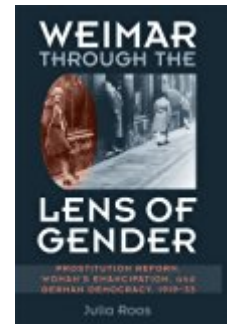


Julia Roos. *Weimar through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Woman's Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919-33*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. viii + 314 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11734-5.

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Reexamining Weimar Germany via the Politics of Prostitution

The key achievement of Julia Roos's meticulously researched *Weimar through the Lens of Gender* lies in the way the author takes what seems at first glance a quite narrow historical issue—the regulation and legal status of prostitution in 1920s Germany—and opens this up to explore such central historiographical questions as the perceived “crisis” or “failure” of Weimar democracy, the strength of the interwar German women's movement, and the rise of National Socialism. By demonstrating not only how the reform efforts of Weimar female emancipists challenged the misogynist basis of state-regulated prostitution, but also how the subsequent backlash against these reforms helped to mobilize antidemocratic sentiments that ultimately contributed to the weakening of the republic, Roos's work succeeds in highlighting the integral importance of gender as a causal factor in Weimar “crisis” and change.

The book consists of five main chapters, moving from the nineteenth-century origins of Germany's system of regulationism—a paradoxical arrangement whereby prostitution was officially illegal yet tolerated under police and medical supervision, and which placed restrictions on streetwalkers' mobility, place of residence, attire, and public behavior—through to the debates and legal reforms of the Weimar era that form the core of the analysis. It concludes with an examination of how conservative reactions to these reforms contributed to the solidification of Nazi power. At the center of Roos's study is the Law for Combating Venereal Diseases (Reichsgesetz

zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten, RGBG), passed in February 1927 following years of debate involving a broad spectrum of political parties, church and morality associations, and female emancipists. The RGBG dramatically altered streetwalkers' tolerated-yet-illegal status by repealing regulationism and decriminalizing prostitution in towns with populations over 15,000, as well as introducing measures to prevent the spread of venereal disease, such as obligatory medical treatment for infected individuals, female and male. It thus “abandoned the misogynist lie of woman's exclusive responsibility for the spread of STDs” (p. 3), and although falling short of full decriminalization, constituted a major victory for the bourgeois women's movement and left-wing social reformers alike.

Of particular significance for historians is Roos's reevaluation of the significance of Weimar feminism, which has frequently been dismissed as anti-individualist, maternalist, and largely ineffective. Roos puts forth a “more complicated” narrative (p. 134), which simultaneously acknowledges middle-class feminists' support for certain repressive measures, including the surveillance and sometimes punitive treatment of (mostly working-class) prostitutes in the interests of social hygiene, while also recognizing their achievements in improving prostitutes' rights in the face of harsh police controls. As well as abolishing regulationism, this included the replacement of the authoritarian “morals police” with welfare-oriented programs for “endangered

girls” and the establishment of a female policing service, leading Roos to conclude that “Weimar feminists were more successful at challenging established gender hierarchies and advancing women’s rights than historians have often claimed” (p. 133). Her work thus contributes to a broader trend within recent Weimar historiography toward emphasizing positive developments in women’s status at this period, which also includes Kathleen Canning’s reassessment of women’s citizenship as a major break in German political history, Atina Grossmann and Cornelia Osborne’s research into feminists’ role in the abortion and sex reform movements, and cultural historians’ emphasis on the ruptures in gender relations symbolized by the sexually and financially independent “New Woman.”[1]

The first chapter uses feminist analysis to identify some of the key factors driving the 1920s push for reform, including prostitutes’ lack of legal protections—compounded by the exploitative practices of the morals police—and regulationism’s misogynist reliance on the moral double standard. While concerns about “venereal pollution” heightened support for police surveillance during the war, several developments in the early Weimar period helped to initiate change, with the abolitionist Social Democrats (SPD) becoming a party of government, and women’s enfranchisement forcing even the bourgeois parties to reconsider their pro-regulationist stance. Chapter 2 moves in the direction of social history, using petitions, letters, and streetwalker periodicals to examine regulationism’s impact on prostitutes’ lives. Here careful analysis of statistical and archival materials allows Roos to dispute contemporaries’ reactionary statements concerning the astronomical rise in commercial sex—claims that continue to be reproduced even in recent representations of the “Golden Twenties,” such as the *Legendary Sin Cities* (2005) documentaries.

The reform efforts of bourgeois feminists are the focus of the third chapter where, as outlined above, Roos highlights the repressive aspects of maternalist feminist policies, but also demonstrates how outrage over regulationism’s misogyny helped to radicalize many abolitionists against broader examples of gender inequality. The fourth chapter investigates the differing ideological and strategic approaches of the two major left-wing parties of 1920s Germany, the SPD and the Communist Party (KPD), finding that while the SPD’s strong identification with the welfare state led it to support the replacement of regulationism with public welfare programs, the KPD insisted that the abolition of the entire capitalist system was the only means of fighting women’s sexual slavery,

whether in the form of bourgeois marriage or prostitution. The final chapter addresses the late-Weimar conservative backlash, highlighting the many different positions on regulationism within the spectrum of right-wing politics. These ranged from blatant antifeminism and authoritarianism in the police and bureaucratic services, to the opposition shown by many religious women, at least initially, to regulationism’s embrace of the double standard. Finally, Roos’s conclusion traces the resurgence of regulationism under Nazi rule, with racialized controls on prostitution seen as necessary to protect “the prerogatives of heterosexual Aryan males” (p. 220).

It is somewhat unfortunate that Roos’s focus on “gender” fails to address the situation of male homosexual and transvestite prostitutes, whose placement outside of regulationist structures might have added an extra dimension not only to her analysis of the misogyny underlying this system, but also to the examination of debates surrounding moral pollution and decay, where her focus is almost entirely on discourses surrounding the promiscuous heterosexual woman. This omission is surprising given that Roos refers at various points to the writings of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, one of several homosexual rights activists at this period whose work also addressed the plight of male prostitutes. This is, however, a small criticism of what is, on the whole, an outstanding piece of historical scholarship, characterized by nuanced analyses of archival sources and exhaustive coverage of the secondary literature. Roos’s study represents an important contribution to both Weimar and gender history, highlighting the radical improvements that 1920s reforms had on prostitutes’ status within society—at least temporarily—as well as how these “remarkably tolerant” (p. 213) policies provoked reactions that, in undermining support for Weimar democracy, contributed to the demise of the republic itself.

Note

[1]. Kathleen Canning, “Claiming Citizenship: Suffrage and Subjectivity in Germany after the First World War,” in *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 212-37; Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Cornelia Osborne, *Cultures of Abortion in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn, 2007), and *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany: Women’s Reproductive Rights and Duties* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992). Numerous scholars have emphasized the social

and cultural rupture marked by the Weimar-era “New Woman”; see for example the edited collection *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Richard W. McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and “New Objectivity”* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

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