

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Karen Hagemann, Jean Quataert. *Gendering Modern German History. Rewritings of the Mainstream.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007.

Reviewed by Molly J. Loberg (California Polytechnic University)

Published on H-German (July, 2003)

Writing on the history of German women has—like women’s history elsewhere—undergone remarkable expansion and change since it began in the late 1960s. Like women’s history generally, the first decade of research culminated in the publication of books with programmatic titles like “Women search for their past”. Since then, the search for a “herstory” and the question of women’s visibility has become more and more of a moot point. Not only have the questions become more varied and complex (which women are we searching for, which women are visible, in what way, when, where, and in which concrete historical contexts?). There has also been, as in the case of the historiography of other countries, an increasing emphasis on writing the history of women as part of a broader history of gender. Women’s history still continues to flourish alongside gender history but the focus of research has increasingly shifted from women to gender. This shift of emphasis acknowledges the assertion that gender is not only a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, but also a primary way of signifying relationships of power. Moreover, gender is of crucial importance for the creation of meaning in social and political life. Far from referring only to men and women, gender constructions are used to give meaning to many other fields of the economy, society, and politics, and even everyday life. And here, too, they constitute relations of asymmetry and hierarchy. This understanding of gender has made it possible to make men and masculinity objects of historical research. Research in the field of women and gender in modern German history has followed these general trends of development from women’s to gender history. The number of articles and books by women’s and gender historians with a focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany is

still increasing. The best of these studies are among the most innovative in their field of German history. They have pushed forward the move from traditional political history to social history. They helped to develop social history and broaden its focus. Many of them took the “linguistic turn” seriously. The results of this research have certainly changed our knowledge of German history, but to what extent? Did they also change ‘mainstream’ historiography on Germany - as early women’s and gender historians hoped? How developed are the differences between North America and Germany in this respect? This were the main questions that stood in the center of the German-North-American Colloquium “Gendering Modern German History: Rewritings of the Mainstream (nineteenth-twentieth centuries)” that Karen Hagemann, DAAD-Visiting Professor for German and European Studies at the Munk Centre for International Studies in the academic year 2002/03, and Christine v. Oertzen, research fellow at the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C. (GHI), organized in Toronto on March 21-23, 2003. The conference was co-organized by the Joint Initiative in German and European Studies at the Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto, and the GHI, and amply supported the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The conveners invited thirty-one experts from Germany and North-America to perform “a critical stock-taking” of the field. Altogether nearly a hundred scholars from Germany, Canada, and the US participated in the conference. In her introduction, Karen Hagemann discussed the development of women and gender studies in the field of German history and compared the state of the field in Germany and the United States. She emphasized that by and large the development of women’s and gender history in Germany followed the general trends

of the field, but that national differences still remain and not only in the way in which "Gender/Geschlecht" is defined. The mere fact that the German term "Geschlecht" means both sex and gender is important for conceptualizing and writing about the field. There are also differences in the way in which German scholars do gender history. These differences are the result, on the one hand, of a distinct historiographical tradition, and on the other of the generally more hierarchical and conservative structures of German academia. In order to gain access to this system, the themes of gender studies tend more frequently to follow the trends of the so-called 'mainstream' research, while at the same time approaching research in a different way. This explains for example why interest in a theme such as the military, war and masculinity was relatively strong early on in Germany. What is more, despite many frustrating experiences, some gender historians continue to cherish the vision of reciprocity and integration between gender history and economic, social and political history. Thus, they do not wish to write only for the community of feminist scholars, but seek instead to develop a dialogue. As part of this dialogue, they try to challenge the 'mainstream' by questioning its theories and methods, periodization, focus, value systems, priorities and hierarchies. Feminist critique continues to focus on the widely shared concept of the "universal" and the "particular" in history, since what the so-called "mainstream" defines as universal or particular is nothing else but a decision about relevance. Decisions about what is relevant measure the so-called universal in history by the male yardstick of the decision makers who dominate politics, the military and the economy, and the mental universe of the opinion makers who shape scholarship and the media, while at the same time constructing anything that deviates from it as a "special case" even if it affects the overwhelming majority of a society. Hagemann's assessment was skeptical. She stressed that she cannot see at the moment that this challenge has met with much success. Despite the development of women's history into gender history the prevailing opinion still seems to be that gender history is 'merely' or primarily women's history, in a dual sense: history studied by and referring to women. This notion is the basis of the academic policy of 'additive integration', which has largely dominated until now—a policy that makes it possible to continue to ignore the importance of 'gender'. Everything related to 'women' and 'gender' is still constructed as a 'special' interest and delegated to women's and gender studies. In North America, especially the USA, the situation appears to be much better, on the one hand because the proportion of women in tenured professorships is sig-

