

## Gender as a destabilising factor of Weimar society

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The Weimar Republic (1919-33) was a period in German history during which great political, social and cultural changes occurred. In addition to the new political system and the onset of rationalisation and modernisation, gender roles and gender relations constituted key areas of change. The experiences of both men and women during the First World War (1914-18) and the German Revolution (1918-19) had a decisive impact on the shaping of gender roles and gender relations during the Weimar Republic.

The experience of war was crucial for the transformation of women's roles. Due to the men's absence or death, women substituted men as heads of households in many instances and frequently replaced them in areas of work and in political institutions. Wartime engendered an increasing political consciousness among women as they actively participated in protests to end the war. Meanwhile, men had an entirely different war experience. They were subject to feelings of displacement and crises of masculinity resulting from life in the trenches and traumatising experiences during battle on the one hand and the societal changes that occurred in their family life at home and in wider society on the other.

Article 109 of the Weimar Constitution of 1919 ushered in a period of female liberation with its establishment of the legal equality of gender relations and post-war conditions in Germany were widely perceived as a period of gender disorder and societal destabilisation. The blurring of traditional gender roles and the polarisation of gender experience during the war undoubtedly created new conceptions of femininity and masculinity and contributed to a post-war view that gender ideologies and gender relations were broken. The losses of the war and the emergence of new roles for women embodied by the emancipated 'New Woman' figure had major implications for the demographic, economic and social make-up of post-war

German society.<sup>1</sup> The changes in the area of gender became topics of widespread political debate and spread to the realms of art and culture. An examination of these demonstrates the destabilising effect of the new gender roles. At a time when Germany was intent on establishing economic recovery and political stability, the post-war gender roles seemed to go against the grain of social reconstruction. It is for these reasons that the post-war gender order fractured German society.

The Weimar Republic granted equal rights and suffrage to women in 1919. This provided the constitutional basis for women's participation in politics. The 'New Woman' figure was both real and symbolic of the social and democratic change in women's lives. She embodied the modernising transformations of German society in politics and the workplace in that she was politically emancipated, sexually liberated and economically independent. Women were increasingly visible in other public spheres as during leisure activities, for example in sports clubs, youth organisations, dance halls, going to the cinema or simply walking unaccompanied in the streets of the metropolis. In 1929 Elsa Hermann, reflecting on the new female role in society, revealed that 'the modern woman refuses to lead the life of a lady and a housewife, preferring to depart from the ordained path and go her own way'.<sup>2</sup> The 'New Woman', therefore, marked a departure from tradition and embodied a 'self-reliant personality' and a spirit of independence.<sup>3</sup> The new roles of women were a challenge to male authority

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<sup>1</sup> Martha H. Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited. A Reader, 1894-1930* (New Brunswick, 2008). The Introduction to this reader provides a useful starting point for the study of the concept of the New Woman. Whilst the book discusses the 'New Woman' in the United States in particular, the 'New Woman' was an international figure whose presence was also felt throughout Europe. Atina Grossmann, "'Girllkultur' or thoroughly rationalized female: a new woman in Weimar Germany?", in Judith Friedlander (ed.), *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986) and Cornelia Osborne, 'The New Woman and generational conflict: perceptions of young women's sexual mores in the Weimar Republic' in Mark Roseman (ed.), *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany 1770-1968* (Cambridge, 1995) are useful for approaching the phenomenon of the 'New Woman' in Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Elsa Hermann, 'This is the New Woman' in Anton Kaes et al. (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (London, 1994), p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and traditional patriarchal structures. After 1918, there was a surplus of two million women in Germany.<sup>4</sup> In light of this demographic imbalance and women's new political rights, there were fears among men of female numerical excess or 'Frauenüberschuss'.<sup>5</sup> This fact and the increased feminisation of the public sphere were viewed as particularly threatening as, in contrast to pre-war conditions, women were now major players in German society.<sup>6</sup>

