**Review-Article**

**The ‘Problem of Women’ in Post-War Europe**

Women’s Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present. Edited by Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis and Krassimira Daskalova (London: Routledge, 2013; pp. 201. £80; pb. £24.99);

Women and Gender in Postwar Europe: From Cold War to European Union. Edited by Joanna Regulska and Bonnie G. Smith (London: Routledge, 2012; pp. 243. £80; pb., £26.99);


In 1947, the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women met for the first time, in the inauspicious surroundings of a former aeroplane factory on Long Island, New York. Amid the chaos of the post-war world, delegates began to discuss how women might be granted equal rights. Unsurprisingly, their annual meetings were not immune to Cold War rhetoric and ideological rivalry. Many participants were eager to show that their own countries had made a special contribution to raising women’s status. Elizieveta Popova, the Soviet delegate, urged her colleagues: ‘If one looks at the situation of women in the world at large, one sees that in some countries, such as mine, the problem usually called “the problem of women” has been finally solved. From the moment the Soviet Authority was established, women have enjoyed all rights, with complete equality’.

It is not difficult to spot the ideological nature of such statements, nor to contrast them with the persistent issues of gender inequality within the Soviet Union. Questions about the status of women have become central and indispensable for historians of modern Europe. It is difficult to imagine a synthetic history of the First World War, the Third Reich, or the Stalin-era Soviet Union with any social history aspirations which did not devote a substantial section to the experiences of women and girls. However, while historians have become skilled at diagnosing the ‘problem of women’ in past societies, it can be more difficult to recognise when it occurs closer to home. As we approach the present day, and particularly move past 1945, ‘the problem usually called “the problem of women”’ fades out of focus.

There is no shortage of sophisticated and nuanced work being carried

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out by individual researchers. But this has, as yet, left few traces in our collective historical understanding of the period. What explains this? Was the experience of women in the post-war period less distinctive than during the First World War or in Nazi Germany? Is this a period in which the traditional categories of women's history, and even gender, are less relevant? Our understanding of the post-war period is often driven by the common-sense assumption that women have taken—or are in the process of taking—their place in society: these were years when women cast off the fetters of prejudice and discrimination and were, after a short struggle, able to take their place at the table. Surveys and popular history accounts relate an essentially teleological narrative in which women move (with various degrees of smoothness) towards ‘normality’, involving control over family size, participation in paid employment, representation in government and financial independence.

Yet there are a number of significant problems with this narrative and the assumptions it makes. Firstly, it is highly Whiggish, setting up the current state of (Western) European gender relations (equality, or as near as dammit) as the end point of thousands of years of historical change. By and large, it suggests, we in the West are now ‘over’ the problem of women.² It offers the reassuring thesis that remaining tensions around sexual difference are merely the residual traces of an almost-complete transition. But the differences in men's and women's lives are persistent. Women are more likely to work part-time and earn less than men for equivalent work. Men are over-represented in leadership positions in politics, governance and the economy. The availability of birth control has revolutionised women's lives, but it cannot be said to have made them identical to men's, in the reproductive sphere at least. (It is estimated that around 40 per cent of pregnancies in high-income countries are unplanned.)³ Rising rates of births outside marriage have had different consequences for men and women (in Germany in 2011, fathers made up only 9.9 per cent of single-parent households).⁴ It seems ahistorical to dismiss these persistently gendered patterns as a transitional phase unworthy of serious attention. Yet the impulse to write that ‘women are still more likely to work part-time’ is a strong one—as if the movement towards universal female full-time work


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is inevitable but delayed. Perhaps it is time for a more widespread acknowledgement of what historians of post-war women have long known: that this is not a straightforward history of the casting off of restrictions, but a more interesting and complicated story altogether, riven with ‘contradictions, which defy any notion of linear progress or naïve optimism’. Otherwise we risk seeing our gender order as natural, or nearing a natural state, in a very similar way to our historical subjects.

One complicated and little-acknowledged part of this story is the changes in men’s lives. If women were moving towards a male norm, they were aiming for a moving target. The post-war years saw astonishing transformations in men’s lives: our failure to grasp this is a second problem with the teleological narrative of women in the post-war period. Some of these changes, to be sure, took place in reaction to women’s shifting roles. Without wanting to evoke weary clichés of the ‘battle of the sexes’, it is undeniable that changes in women’s lives have led to increased competition for resources, including money, authority, jobs, physical control, education, affection and time. Such conflicts, of course, are not only gendered, but involve issues of class, ethnicity, geography and nationality. In large part, though, changes in men’s lives have been a result of the changing nature of the global economy. The rise of the service sector, mass consumption, the global labour market, the collapse of manufacturing, the demise of the family wage—all have had an impact upon men’s working lives, financial situation and self-understanding in ways that we have yet to fully understand.