nificantly higher and on the other because women's and gender studies enjoy a greater degree of acceptance, although there are substantial variations from university to university. <p> During the conference, the connections between different structures of the academic systems and different approaches and trends in the development of women's and gender history were one important topic of discussion. Especially German participants emphasized the importance of the different structures for the possibilities and limits of the research. They underscored moreover that the differences in the historiographical tradition also nowadays form the research interests and methods even in the field of gender history. A second point of intense discussion was the actual relationship between women's and gender history on the one side, and gender history and the history of men and masculinities on the other. Some North-American scholars questioned the increasing interest of German gender historians in masculinity studies. They wondered if this is only a strategy of assimilation and integration into the still very powerful German 'mainstream'. Others disagreed and defined the history of men and masculinities as one of the most innovative fields of gender studies that pushed forward to a rewriting of history in general, because it analyzes the making of asymmetries, power structures and hierarchies. A third subject of ongoing discussion during the conference was the question what we mean if we speak about the 'mainstream' and whether we should use this term. The majority agreed not only that it is more difficult than ever to define this term, because of the increasing plurality of historiographical approaches, but also that it is problematic to use the term: if we use it, we reproduce the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion that are an inherent part of this term by defining ourselves as 'marginal', as 'outsiders' of the 'mainstream'. Therefore, the major questions of the conference were: What are the goals with which we conduct gender history in the field of German history? What consequences do different goals have for our history-writing? How we can get—especially in Germany—more influence on the field in general, if we aim for a 'mainstreaming' of gender history? These questions run more or less through all conference papers and comments. <p> In the first paper "Nation, National Identities and Collective Memories," Geoff Eley (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) discussed how gender might be used to rewrite perhaps the most familiar narrative of German history: nationalism. The Enlightenment and French Revolution provided the modern political vocabularies of "nation" and "citizen," but also assumed binary gender distinctions. At its "constitution-making" moment (1860s-1870s), Ger-

many, like many other countries, drew upon vocabularies that posited inclusions and exclusions, equalities and hierarchies. But the engendered terms of German citizenship, according to Eley, must also be historicized and understood within the unique circumstances of the struggle for unification and the *Kulturkampf*, when aggressive boundary drawing by German liberals between backward Catholicism and the progressive middle-class bourgeois family set long-lasting definitions of national belonging, and shaped the terms of women's political agency throughout the Wilhelmine period. Further study of the discourses at Germany's multiple "constitution-making moments," Eley concluded, might reveal the possibilities and limitations of making new claims to citizenship at moments of historical rupture. His paper made a strong case that gendered discourses of the nation were shaped and reshaped during key historical moments. <p> Karen Hagemann discussed another traditional field of historiography in her presentation: "The Military and War." She stated that German military history belonged to the fields of historiography that have confronted the challenge of women's and gender history for a long time at best only on the margins. The obvious 'maleness' of the subject was perceived as quasi-'natural' given, which thus did not need to be addressed. In her paper, she discussed which concept of gender might be especially fruitful for an analysis of the military and war, and which dimensions of the military and war are influenced by gender. She pursued the question of whether, and to what extent, the new "military history in extension" also encompasses gender history, and how far gender studies have succeeded in rewriting the so-called 'mainstream'. At the end she provided a brief overview of the state of research on the military, war and gender, and suggested some of the main deficits of this research. She proposed that because of the close interrelationship between civilian and military society, home and the front, both should be analyzed more strongly in their contexts. Moreover, the obsolete periodizations should be abandoned and different periods should be compared far more than usual. Last but not least more regional and national comparative studies and transnational research is necessary. <p> Thomas Kuehnes (University of Bielefeld) paper entitled "The State, Parties, and Politics" focused on politics as the decision-making process of the state (i.e. national parliaments, parties, elections, governments, law), from which women in Germany have been traditionally excluded. "Bringing the State back in" that could be—suggested—the program of historiography which would utilize the challenge of gender studies for the analysis of

state actions and institutions. New cultural histories of politics have made significant contributions to this approach by challenging the notion of the "autonomy" and "objectivity" of the state. But gender has to be integrated as well. He stressed that here, as in other field of gender history, gender is only one of many important categories of difference for a broader inquiry into asymmetries and power relations in state related politics. This is especially true if one wants to analyze the nature of political networks, rituals, symbols and rhetoric. Kuehne concluded that scholars who want to grasp asymmetries and hierarchies not only have to study the interrelationship between different categories of difference but also widen gender history and include the history of men and masculinities. <p> In the fourth panel, Belinda Davis (Rutgers University) presented a paper on "Protest and Social Movements". She outlined some of the problems and paradoxes revealed by research on women's political activism, for example: the trade-offs women face in seeking equal status within, working outside, or trying to modify structures created by men. Women's loss of status within protest movements after these groups gain political power; conservative women politicians' tendency to achieve greater influence despite or because of their advocacy of more traditional women's roles; the fragmentation of women's movements as organizing exposes differences among women (class, racial, religious, sexual orientation). Davis asked participants to consider what such findings suggest both for the desired direction for future activism as well as further scholarly inquiry. <p> Edith Saurer (University of Vienna) reviewed in her presentation areas of gender research that have been productive for the study of "Religion and Religious/Ethnic Differences." These included: the denominational women's movement (Jewish, Catholic and Protestant), the "feminization" of religion in the 18th/19th centuries, and the ambivalences of attaining greater influence within structures dominated by men. She concluded that, in an age of globalization, comparative work becomes all the more important, especially on the topics of conversion (e.g. from Judaism to Protestantism in the 19th century), intermarriage, and religious plurality. <p> In the sixth panel, Maria B. Baader (University of Toronto) presented a paper on "Jew and other Germans" in which she considered the relationship between multiple historiographical margins and mainstreams. Jewish history was originally a reflexive enterprise by which Jews explored their relationship to God and the community. Beginning in the 1970s, however, Jewish history transcended the margins as non-Jewish scholars and readers demonstrated greater interest, especially in the Shoah. Baader eval-