The appearance of women in the workforce had a destabilising effect on gender relations and was ultimately linked with economic instability. During the Weimar Republic there was an increase in the employment of female workers in favour of male employees particularly in the area of industry and white-collar jobs. An article entitled 'Women and the Economic Crisis' appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1931 and revealed that the number of working women in Germany at that time amounted to 11.5 million which constituted 35 per cent of the working population.<sup>7</sup> The article propounds that this was purely motivated by the fact that, due to the rationalisation and modernisation of industry, women were favoured because they were cheaper sources of labour. Nonetheless, the new role of women in the workforce represented female competition for men's traditional jobs in an increasingly tight labour market. This competition was met with fear and resentment by men. As one reflection of this attitude married working women were often attacked and stigmatised as 'Doppelverdiener', double income earners.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the new role of women in society became increasingly bound up with the idea that women were responsible for economic damage during the years of hyperinflation. Women had acquired spending power in the new culture of mass consumption. Thus female excess and overspending were associated with

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony McElligott (ed.), *The German Urban Experience 1900-1945: Modernity and Crisis* (New York, 2001), p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Canning, 'Weimar and the Politics of Gender' in Anthony McElligott (ed.), *Weimar Germany* (Oxford, 2009), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>7</sup> Anon., 'Women's Work and the Economic Crisis' in Anton Kaes et al. (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (London, 1994), p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Ute Frevert, *Women in German History. From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (Oxford and New York, 1989), p. 197.

inflation during the Weimar Republic.<sup>9</sup> As the crisis years of the Great Depression (ca. 1929-1939) dawned there was widespread belief in what Hilde Walter referred to in an article in 1931 as the ‘mythical idea of the economic detriment caused by working women’.<sup>10</sup> Walter refers to the growing belief in Germany that the exclusion of women from the workplace could counter mass unemployment.<sup>11</sup> This is demonstrated by the passing of the ‘Law on the Legal Position of Female Public Servants’ in 1932 which legally permitted the civil service to dismiss married female workers.<sup>12</sup> This law also reveals the persistence of patriarchal attitudes in Germany. The presence of women in the workforce was tolerated if a woman did not have a husband but once she was married she was expected to return to her place in the domestic sphere.<sup>13</sup> The discrimination against women in the area of work highlights a degree of misogyny in Weimar society and reveals a tendency to scapegoat women as the cause of economic crisis. The new gender roles, therefore, became a highly charged class issue.

Underlying social and sexual concerns associated with the new gender roles and a range of images of the ‘New Woman’ found their expression in the area of fashion. Erich Fromm from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research who surveyed blue- and white-collar workers in the 1920s noted that ‘short skirts, silk stockings and the page-boy cut (Bubikopf) were the fashion’ during this period.<sup>14</sup> German fashion, as that of America, France and other westernised societies drew light on the newly masculinised images of women that were appearing and that were encapsulated by the Girl, the flapper and the Garçonne. Fromm notes that in the new fashions the conventional distinction between men and women was often blurred.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the androgynous appearance of the Garçonne represented a hybrid

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<sup>9</sup> Canning, ‘Weimar and the Politics of Gender’, p. 162.

<sup>10</sup> Hilde Walter, ‘Twilight for Women?’, in Anton Kaes et al. (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (London, 1994), p. 211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Gesetz zur Rechtsstellung der weiblichen Beamten (May, 1932)

<sup>13</sup> Frevert, *Women in German History*, p. 198.

<sup>14</sup> Erich Fromm, ‘The New Woman’, in Anthony McElligott (ed.), *The German Urban Experience 1900-1945: Modernity and Crisis* (New York, 2001), p. 197.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

sex and challenged the traditional male and female gendered spheres.<sup>16</sup> Fashion, therefore, was a space where gender roles were deconstructed. The gender dissolution displayed in women's fashion was quite threatening to some men as an article in the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* in 1925 illustrates: 'It is high time that sound male judgement take a stand against these odious fashions (...) the look of a sickeningly sweet boy is detested by every real boy or man'.<sup>17</sup> Yet Fromm's research exposes quite an ambivalent response among males toward the new fashions as many revealed that they felt the new fashions were practical and, in this way, they accepted the changes.<sup>18</sup>

At any rate, the new fashions reflected the cultural changes that were occurring in Germany as every facet of modern womanhood was incorporated into the image of the 'New Woman'.<sup>19</sup> She was not just the femme fatale or the cross-dressing lesbian. She could also be a sportsperson, an idealised housewife, a typist and a student.<sup>20</sup> Such a range of images of the modern woman points to the extensive and varying perceptions of cultural change in German society. Yet the incoherency of the image and the ambivalent response to it reflects the ambivalent response of German society to modernisation. However, perhaps the most threatening aspect of the 'New Woman' image was its intractability. Fashion is a form of self-representation and its variability at this time highlighted that women had choices in post-war German society. The range of options is reflected in their choice of clothes, consumer goods and in how they spent their leisure time. This ungovernable feature of the 'New Woman' image and the new freedom of choice for women correspond with Hermann's notion of the 'self-reliant personality' and an independence that was strictly at odds with patriarchal tradition.

