H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Hagemann, Jean H. Quataert. *Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting Historiography.* Berghahn Books, 2007. viii + 301 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-207-0.

Reviewed by Michelle Mouton (University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh)

Published on H-German (August, 2010)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Successes and Failures in Gendering German History across the "Atlantic Divide"

Gendering Modern German History explores the growth and development of gender and women's history over the last three decades. It asks to what degree the field has succeeded in entering the mainstream of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German historiography. In the introduction, Karen Hagemann and Jean Quataert provide a useful and thoughtful comparative history of the fields of women's and gender history in the United States and Germany. Women's history, they argue, grew out of the social advocacy of the women's movement in the late 1960s in America and the 1970s in Germany. Feminists thought that by producing high-quality scholarship documenting women's role in history–"herstory"–they could change the master narrative. From this initial optimistic starting point came the establishment of women's and gender history as a field in its own right. Its consistent influence in the wider historiographical narrative of German history has developed in complex ways. Hagemann and Quataert argue that women's history and gender studies made earlier and greater inroads in German historiography in the United States than in Germany. The uneven integration of women's history reflects structural and institutional differences between the two countries. The presence of private women's colleges together with tuition-driven enrollment encouraged American universities to hire women to teach women's history. As a result, from the beginning of women's history, American women followed a liberal model, working inside the universities. In sharp contrast, the state-financed, hierarchical nature of the German university system has hindered the incorporation of women's history into university departments and, thereby, women's history scholars into the profession. Feminist historians and feminist history thus experienced a "double marginalization" in the German academy, with the result that an active non-academic culture of women's history was born and has continued to flourish. Despite institutional hindrances, however, German women academics constitute an integral part of modern scholarly and public conversation.

Women's history scholars increasingly debate the usefulness of mainstreaming as a goal. In the beginning, some women feared that mainstreaming women's history through its professionalization would compromise feminist and interdisciplinary work, even if it greatly expanded the institutionalization of women's history. Since the 1990s, gender has increasingly become the working paradigm of the field, with more attention devoted to men, masculinities, and male bodies. Equally important have been debates about "agency" and "experience" in method and theory. Although feminist historians outside Germany began to claim gender for women's history, German feminist scholars were less inclined to shift away from women to the broader category of gender. Recently, German scholars have taken the lead in the amount of scholarship devoted to men and masculinity. Simultaneously, a backlash has developed, with some

historians expressing concern that replacing women with gender as the "basis of feminist politics, rooted firmly in assumptions about shared experience and identity across class, ethnic or racial backgrounds" will obstruct the reestablishment of "the history of women's protests and achievements undertaken in the name of the sisterhood" (p. 20). These questions receive considerable exploration in the book's collections of essays.

Each of the essays examines a different area of historical inquiry, with an eye to the questions raised in the book's introduction: progress toward the full integration of women's and gender history, the worthiness of mainstreaming as a goal, and the "Atlantic Divide." Written by major scholars in the field, the ten chapters examine nation/nationalism (Angelika Schaser), colonialism/ethnicity (Birthe Kundrus), war and military (Karen Hagemann), class/citizenship/welfare state (Kathleen Canning), religion (Ann Taylor Allen), German-Jewish history (Benjamin Maria Baader), National Socialism (Claudia Koonz), political activism (Belinda Davis), sexuality (Atina Grossmann), and family (Robert G. Moeller). As a group, the essays clearly demonstrate that women's and gender history have made great strides in shifting the historiography, albeit not uniformly and not to the degree or in quite the way foreseen by early scholars.

