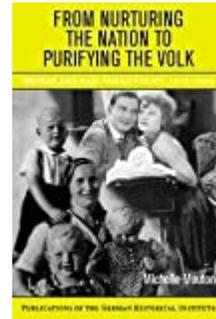




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Racializing the Family

Michelle Mouton's study of Weimar and Nazi policy is a welcome addition to the literatures on women, the welfare state, the family, and resistance and collaboration. Marshaling a wide range of sources that includes oral interviews with forty-eight women, Mouton explores the formation and implementation of family policy in both German regimes at the national, state, and local levels. From these perspectives, she looks at policies regarding marriage and divorce, pronatalism, support for mothers, single motherhood, and foster care and adoption. Mouton's approach—and one of the chief merits of her study—is to examine these aspects of public policy and their implementation comparatively. In doing so, she builds the case that the Nazi family policy differed substantially from Weimar's in that the former was monolithic and racist and the latter more heterogeneous and contested.

The main framework for Mouton's analysis is gender and how policymakers sought to stabilize society and encourage reproduction by shoring up traditional roles for women. In contrast to historians who see in the de-

velopment of the Weimar welfare state the potential for intrusion and Foucauldian control, Mouton emphasizes the improvements that the policies made in the lives of German women and their children. Where some may see a fatal divisiveness behind piecemeal Weimar programs for mothers and children, Mouton sees political contestation over the balance between the needs of the individual and those of society. The potential dangers of eugenic arguments and programs were held in check by intense political debates and by a legislative process that was (notoriously) characterized by a lack of consensus. In Mouton's assessment, the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 represented a caesura in German history in two important respects. First, all debate and political struggle over policy ceased; the needs of the nation were definitively elevated above the needs of the individual. Second, the Nazis completely redefined family policy on the basis of race. Mouton argues that, "although Weimar-era efforts to 'normalize' behavior did make it easier for Nazi authorities to intrude into the private sphere to evaluate the worth of individuals, Nazi policy represented a radi-

cal departure from anything that preceded it” (p. 15).

Although Mouton emphasizes discontinuity between Weimar and Nazi policies regarding the family, she argues that, while the Nazis enforced a consensus regarding the family, the implementation of policy on the local level was anything but uniform. To make this case, she moves her analytical gaze from the national level to her case study of Westphalia, a region marked by high postwar unemployment, the lowest postwar birthrates in Germany, a large Catholic (as well as Protestant) population, and resistance to Nazification. Church records, case files of social workers, court documents, and local administrative records reveal a high degree of variation in the ways that doctors, social workers, officials, and activists put policy into action. Drawing inspiration, she tells us, from *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life), Mouton makes colorful use of her interviews to demonstrate the ways in which ordinary women, officials, doctors, and social workers sometimes manipulated legal proceedings, appropriated programs for their own purposes, and eschewed political indoctrination. Mouton is careful to point out that these instances of evasion did not constitute a meaningful resistance to the regime. As historians have demonstrated with regard to other aspects of Nazi society, opposition was personal rather than political and offered *Resistenz* in the sense of providing an obstacle rather than principled opposition. Furthermore, Mouton’s sources capture the devastating consequences that Nazi family policies had on German and German-Jewish women who were deemed biologically “unworthy.”

Mouton organizes her work into six chapters, each following the development of a specific policy in the two periods. The first chapter examines marriage policy. In the wake of the First World War, Weimar policymakers across the political spectrum sought ways to encourage healthier and more productive marriages in an effort to raise the birthrate and address the putative moral decline that many Germans believed the war had caused. Yet the tension between the Weimar commitments to the traditional family and the equality of women, both inscribed in the constitution, meant that complete regulation was never possible. Thus, for example, Weimar officials were never able to enact mandatory medical examinations to ensure eugenically healthy marriages; Weimar policymakers, concerned to discourage the genetically “unhealthy” from marrying, had to content themselves with public information campaigns and education programs. This was not the case after 1933, when the Nazis implemented tighter racial and health requirements for

marriage. Similarly, applications for the infamous “marriage loans” required medical examination that tested for a broad range of “deficiencies” to ensure the racial and biological desirability of the applicants.

As invasive as these measures were, and as devastating as they could be to those whose applications were denied, Mouton shows that their invasiveness was attenuated by a shortage of doctors to administer the exams and, sometimes, the lack of cooperation on the part of doctors who refused to enforce the strict requirements. The marriage loan program was meant to increase the number of procreative unions and at the same time encourage women to leave the workforce; many couples, however, were discouraged from applying because of the stringent medical examinations. Since until 1937 the loan was only available to women who quit the workforce to marry, some women found it necessary to join the workforce for a time to qualify for the loan. Mouton provides ample evidence that German women found some room for maneuvering under the pronatalist and antinatalist policies of the regime. Women who received negative results from medical exams were sometimes able to find second opinions. Social workers’ case files reveal citizens directly challenging local officials and reversing court decisions. Mouton is careful not to make too much of this “resistance”: few challenges were in fact successful. Such actions “do not constitute resistance, nor did they significantly challenge the regime,” she maintains (p. 281). What such acts of defiance demonstrate is that “the Nazis never made it a priority to enforce uniform implementation of family policy” and that the regime was “more flexible” than some scholars believe (p. 281).