Images of the 'New Woman' in paintings and films serve as a further reflection of the destabilising effects the new gender roles had on German

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<sup>16</sup> McElligott, *The German Urban Experience*, p. 217.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, 'Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Woman', in Anton Kaes et al. (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (London, 1994), p. 659.

<sup>18</sup> McElligott, *The German Urban Experience*, p. 205.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *20<sup>th</sup> Century Germany: Politics, Culture and Society 1918-1990* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

society. The male experience of war encompassed many forms of physical and psychological trauma, such as loss of limbs, shell shock and male hysteria.<sup>21</sup> These had an emasculating effect on men. Additional post-war experiences of male workplace displacement by women had a transforming effect on perceptions of masculinity. Paintings such as Otto Dix's 'The Sex Murderer' which appeared a few years after the war in 1922 serve to delineate male fears and anxieties pertaining to post-war gender roles.<sup>22</sup> The representation of the male as a pathological sexual criminal and the image of the mutilated female body depict the sexual tensions and misogyny of the period and emphasise the complex emotional as well as social responses to women's changing role.<sup>23</sup> Fears of emasculation are also present in films of the period such as Georg Pabst's film from 1929, *Pandora's Box*, with its presentation of the effeminate male protagonist, Alwa.<sup>24</sup> This male character is in stark contrast to the leading female character, Lulu, who is a prostitute and who is representative of the 'New Woman'. The film, therefore, depicts a reversal of the traditional models of gender. Weimar art not only acted as an articulation of anxieties about gender but also as an attempt to reassert masculine authority.<sup>25</sup> This is apparent in Dix's painting with respect to the death of the female as well as films in which the conventional ending is the restoration of the female character to the institution of marriage. Thus a masculine bias can be detected in Weimar art as attempts were made to stabilise threats to male dominance and to restore traditional models of patriarchy. Moreover, the psychologically destabilising effect of the new gender roles on German men is observed in the display of 'militarised masculinity' in the political culture

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<sup>21</sup> Canning, 'Weimar and the Politics of Gender', p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm Heinrich Otto Dix (1891-1969), 'Lustmord' (1922)

<sup>23</sup> Beth Irwin Lewis, 'Lustmord: Inside the Windows of the Metropolis', in Katharina von Ankum (ed.), *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (London, 1997), p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> Richard McCormick, 'Private Anxieties/Public Projections. "New Objectivity", Male Subjectivity, and Weimar Cinema' in *Women in German Yearbook*, 10 (2000), p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

of the republic.<sup>26</sup> Schumann notes that political violence ‘served to restore a man’s bruised self-esteem in the private realm of the family’.<sup>27</sup> Street fighting can be seen as ritualised performances in which masculine roles could be rehearsed. Thus, art and political violence in the Weimar Republic displayed complex male emotions and anxieties in response to an increasingly feminised public sphere and served as structures for constructing and reasserting masculinity.

Although the new role of women in society provided many liberating prospects for women, the glamorous and emancipated image of the ‘New Woman’ was more a cultivated myth than an actual social reality for the majority of females in German society. In fact, women were largely ambivalent about the new gender roles. This might be due to the fact that many women were overburdened by the dual demands of their roles at home and at work. Ute Frevert notes the pressures and increasing expectations placed on German woman as women were expected to run a household according to the principles of rational economic management, to raise children in line with the recommendations of educationalists, to be an adaptable sexual partner to their husbands and to hold their own at work.<sup>28</sup> The new gender roles arising from rationalisation and modernisation ultimately increased the workload and strain on women. An account of a female textile worker published in 1930 points to the burdens and social reality of the ordinary working-class German woman. Her account is in line with the belief that many women worked out of economic necessity rather than by choice as she reveals a view that ‘if a (...) mother could be at home, then the household and children would be better served’.<sup>29</sup> Thus it is not surprising that Alice Rühle-Gerstel noted in *Die literarische Welt* in 1933

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<sup>26</sup> Dick Schumann, ‘Political Violence, Contested Public Space, and Reasserted Masculinity in Weimar Germany’ in Kathleen Canning (ed.), *Weimar publics/Weimar subjects: rethinking the political culture of Germany in the 1920s* (Oxford, 2010), p. 247.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>28</sup> Frevert, *Women in German History*, p. 192.