uated as a relative success the incorporation of gender into mainstream scholarship within the larger framework of German-Jewish history. Gender played a pioneering role in German-Jewish social history (especially of the middle-class) and it was social (rather than intellectual or religious) history that made the greatest inroads into established narratives. Baader suggested the Jewish working class and representations of masculinity and nation as areas for further study. <p> Although scholarship on gender formations under the Nazi regime has surged, many of these works remain within the established “perpetrator, victim, bystander” paradigm and few have made it into the “big picture” histories, Doris Bergen (University of Notre Dame) commented in her presentation “The Construction of Race and the Holocaust.” Bergen explained how gender research might advance our understanding not only of relationships between men and women in this period, but also the basic mechanisms of power hierarchies. She described how the courts’ ascription of certain racial/ethnic classifications (e.g. Volksdeutschen) depended on gendered criteria: fitness for duty (male), reproductive capacities and household skills (female). Complicating “race” and “blood,” formerly considered fixed in the Nazi worldview, suggests one example of how gender research may reshape such an established field. <p> Kathleen Canning (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) charted in her paper divergent trajectories for the categories “Class, Citizenship and the Welfare State” within different national historiographies. As an example, the Anglo-American focus on class as a set of meanings and experiences left more room for the study of women than a more structuralist German approach, Canning contended. Gender studies and the linguistic turn fostered new paradigms for understanding class, just as mainstream German scholarship moved on to other social formations and, thus, neglected important contributions by German and non-German historians. Canning considers the “unmooring” of structural categories an interdisciplinary innovation and expressed concern that “mainstreaming” gender history might close off future exchanges by concentrating too much on disciplinary aspirations. <p> Merith Niehuss’s (University of the Bundeswehr, Munich) presentation on “Families, Household and Consumption” offered suggestions regarding how historians might greater utilize research in other disciplines. She considered statistics a source not fully exploited by historians, particularly for work on the 20th century. The fields of psychology and sociology, she suggested, could further help historians to interpret decisions made about employment, family size and household management. Niehuss advocated greater

comparative work on women’s lives across different periods and regimes (GDR versus FRG), as well as the lives of children and youths. <p> With changing notions of sexuality during the 1960s-1970s as serving as the background and impetus, early inquiries into “Bodies, Sexuality and Reproduction” focused on breaks and continuities of the Weimar and Nazi period, Attina Grossman (The Cooper Union, New York) recounted. The inquiries revealed striking counterintuitive: in contrast to more progressive imagery, Weimar institutions experimented with sexual regulation schemes and population control and, despite their reactionary reputation, National Socialists encouraged certain radical forms of “Aryan” heterosexuality. Subsequent work continues to concentrate on the regulation of sexuality, often as a way of exploring sexuality on the social margins, rather than the everyday practices, experiences and attitudes of historical subjects (e.g. the New Woman). Despite the methodological challenges, Grossman asserted that it might be time to give these areas greater attention. <p> In the last panel entitled “From the Margins to the Mainstream? A German-North America Comparison,” Jane Caplan (Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia) and Hanna Schissler (University of Hannover) offered concluding comments on the conference presentations and discussion. They focused not only on points that had been raised several times in the discussions but also on deficits that should be discussed further. One was the question what exactly is meant in different academic contexts by “gender” and how does the status of this concept compare in German and North American scholarship. Caplan referred in her answer to this question to Joan Scott’s conclusions that scholarship has approached gender in two ways (1) as binary male/female differences and (2), as sets of masculine/feminine subject-positions (i.e. not fixed social or biological categories). She cautioned that the predominance of the first methodological camp has obscured the issue of multiple sexualities, both in papers presented at the conference and the field in general. Another question both commented on was the problem of the margin/mainstream model. They demanded that this model should not only be discussed more critically but also should be contextualized. It might better describe the position of “gender” in Germany, where such scholarship has faced greater institutional barriers. To state this does in no way imply that research by German scholars lags behind North American historiography. Rather, it acknowledges the distinct professional cultures in which historians work. <p> A publication on the topic of this conference is under preparation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Molly J. Loberg. Review of Hagemann, Karen; Quataert, Jean, *Gendering Modern German History. Rewritings of the Mainstream*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15288>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.