The Nazis, in fact, redefined what was meant by a “healthy marriage” in the 1938 divorce law, introduced after the *Anschluss* with Austria. Divorce had been the subject of considerable debate in the Weimar period, and legislators grappled with the problem of how to revise existing (and prohibitive) divorce laws in a way that encouraged strong and happy unions while not undermining marriage as an institution. While no consensus was ever reached, Mouton’s investigation of divorce cases, including eighty-seven cases of reconciliation, reveal a judiciary creating policy from the bench by broadly interpreting “culpable marital breakdown,” which replaced adultery as the main grounds for divorce (p. 81). The broad interpretation effectively served as an approximation of “irreconcilable differences,” which the existing code did not provide and which Weimar reformers failed to introduce into civil law. At the same time, Weimar judges in the German adversarial divorce system increas-

ingly found women responsible for marital breakdown—a development Mouton argues was likely the result of women’s newly found legal equality. After 1933, the Nazis redefined a “healthy” marriage in terms of race. Unable to introduce a general “no-fault” divorce out of deference to the public’s traditional views of marriage, the Nazis had to content themselves in 1938 with introducing a law that provided for “no-fault” divorces in cases of unfruitful marriages and in cases of mixed-race unions. As with other policies, the implementation did not proceed smoothly. The impact of the new law seems to have been much more dramatic in Austria than in Germany, where the number of divorces fell from 54,402 in 1934 to 49,497 in 1938; the divorce rate fell again once the war started, although numbers in Dortmund suggest an increase in the number of divorces granted to those who applied.

Mouton’s next three chapters deal with motherhood, both married and single. Weimar and Nazi Germans alike celebrated (wedded) motherhood and sought to promote an idealized model of motherly virtues. Mouton compares the campaigns to honor mothers in both periods and underscores the extent to which previously decentralized and disparate campaigns like Mother’s Day in the Weimar period became nationalized and racialized under the Nazis. In fact, Nazi policymakers undermined their own project by requiring applicants for the Mother Cross to undergo medical examinations to prove their biological “worthiness.” Such efforts to increase the birthrate by encouraging women to take on the hallowed role of mother were singularly unsuccessful, especially after the onset of the war when the burdens of motherhood increased. Such burdens were well known to Weimar and Nazi policymakers, who sought to encourage births and improve the rearing of children by helping women with their maternal tasks. The Weimar period saw the development of mother-advice centers (first established during the war), the proliferation of kindergartens, the extension of wartime maternity benefits into peacetime, and paid maternity leave (in 1927) for industrial workers. These programs persisted under the Nazis, as did the “mother recuperation” programs, organized by churches and welfare organizations in the 1920s, which sent women on vacations in homes that provided physical and emotional rest. The program organized by the Protestant Women’s Aid Society in Westphalia sent 25 women in 1921 and 2,400 in 1932. Recuperation programs organized by the National Socialist People’s Welfare Organization and the National Socialist Women’s Organization continued to attract subscribers, but now were dis-

tinctly ideological, requiring racial and political education.

Programs aimed at assisting mothers presupposed the traditional married family. After the First World War, the status of unwed motherhood became a matter of considerable political debate. There was a recognized need to improve the conditions of illegitimate children, who were represented disproportionately in the rate of infant mortality, while at the same time not undermining the institution of marriage. There was considerable disagreement over the issue, yet Weimar politicians did manage to put into law practices that improved support for illegitimate children and raised their life expectancy. Chief among these innovations was the Youth Welfare Act of 1922, which led to the creation of youth departments that would take over guardianship of illegitimate children. Mouton qualifies the argument advanced by other scholars that welfare for single mothers led to intrusive state control and increased stigmatization. Single motherhood and illegitimacy were still stigmatized, to be sure, but the decline in illegitimate infant mortality indicates that the material welfare of illegitimate children improved. As with divorce, Nazi policies regarding single motherhood were shaped by two mutually exclusive goals: the desire to create as many “racially fit” babies as possible and the need to perpetuate traditional gender norms. Propaganda campaigns aimed at reducing the stigma of single motherhood and encouraging women to bear children (“Bear a child for the Fuehrer!”) remained largely unsuccessful. The infamous *Lebensborn* program, the brainchild of Heinrich Himmler, who would later encourage men to impregnate women before going to the front, was an attempt to remove illegitimacy from public view. Publicly, the regime reinforced its support of families by insisting that the family was the primary means through which children would be educated and socialized for the racial community. Mouton argues that “the Nazis did not redefine motherhood per se; rather, they tried to separate the rearing of children from the bearing of children” (p. 216).