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous, ‘My Workday, My Weekend’ in Anton Kaes et al. (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (London, 1994), p. 208.

that 'the new freedom for women had achieved nothing'.<sup>30</sup> Due to women's 'doubly bound' situation, she remarks on the desire of women to return to traditional models of femininity.<sup>31</sup> This eagerness reflects a yearning for a social stability that was perceived to be lacking at the time.

In this sense, the readiness of women to return to more patriarchal structures underscored a class differential between middle-class notions of femininity that were exemplified by the 'New Woman' and the working-class reality of increased workloads for women. It also highlighted the fact that traditional attitudes persisted in the republic and that German society was inherently patriarchal. The Weimar Constitution, for example, only accepted women's equal rights in principle and did not revise the patriarchal family law of the German Civil Code.<sup>32</sup> One of the most threatening aspects of the 'New Woman' was her sexual emancipation. Increased divorce rates, a rise in the number of abortions and the use of birth control which both signified liberation with regard to sexuality and reproductive rights was widely considered as a threat to the unit of the family. In a sense, the sexual behaviour of women heralded a period of 'moral panic' and an obsession with female sexuality and identity as issues concerning women's reproductive rights were vigorously and publicly debated.<sup>33</sup> The perceived 'birth strike' among young single women was particularly disconcerting as it signalled the idea that women were pleasure seekers with no concern for the interests of the nation and were directly contributing to the population crisis.<sup>34</sup> Their independence was viewed as disordering natural gender roles and disrupting the social fabric of the nation. The individualism of women and their new status was considered a sign of cultural degeneration and a threat to the social, political and economic reconstruction of Germany. Most images of the 'New Woman' originated outside Germany. These imported

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<sup>30</sup> Alice Rühle-Gerstel, 'Back to the Good Old Days?' in Anton Kaes et al. (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (London, 1994), p. 218.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Frevert, *Women in German History*, p. 185.

<sup>33</sup> Cornelia Osborne, *The Politics of the Body in Weimar Germany. Women's Reproductive Rights and Duties* (Basingstoke, 1992), p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> Atina Grossman, 'The New Woman and the rationalization of sexuality in Weimar Germany', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, (New York, 1983), p. 193.

images of femininity and the subsequent perception of de-nationalisation of the modern woman made the figure all the more volatile.<sup>35</sup> The new role of women, therefore, spawned intense nationalist controversy and debate as women were regarded as the cause of cultural degeneration and a threat to the existence of the race.<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, the new gender roles in post-war German society, whilst embodying the liberating potential of modernity, were also associated with Weimar society's disillusionment with modernising transformations. The new gender roles had a troubling effect on Weimar citizens as they psychologically emasculated men and overburdened women. The public attention that female sexuality and the new role of women received during Germany's interwar years paralleled the attempts to express anxieties about gender in the arts. Whilst leftist sex reformers and liberal feminists campaigned for reproductive rights on behalf of women, conservatives, the clergy and traditionalists promoted idealised images of motherhood and marriage and advocated a return to patriarchal structures. At a time of economic crisis, demographic imbalance and fears for the continuity of the race, the new role of women in society and the issue of gender disorder acted as a powerful metaphor for the instability of society and as a convenient scapegoat for the ills of the German nation. Whilst the decriminalisation of prostitution marked a political victory for the left, issues pertaining to female sexuality and the role of women became a central target of right-wing attacks.<sup>37</sup> Thus the question of gender had a polarising and politically destabilising effect on German society. Furthermore, since the Weimar Republic was seen to have granted women new political, economic and reproductive rights, opponents of the political system would continue to align the economic woes and moral degeneracy of the period with the new role of women and, hence, with the republic. Thus,

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<sup>35</sup> Canning, 'Weimar and the Politics of Gender', p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany* (New Jersey, 2007), p. 328.

<sup>37</sup> Julia Roos, *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution, Women's Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919-1933* (Michigan, 2010).

the new gender roles ultimately had a destabilising effect on German society as they contributed to the downfall of democracy.