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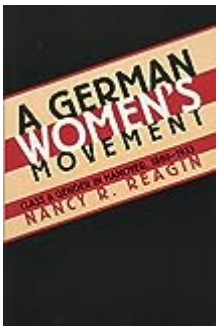

Nancy R. Reagin. *A German Women's Movement: Class and Gender in Hanover, 1880-1933.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xii + 322 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4525-7; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2210-4.

Reviewed by Ann Allen (University of Louisville)

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"We have our city fathers," the German feminist Henriette Goldschmidt admonished the women of Hanover in 1877, "but where are the mothers?"[1] Nancy Reagin's book tells the story of women's organizations in Hanover which followed Goldschmidt's exhortation to create a role for women in philanthropy, education, the professions, and social policy-making. Reagin's study is an extremely valuable contribution to the history of German women's movements, which hitherto has been oriented chiefly toward national organizational strategies and ideology.[2] In her thorough, well organized, and clearly written study of middle-class – or better said, *buergerlich* – women's movements in a single city, Reagin shows how women's politics actually worked at the local level. From the subtitle, "Class and Gender in Hanover, "the reader might expect that socialist or working-class women's organizations would also be described, and in fact their inclusion would have led to some interesting comparisons, as explained below. But the civic life of middle-class women was so rich, diverse and varied that it provides more than enough subject-matter for this book, which developed from the author's dissertation.

This is an exemplary local study, showing extensive knowledge not only of the movements themselves but also of the city's history and social composition. The organizations which Reagin describes supported causes ranging from day-care to the German colonial effort, and from professional opportunities for women to the abolition of prostitution. Because Reagin's research is focused on a single city, she is able to cover a greater variety of organizations than most works on national women's movements. Some of the groups that she studies were affiliated with the central feminist organization, the *Bund deutscher Frauenvereine*; some were not; and some joined or left it in response to changes in organizational strategy or politics. Thus the book focuses on women's, but not specifically on feminist, movements.

Reagin's research calls into question some historians' portrayal of a separate women's political culture by showing how closely organized women worked with prominent male citizens, who were often members of their families, to gain support for their programs. Her concluding chapters explain how these women's organizations adapted to wartime pressures and opportunities, the trauma of defeat, the establishment of the Weimar democracy, and the rise of National Socialism. The fact that the achievement of a major goal – woman suffrage – led to the fragmentation and ultimately the decline of most women's movements is well known, but Reagin's data on the vicissitudes of the Hanover organizations in the 1920s provides a fascinating and depressing local example of this broad trend.

Reagin's overall view of these organizations and individuals is critical and even negative. The substance of her criticism is that most *buergerlich* women, though they worked for the broadening of women's role in society, nonetheless uncritically accepted the attitudes and prejudices of their class. Certainly Reagin is justified in emphasizing the intersection of class with gender identity, for class divisions constituted a major barrier to solidarity among women in Germany and throughout the Western world. And she correctly notes that whatever the differences between *buergerlich* women and men, they usually cooperated to defend class privilege. The overtones of repressiveness, condescension, and prejudice in the attitudes of even the most high-minded *buergerlich* women toward their working-class fellow citizens are unmistakable.

But the fact that women as well as men acted and thought as members of their class is hardly surprising. And Reagin's analytical framework, which subsumes all of these very diverse groups –feminist and non-feminist, progressive and reactionary, religious and secular – under the common label *buergerlich*, sometimes prevents her from recognizing the considerable variation among them. In fact, the diversity of these organizations shows that the limits set by *buergerlich* identity were quite wide, permitting much disagreement, contestation, and criticism. Women did indeed work within the limits set by their class, but they also attempted to expand them, usually in pursuit of their own agendas, but occasionally in order to support women, and even men, of less privileged groups.

Reagin's judgment that "much of the bourgeois women's movement was indeed politically conservative" (6) therefore seems overgeneralized and anachronistic. Many of the causes supported by the various organizations, such as increased opportunities for women in secondary education, opposition to legalized prostitution, woman suffrage, and leading roles for women in social policy-making were not, of course, viewed favorably by most conservatives of the era. Other causes championed by groups of *buergerlich* women, such as the restriction of the sale of alcoholic beverages, the reform of juvenile justice, the education of poor children, and even the zealous teaching of domestic hygiene and nutrition, appealed to both conservative and progressive opinion during this period. Morose diatribes on the decline of morality in urban society were heard across the political spectrum; the fact that some women echoed them does not necessarily identify them as "conservative." In fact, had Reagin compared the objectives of the *buergerlich* women's organizations to those of contemporary socialist women's groups, she might well have found that despite their mutual antagonism, women of both classes agreed on some issues, particularly on ideas concerning gender difference and the importance of motherhood in both the private and the public spheres.

Sometimes the Hanover women's adherence to norms of respectability and lady-like behavior seems to have arisen from strategic as well as from moral considerations. For example, Reagin's interesting chapter on the crusade of women's organizations to prevent the police from confining local prostitutes to an officially regulated "red-light" district criticizes the women for their avoidance of the fiery, anti-male rhetoric of the more radical feminists of the Abolitionist Federation, an international organization that opposed regulated prostitution. But the Hanover activists' reluctance to offend the male politicians on which the success of their campaign depended seems only sensible – and indeed, the tactic was successful. Considering the reluctance of most of today's American women, even after a second women's movement, to be identified as "feminists," we can hardly be surprised that most of the Hanover ladies rejected the radical feminism of their day.

Reagin argues that the conservative politics of the pre-war organizations explains the "drift to the right" of the German women's movements, particularly during the 1920s. However, she also acknowledges considerable discontinuity; in the 1920s many of the older organizations declined or even dissolved, and were superseded by others, such as the National Housewives' League, whose agenda was much more conservative and nationalist. As in all historical accounts, the assessment of the relative importance of continuity and discontinuity is difficult here.

Reagin's criticism of the German women's tendencies toward nationalism and class prejudice, which increased in the 1920s, remind us that our analysis of this period is still overshadowed by what proved to be its decisive event, the rise of National Socialism. Without in the least denying the importance of the questions that Reagin raises about the role of the women's groups in preparing the way for National Socialism, I suggest that it is also essential to see historical actors in the context of their own era, rather than in that of a later era that they could not have foreseen. The American women's movement, after all, showed many of the same characteristics as its German counterpart – it was dominated by middle-class, respectable organizations, deeply divided by race

and class, and in its majority patriotic and sometimes jingoistic. We can nonetheless credit the positive achievements, as well as criticize the flaws, of this movement. In our judgments of the German movement, we should strive for the same balance.

My disagreement with some of Reagin's conclusions does not, of course, detract in any way from my admiration of her work. She has made a valuable and stimulating contribution to an ongoing debate. Let the discussion continue!

[1] Henriette Goldschmidt, *Die Frauenfrage innerhalb der modernen Culturentwicklung: Vortrag gehalten zur Eroeffnung des Frauentages zu Hannover* (Hannover 1877), p. 14.

[2] Another local study is Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen, *Weibliche Kultur und soziale Arbeit: Eine Geschichte der Frauenbewegung am Beispiel Bremens, 1810-1927* (Koeln 1989).

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