H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences


**Kathleen Canning.** *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006. xiii + 284 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4357-2.

**Reviewed by** Ann Allen (Department of History, University of Louisville)

**Published on** H-German (October, 2006)

## Difficult Dichotomies: The Theory and Practice of Gender History

Kathleen Canning opens this book by stating her purpose: "to bring social theory, including feminist theory, into conversation with the archives" (p. ix). Canning, a historian of women and gender relations in Germany, now serves as co-editor of the journal *Gender History*. Most of the essays in this volume are reprinted from other publications; the first dates back to 1994, but the final one is part of a work that is still underway.

These essays deal with the development of the field of gender history from its origins in the 1980s until the present–a process in which Canning herself has played an important role as author, teacher and editor. Gender history arose out of the field of women's history, a field that dated back to the 1960s in North America but only to about 1980 in Germany and some other European countries. The initial purpose of women's history was to recover the experience of women, who had so long been absent from the historical record. The new visibility of women not only expanded, but also disrupted the field of history. Historians of women criticized Marxist notions of class–the theoretical basis for the fields of social and labor history–for their failure to take into account women's experience of work, which was very different from men's. National histories, too, were revealed as one-sided narratives centered on male concerns and excluding those of women.

But meanwhile, the field of women's history itself was in ferment. Women of minority groups rightly insisted that no such group as "women" could be identified without attention to the many differences–in race, class, sexual orientation and other aspects of identity–that divided it. And in the 1980s, what Canning calls an epistemological crisis questioned the very foundation of women's history as well as other social-science fields that aimed to discover and chronicle "experience." Widely read theorists claimed that no objective account was possible, for experience was always conveyed by language and discourse, and these were permeated by the speaker's subjectivity and the culture's conventions. Some historians shifted their focus from experience itself–which they claimed was unknowable–to the texts through which it was mediated. Other theorists pointed out that sex itself–the bedrock upon which the concept "woman" was based–was less a biological constant than a cultural con-

struction. And claiming that the category of "woman" existed only in relationship to that of "man," some historians redefined their field as "gender history"–a field that included men well as women in an analysis of gender difference as an organizing principle in all human societies.

All of these developments were intensely controversial, and it is these controversies that Canning's essays address. It is a difficult task, which she performs admirably. Each essay brings together an immense body of material–both theory and concrete examples–to explicate and clarify a complex issue. This is definitely a book for specialists–it presupposes a general knowledge of women's and gender history and of the often esoteric vocabulary of poststructuralist and feminist theory. However, Canning shows an impressive command not only of her own field–German social history–but of other fields as well, including philosophy, social theory and the histories of other European countries. Thus the book should appeal to an international community of gender historians.

Canning assesses the impact of gender studies on the historical conceptions of the body, class and citizenship, and on interpretations of labor, social and women's history. In each of these areas, she finds that scholarly discussions are polarized around "difficult dichotomies." One of these–discourse/experience–she has summed up in the title of a recent lecture: "Experience: Is Everything Discourse?" Other dichotomies involve class/gender; materialist/cultural interpretations of the body; and women's/gender history. In the debates arising from these oppositions, Canning presents herself as a mediator. "Oppositional modes of thinking," she wisely points out, "are far more effective in dismantling categories and narratives than in reconfiguring them" (p. 120).

Deploring the dogmatism into which scholarly discussions often fall, Canning finds merit in both sides of almost every argument. To be sure, she explains, discourse often obscures experience by veiling it under the linguistic conventions of an epoch, and by privileging those who can speak over those who must be silent. But through knowledge of the context in which texts were written, the historian can still reconstruct individual experience and its material context. I would add that a history that is about discourses rather than people makes very dull reading. Canning admits that gender history has disrupted Marxist notions of a unified "working class" by showing that working women and men had different, often antagonistic, interests and goals. Nonetheless, she concludes that the effect has been not to invalidate, but rather to deepen and broaden, our understanding of class difference. The discipline of labor history, which must now attend to gender as well as class, has become "less bounded" and now explores "a wider terrain of institutions, movements, languages" (p. 137).

Canning admits that the body cannot be interpreted as purely material and biological, and that it too, like the mind, is molded and inscribed by power relationships. However, she insists that the materiality of the body cannot be dismissed, for it is often the basis for resistance–as when working women cited their experiences of pregnancy, abortion and illness to justify demands for improved social services and working conditions. By looking at gender rather than just at women, historians have broadened their analysis to deal with men and with the many aspects of culture and politics from which women have been excluded. But gender history has not disabled women's history–indeed, Canning notes that "the relationship between the two concepts [gender and women] remains uneven, varied, and above all historically specific" (p. 61).

Canning tries not so much to resolve these questions–to which she claims that there are no clear answers–as to affirm that robust debate is a sign of her field's vitality. And indeed, gender history is a flourishing enterprise, which (from small and marginal beginnings) has now expanded into many areas of historical inquiry, subverting old paradigms and insistently calling attention to new questions. Canning perceptively outlines the broader political trends that have driven the development of the field over the past twenty years. Among these are the fall of state socialism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, which has discredited Marxism and focused attention on the relationship of gender to nationality and citizenship in newly independent states; the decline of labor movements, a trend that has called some of the basic assumptions of labor history into question; and the continuing prominence of gender roles and reproduction as political issues.

But Canning overlooks another political arena obviously relevant to her subject–the academy. Originally, women's history was linked to a specifically feminist agenda–the opening of universities, which had been bastions of patriarchy for centuries–to women scholars. Women's history also hoped to provide a "usable past" as a basis for political activism in the present. At least to some extent, the first of these goals has been achieved. Like other discourses, the polarized controversies that

Canning describes arise from a specific context–in this case, the competitive struggle of women scholars to gain academic prestige and advancement. But to what extent is this–or should it be–a feminist enterprise, driven by a vision that goes beyond the ambitions and interests of individuals? Canning refers to feminism and feminist theory, but chiefly in connection with the origins of gender history–she never explains what these terms mean to her or whether they are useful or relevant any longer. In the perspective provided by the more than thirty years over which women's and gender history have developed, the question of these fields' relationship to feminism would be well worth reopening.



**Citation:** Ann Allen. Review of Canning, Kathleen, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12403