The final chapter of the book is likely to be the most interesting to the members of this list. While attempting to strengthen the traditional family for the purposes of social stability and procreation, both Weimar and Nazi policymakers faced the reality of large numbers of “orphaned, fatherless, and indigent children” who could not be raised within a traditional home. The task of policymakers in both eras was “defining the institution of the family in such a way as to enable the creation of non-biologically based groups that function as families” (p.

236). Children made up the largest group of state dependents after the war (1.2 million in 1918). As with single motherhood, the key piece of Weimar legislation was the Youth Welfare Act of 1922, which empowered state welfare agents to place children whose parents could not or would not care for them in alternative circumstances. Since foster care, it was believed, offered children the best personal care, youth welfare departments sought to improve the quality and consistency of foster care by establishing strict regulations and oversight, measures that foster parents often resisted. Options for foster parents to adopt their charges improved (as it was no longer in practice for solely blood relatives to have the right), but at the same time state agencies, eager to assure the safety and health of children, developed stricter guidelines and requirements for adoption, some of which proved to be rather prohibitive. The sheer enormity of the task of enforcing the regulations far outstripped the human and fiscal resources available to the responsible agencies. Mouton thus seems far less sanguine about the progressive potential of Weimar adoption and foster policies than in the cases discussed above.

Under the Nazis, the agencies responsible for the care of parentless and indigent children was centralized under the aegis of the National Socialist People's Welfare Organization (NSV), the purview of which was restricted to the welfare of "racially pure" children. While the Nazi rhetoric of family values framed the regime's approach to the care of parentless and indigent children, the NSV shifted the focus of foster care away from the parents and to mothers; single women were now allowed to become foster parents. It is in this area, more than any other, where we see the Nazi challenge to the traditional family: "Fatherhood and the traditional family came to be regarded as less important than race in the creation of non-blood-based families" (p. 270). Nonetheless, in propaganda, the Nazis promoted the special "bond" that should develop between child and foster parent. In an effort to disassociate foster care from pecuniary gain, the Reich minister for People's Education and Propaganda even went so far as to prohibit newspaper advertisements and the promise of monetary reward. Mouton provides some evidence to suggest that some Nazis no longer viewed consanguinity as a prerequisite for foster or adoptive parenthood, although blood was important in another way: those identified by the regime as racial outsiders could not participate in adoption or foster care programs. By 1938, the National Socialist organizations were in charge

of all adoption proceedings, which allowed the regime to better manage the adoption process in racial terms. Existing adoptions in "mixed-race" households were threatened with dissolution, although Mouton finds evidence of resistance to this policy. Not surprisingly, new guidelines imposed over old ones to enforce the racial qualifications for adoption made the legal process far more difficult, despite the Nazis' commitment to placing children in new homes.

Mouton conceives her work as a history of women and everyday life; she thus focuses on motherhood in her study of the German family. She takes Gisela Bock to task at one point for suggesting that National Socialism was a "cult of fatherhood" because the Nazis privileged men over women (by paying marriage loans to men, for example). The Nazis "disregarded fatherhood and viewed men as breadwinners instead" (p. 124). While Mouton does not ignore men in her study, she does not explore how Nazi policies affected those family members. Who, for example, was the intended audience for the propaganda film *Papa's Birthday* (1938), which depicted Joseph Goebbels's multiple children frolicking about their father in apparent celebration of his fruitfulness?

Some of the conclusions Mouton draws will perhaps not surprise historians of modern Germany. The bureaucracy in charge of enforcing policy was "far more discerning" than some historians have assumed; there was a great deal of "selective compliance" on the part of Germans with regard to family policies; and the Nazis were, in fact, ultimately unsuccessful in attaining many of their policy goals (p. 279). Yet what Mouton provides is a valuable examination of the intersection of public policy and private life before and after 1933. She shows us "families constantly work[ing] to keep the Nazis out," and offers a vivid account of the ways in which the Nazis sought to refashion the German family to suit the needs of the racial state and how those efforts affected ordinary citizens (p. 280). Although Mouton does not look ahead to the period after Nazism, her work helps to explain the remarkable durability of traditional gender roles and the German family as well as the desire of many Germans after the war to return to the gender status quo. Aside from German historians, scholars interested in the family, women, and social policy will read the work with great benefit. Its accessible style and numerous illustrations makes this book useful for researchers, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates.

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