it applies to the poor: was there a gendered division of public vs. private life? Did poor men have greater rights and freedoms guaranteed to them than poor women?

Chapter 2 considers the demographic changes witnessed in the nineteenth century. Industrialization, urban migration, and the redefinition of work and family had a significant impact on the lives of women. The initial population increase that begins the century starts to decline toward the end; this statistic has a profound effect on the state and on society. Women are faulted for having too many children and then criticized for having too few. The state and local authorities could

not quite decide if they needed more citizens or if they wanted only the "right kind" of citizens. Fuchs points out that the increase in extra-marital childbirth and the decrease of endogamous (community-based) marriage and social connections were due in part to the increased incidence of urban resettlement. In turn, the loosening of natal community connections made the creation of urban communities imperative. These connections could not be controlled by the outside authorities and so the middle- and upper-class observers regarded the population growth of the poor classes with horror and distrust.

Chapter 3 focuses on rural life and the certainty of calamity. Beginning with this chapter and continuing in chapters 4 and 5, Fuchs addresses how women in particular dealt with the work they had to do, paid or unpaid, childbearing and child rearing, and the assorted crises that were fully expected to happen at any time. Fuchs travels throughout Europe in this analysis, from the relatively familiar regions of England, France, and Germany to less well-known areas such as southern and Eastern Europe and Russia. It is sometimes awkward when she takes the discussion to these lesser documented regions, as the economic and political developments as well as the life experiences of the poor and of women there do not fit the paradigm established in the western states. Presenting a comparative picture, however, is central to breaking down the assumption of the monolithic block image of the lower class and of women in many current historical surveys. In chapter 4, Fuchs turns her attention to urban life, beginning with the nature of urban work and how it changed the concept of family and gender roles. The crises that struck urban women led to reliance on work that would be considered outside the pale of morality--that is, the sex trade--but which the community accepted as an expedient response to exigent circumstances. This marks

a shift in community perceptions, gender roles, and even the meaning of work. Chapter 5 continues the focus on urban society, centering on the difficulties of everyday life and the coping strategies that made it possible for the poor to survive and in some ways thrive despite the constant sense of the nearness of the tipping point between need and desperation.

In the final chapter Fuchs makes one of the more intriguing arguments of her text. In chapter 6, "Charity and Welfare," she shows how poor women as a community found empowerment by learning to use and manipulate the social-welfare systems to their advantage. Instead of being passive recipients of middle-class patronizing, women worked the system to their advantage, protecting one another from inspectors and charity workers, holding together their families and defending their homes against intrusion and meddling. Whether taking advantage of faith-based charity or state-sponsored welfare, women subtly took advantage of what they needed while not surrendering any more of their autonomy than they had to. This approach makes for an interesting thought, but there is more to the charity, reform, and welfare movements than middle-class fears of the urban poor. As much as Fuchs finds strength in poor women manipulating the system, she overlooks middle-class reformers who entered into welfare work in sincere hopes of ameliorating the worst of urban poverty. She seems to consider most of the state and faith-based efforts to be directed by assumptions of superiority and condescension. For the poor, Fuchs paints an image of an "us against them" mentality. The strength of this discussion is that it provides a new interpretation of the agency poor women created for themselves to respond to and protect themselves from the intrusion of authority, whether condescending or well intentioned. That is a necessary correction to the sense of powerlessness and voicelessness that is the traditional historical picture of the poor in industrial society.

This text provides a solid introduction to the issues involving women's and gender history, the concepts of "history from below," and the distinction among the various schools of contemporary historiography. As with other works in Cambridge's New Approaches series, it is particularly useful for upper division courses as a starting point for discussion. With its chapter-by-chapter bibliographical suggestions, it is also a goldmine of additional sources for students to delve into. Aside from an occasional lapse into colloquial speech (the anachronistic phrase "deadbeat dads," p. 51, sticks out) and weak connections (such as the fairly obvious discussion of the relationship between housing arrangements and community connections), Fuchs provides a concise analysis that frames the economic and social developments of the long nineteenth century and the changes and crises that the poor, especially poor women, confronted and overcame.

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Citation: Janet M. C. Walmsley. Review of Fuchs, Rachel G. *Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

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