The fields of sexuality and family history have been absolutely central to women's and gender history and are now clearly part of the larger historiographical conversation. Baader calls the integration of women's history into Jewish studies a success, although he identifies clear differences in the directions of research trends on the two sides of the Atlantic. Canning argues that class and labor history changed so dramatically with the "linguistic turn" that the door was inadvertently opened to women and gender. Although the *HistorikerInnenstreit*, which divided women's historians in Germany from their counterparts in the United States, barely "caused a ripple on the surface of the academic mainstream" (p. 152), Koonz points out that women's and gender history has become an integral part of the narrative of National Socialism. Not all fields have been equally successfully changed. Ann Taylor Allen asserts that, until recently, feminist historians themselves showed a tendency to accept Weberian claims that secularization went hand-in-hand with modernization. They thus failed to recognize that rather than being submissive, female religiosity "could also assume active, even rebellious forms" (p. 197). Hagemann demonstrates the richness of scholarship on gender in the military, but concludes that there remains much to be done to bring it into the mainstream both in Germany and the United States. In the fields of colonialism and nationalism, work on women's and gender history remains even more marginalized.

Some scholars, like Canning and Schaser, express concern that fitting gendered analyses into traditional mainstream accounts of politics and nation will lessen the impact of feminist analyses. Others, like Moeller, argue that gender history has significantly changed ideas about history and methodology, challenging key master narratives of modern German history. Atina Grossmann goes further to argue that one "unintended consequence of the determined dismantling of master-narratives has been that there is no clearly established unilateral mainstream history left for us to gender" (p. 220).

The essays provide thorough and balanced overviews of the trends, although four stand out that illustrate the issues confronted by the mainstreaming of women's and gender history. At the heart of Belinda Davis's essay, "The Personal is Political: Gender, Politics, and Political Activism in Modern German History," stands the question as to why scholarship that began to focus on political activism has come to be so "depoliticized." In the 1970s women historians–many of them non-professionals–began to challenge contemporary views of women's activism as politically "neutral," asserting the absolute centrality of politics to women's organizing. As Davis notes: "Testing, arguing and refining definitions of feminism was a hallmark" of this groundbreaking work. Historical scholarship offered "a hopefulness that awareness of these limitations [that women face in politics] would provide a means to supersede them" (p. 112).

During the 1980s, feminist scholars challenged the underlying goal of finding historical models of women's positive and successful activism and political life. The *HistorikerInnenstreit* demonstrated the problems of identity politics, as well as assumptions that women–as a homogenous group–would differ entirely from men in their political behavior. It also undermined the belief that victims cannot be perpetrators, significantly "complicating women's politics" (p. 114). Scholars of the Weimar Republic revealed that women's acquisition of formal political power coincided with their loss of leadership positions. Ultimately, male antifeminism radicalized women in late Weimar, but it did so by pushing younger women to the left and older women further to the right, thus dividing the sisterhood. Davis identifies this era as "perhaps the most exciting decade in the history of German women's politics and activism" (p. 116). By con-

trast, the 1990s witnessed the "mainstreaming" of gender, as women's history was replaced by "gender history" that included the study of imagery, propaganda, and symbolism. As Davis notes: "for all its continued achievements this work ... reflected relatively few innovative topics, methodologies, or theoretical contributions to earlier achievements" (p. 118). Only recent work on the East German women's movement (explored mostly by political scientists and other social scientists) has begun to shift away from this depoliticization. In Davis's view, then, adding gender to women's history has weakened its connection with women's politics.

Koonz's essay, "A Tributary and a Mainstream: Gender, Public Memory and Historiography of Nazi Germany," demonstrates how methodological changes that shook mainstream historiography opened the door to women's history. Only with the studies of the 1980s did scholars analyzing women and gender under National Socialism overarchingly conclude that, although women resisters exercised agency, ordinary women did not. The *HistorikerInnenstreit* exploded when Anglo-American scholars challenged German-speaking scholars' stark "*Opfer-TÃ¤ter*" (victim-perpetrator) binary framework for women in Nazi Germany. Even as this debate took place, the interpretative and methodological questions that women's historians were asking about ordinary women's participation "prefigured the emphasis on ordinary Germans that dominated mainstream research agendas during the coming decade" (p. 152). Since the *Wende*, a methodological openness has inspired a greater appreciation of the pioneering work from earlier years. Public culture, too, has contributed to shifts in academic mainstream, as commemorative exhibitions and films have brought women as historical figures into the public memory of Nazism. The result is that "the stark black-or-white categories of the Cold War mainstream dissolved into post-Wende shades of gray" (p. 153). Since the late 1980s, gender and women's scholarship has addressed key questions that also engage mainstream scholars. Issues include arguments about whether Nazism was modern, and how women acted as perpetrators individually and together with male perpetrators. Koonz argues that "recent scholarship on women finds a niche without affecting larger metanarratives," yet she sees this situation as a threshold, not an impasse, since "historians in the mainstream will understand that without including women and accounting for the force of gender in Nazi Germany, no account of this catastrophic era can be satisfying" (p. 164).

