

Iris Schröder. *Arbeiten für eine bessere Welt: Frauenbewegung und Sozialreform 1890-1914.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2001. 368 S. EUR 39.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-36783-5.



Reviewed by Tracie Matysik (Center for European Studies, Harvard University)

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Working for a More

Working for a More “Feminine” World: Iris Schroeder on Social Reform in the German Women’s Movement

In recent years cultural and social historians of modern Germany have converged upon the vast territory between the private lives and thoughts of individuals and the political domain of state action. Referring to this nebulous territory alternately as “civil society” or as the “public sphere,” some historians have found in this domain a space in which individuals and groups formally excluded from political participation could work to effect political and social change. Others have focused more on the gloomier variants: the commodification of public opinion, on the one hand; and the extension of a disciplinary public discourse into the most intimate dimensions of individuals lives, on the other. Historians of social work and social reform in particular have demonstrated the relevance of interrogating how this slippery space of public action operated. Notable in this regard have been such recent offerings as Young Sun Hong’s work on social work and welfare in Weimar, Kevin Repp’s study of social reform movements in the Wilhelmine era, and quite recently Jean Quataert’s history

of philanthropy and women’s patriotism in nineteenth-century dynastic Germany. It is in this genre that the valuable contribution from Iris Schroeder, *Arbeiten fuer eine bessere Welt: Frauenbewegung und Sozialreform 1890-1914*, belongs.

In this book Schroeder examines the central role of social work and social reform in the German women’s movement. Drawing on T.S. Marshall’s notion of social citizenship, she depicts how social and political rights were intricately woven together for women in Wilhelmine Germany. As a result, she claims, it is important to recognize the political implications of seemingly non-political social reform activities. In this light, Schroeder argues that the women’s movement takes on a more unified appearance than historians have claimed in the past, as so-called radical and moderate branches alike privileged social work and reform in their organizational activities. Within this overarching framework, however, Schroeder is careful not to homogenize the women’s movement. Rather, she suggests that what united the women’s movement around social work and reform was not agreement on an overall project, but rather the idea

of social work and reform as the center around which disagreement circulated. Schroeder consequently structures the book around the points of tension and rifts within the women's movement.

Providing a necessary introductory overview, the first chapter surveys the various social reform efforts with which the women's movement was involved. It traces debates over three terms that were central to the social reform projects of the women's movement: "Gemeinwohl" (the common good), "Frauenwohl" (the good of women), and "weibliche Eigenart" (the uniquely feminine character). At stake in these debates was the extent to which the women's movement could or should call attention to the particularities of femininity in the quest for expanded participation in reforming both the political and social environments. Interesting on its own, the real task of this chapter is to set the stage for the succeeding chapters in which the heart of the argument about social reform and political participation unfolds.

Turning attention to local case studies in Leipzig and Frankfurt, the second chapter discusses attempts on the part of women's organizations to gain access to the most privileged organ of social work, the local Ehrenamte (honorary offices). Here the connection between social work and political status is particularly poignant. Traditionally care for the poor had been seen as an honorable duty to be performed by "unbesoldete und gebildete Maenner" (unpaid and educated men) (p. 115). When these positions were conceived as political offices, women were by definition excluded from them. And yet, it was precisely for such offices that spokespersons from the women's movement argued that women were particularly well-suited. If women were to gain the right to direct these municipal social programs, however, they would in effect acquire a highly esteemed political position hitherto denied them. It was, Schroeder insists, a site at which the character of the state as a Maennerstaat (masculine state) came under direct scrutiny. Interestingly, her local studies demonstrate how variously this challenge could play itself out across Germany, as women faced insurmountable obstacles in Leipzig while making substantial inroads in Frankfurt. The Maennerstaat was, it seems, made up of cities that varied substantially in their adherence to a masculine character.

Moving into the early twentieth century, Schroeder investigates in the next three chapters the tensions within the women's movement as it had evolved from a relatively small and unified project into a mature but multi-faceted movement. She points to the growing

pains the movement underwent in the process, at once strengthened as it added members by the thousands but also challenged by internal schisms that followed. In one case-study Schroeder explores the challenges the women's movement confronted in response to specifically Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic women's organizations that were founded between 1899 and 1904. Rather than view this as a conflict between a predominantly secular organization and confessional subdivisions, Schroeder reads the conflicts in order to draw out the religiosity that silently pervaded women's organized social reform. The next study takes up another strife-ridden issue within the umbrella movement, namely the issue of women's education. Again, her focus is less on the consensus within the women's movement that women's education should be seen as a positive goal, but rather on the arguments within the movement as to what type of education would be particularly desirable. Not only was it debated what might constitute "social education"—i.e., education that would prepare women for social work and thus for political participation—but as well what if anything was to be specifically feminine about such education. Schroeder returns to this theme in the last chapter that treats the period just before 1914. She returns, however, not to detail its resolution, but rather to highlight the expansion of conflict within the women's movement as it confronted the inevitable product of maturity—the next generation. It was, Schroeder argues, the conflict around education and training in particular that gave rise to what she quite novelly identifies as a youth movement within the women's movement.

Published in the "Geschichte und Geschlechter" series that Ute Daniel, Karin Hausen, and Heide Wunder edit, Schroeder's book is a model of scholarly enterprise. To the extent that she aims to depict the many sides and tensions that social reform incited within the mainstream bourgeois women's movement, she succeeds masterfully. If one wanted to extend the study more broadly, it would be possible to consider dimensions of social reform that Schroeder does not address. One may wonder, for instance, to what extent the social reform efforts that Schroeder discusses were mirrored within or responded to by the equally well-organized working class women's movement. Likewise, one could discuss how ideas of sexual reform advocated by a smaller though very prominent branch of the women's movement might also be considered as a variant of social reform, a claim in fact made by contemporaries. These questions are intricately tied to the phenomena Schroeder discusses, yet efforts to address them would certainly take her book in direc-

tions that extend beyond the well-defined contours of her study, possibly turning a valuable and manageable monograph into an unwieldy and less usable tome. As it stands, the book is a welcome contribution in the field of German women's history. The footnotes are ample, and the bibliography comprehensive. If the book has a drawback, it is that it is a very academic book aimed solely at the specialist. A reader unfamiliar with German history, and even more specifically with German women's history, may struggle to orient him- or herself within the debates Schroeder examines. It may well be, however, that such relative inaccessibility to a lay audience in this instance is simply the price of the scholarly achievement.

Schroeder's intricate analyses that dig well below the surface will certainly help the academic historian to understand ever better the social richness and multi-faceted complexity that went into what is referred to conventionally as simply the German women's movement.

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