In her essay "Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Germany: Historiography and its Discontents," Grossmann's assertion that most scholarship has not dealt with sex is initially surprising. Historians began working from the premise that National Socialism was a repressive reaction to the freewheeling sexuality of the Weimar Republic. Since the mid-1970s, Grossmann argues, women's, gender, and social history have concentrated on debunking the myth of the emancipated women of the Golden Twenties. Conversely, they have corrected the notion of women in Nazi Germany as being confined to *Kinder*, *KÃ¼che*, and *Kirche* (children, kitchen, and church). Yet, this focus came at the expense of recognizing the ways in which sexuality expressed and reflected both the radical ruptures and the stubborn continuities of modern German history. During the 1980s, a younger generation of social historians (female and male, German and Anglo-American) began to look at biological politics, the nature of the *VolkskÃ¶rper* (the body politic), and the politics of reproduction: abortion, birth control, "deviance," homosexuality, prostitution, and venereal disease. Aside from one study that considered the role of sexuality and female athletes in constructing a modern culture of celebrity, no studies of Weimar have directly addressed sexuality.[1] Unlike the other chapters, Grossman incorporates primary texts to argue for her initial assertion that "[s]ex was not necessarily about pleasure or orgasms ... but about being modern, avant-garde, up-to-date, anti-bourgeois. Sex in Weimar, was a great passion, but not necessarily about sex" (p. 213). Recent scholarship on National Socialism has been more focused on sexuality, especially in the context of the war and the Holocaust. Echoing the calls of Allen and Hagemann for more comparative history, Grossmann states that the gendering of German history will benefit from more comparative work.

In the book's final essay, "The Elephant in the Living Room Or Why the History of Twentieth-Century Germany Should Be a Family Affair," Robert Moeller contends that "the family is inescapable ... [in] twentieth-century German history, always present but apparently something that we seem reluctant to put in book titles and subject headings" (p. 230). He also forcefully asserts that "it is high time that we make the more recent past into history" (p. 233). Recent scholarship illuminates how the sexual division of labor lodged in family structures, so that conceptions of family allowed women to become political subjects and offered them languages to make demands, protest, and resist. Middle-class women mobilized around maternalist politics; women entered politics on a daily basis during the First World War. As

Moeller observes, "politics that begin around the kitchen table do not always affirm family ties"; after World War II, generational conflicts developed that were addressed differently in the East and West (p. 236). In the West, aberrant families were held responsible for generational conflict and youth rebellion. In the East, the "parental state" fulminated so strongly against western influences that it bolstered "the barrier between families and the state" (p. 236). Moeller argues that in all the regimes of Germany's long twentieth century, the family became one of the key institutions charged with mediating between individuals and the nation. As a result, he contends, "by analyzing how politics begins at home, we gain important insight into what has frequently formed the basis for collective action, and we can begin to interrogate the very boundaries of what we want to call politics" (p. 237). He calls for scholars to explore family not only in the apartments and houses of German men and women, and children, but also in the streets, department stories, churches, doctors' offices, advertising agencies, sex shops, movie theaters, and halls of Parliament. No less important in Moeller's examination of the recent past are aging, childhood, and kinship networks.

Together, the essays in this volume provide an eloquent and useful overview of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German women's and gender history. Scholars of Germany, comparative gender historians, and non-specialists will find here rich essays on German history, gender, and sexuality.

Note

[1]. Eric Jensen, "Images of the Ideal: Sports, Gender, and the Emergence of the Modern Body in Weimar Germany" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003).