Thirdly, accounts of women’s progress dodge the question of causality. It is certainly not the case that change in gender roles was in any way inevitable. The outstanding body of work on the immediate post-war period by scholars such as Joan Tumblety, Erica Carter, Robert Moeller and Elizabeth Heineman shows how widely conservative ideas about gender norms were shared in the late 1940s and early 1950s. What changed? The relationship between the socio-economic developments of the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of the women’s movement, and changes in women’s employment and reproductive patterns are rarely interrogated. Were the rise in female employment and the women’s

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movement manifestations of the same pulse of social change? Were the causes of women’s emancipation cultural, economic or political? If the latter, was change driven from above (by reforming legislatures) or below (by the women’s movement)?

How do we make sense of the similarities between countries with a strong women’s movement and those where activism was less significant? What meaningful comparisons can be drawn between Eastern and Western Europe? These are difficult questions to answer, particularly for a field that has largely set questions of causality to one side. As Stefan J. Link recently reflected, repeated historiographical turns appear to have concluded in a weary truce: ‘We seem to have arrived at a point of exhaustion, where all we do is tacitly agree on a thin common denominator: that everything is related to everything’. This, then, is not a shortcoming unique to the history of women and gender—on the contrary, it reflects much broader trends in the profession. But a sub-field that has ambitions (both implicit and explicit) to contribute to political debate surely needs to be at the forefront of reintroducing ‘why’ as well as ‘how’.

The problem of women, therefore, raises a number of intriguing questions that are central to understanding the social history of the post-war period. What were the interconnections between social, economic and political change? What motivated people to behave in ways that were different to earlier generations? How did (welfare) states and political settlements that were built on a historically contingent post-war moment adapt to fundamental changes in its nature? Post-war Europe was built on a particular gender order—which has now collapsed. What are the implications of this for the history of the 1970s and beyond, not only for historians of women (and men qua men) but for the histories of the welfare state, education, the economy, politics and leisure? The three recent books which are reviewed here offer some clues.

8 Geoff Eley offers a subtle analysis which combines political and economic change: ‘[B]y the 1980s feminism had not “transformed society”, but the utopianism of Women’s Liberation—“its wild wish”—had redefined “the scope and conceptualization of what is politics”. As politics moved right, this changing of categories happened increasingly in the private zones—in personal relationships, in small groups, in alternative spaces, and in fashioning new cultures, away from the main thoroughfares of party and state, although still shaped and enabled by larger structural changes in employment, social politics, education, public health, family organization, and popular culture much as before. G. Eley, Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000 (Oxford, 2002), p. 381.


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The editors of the first, *Women’s Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*, Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis and Krassimira Daskalova, take as their starting-point a tripartite conceptual framework, set out in an excellent introduction. The three main contentions at the heart of this project are the global interconnectedness of women’s activism for social justice, the need to set aside a single-minded focus on gender as a category of analysis, and the urgency of de-centring Eurocentric perspectives. All three of these contentions push back against a view of women’s political awareness as a Western phenomenon which subsequently trickled down or was imposed upon the developing world. So, for example, Patricia van der Spuy and Lindsay Clowes explore the impact of the visit of Sarojini Naidu (a member of the Indian National Congress) to South Africa in 1924, pointing in particular to Cissie Gool, who acted as Naidu’s host and later became a prominent political activist in her own right. Kiyoko Yamaguchi describes the emergence of the grassroots ‘housewives-lib’ movement in 1970s and 1980s Japan, and Victoria Haskins explores the interactions between Chinese-Australian women and their Aboriginal domestic servants in the early part of the twentieth century. De Haan and her colleagues foreground the concept of ‘intersectionality’ as a means of exploring the complicated nature of female identity. First used by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term ‘intersectionality’ draws attention to the ways in which gender identity intersected and interacted with other identities such as class, ethnicity and sexuality. It has been used to draw attention to the standpoints of black and ethnic minority, transgender, disabled, working-class and non-Western women, demonstrating that multiple identities not only co-exist, but also inflect and shape each other. That is, to be a black woman is more than the sum of being a woman and being black: the intersection of these two identities creates a new and particular experience.

The global focus of this collection throws the differences between women, and the problems of using ‘gender’ as a single category of analysis, into sharp relief. As Glenda Sluga puts it, in a superb chapter on the early UN: ‘There was no shared “women’s view” on global interests in the immediate post-war era, just as there was no global consensus on women’s rights’ (p. 54). Chiara Bonfiglioli’s article on left-wing women in Italy and Yugoslavia in the early post-war period shows not only the way in which such ideological allegiances created transnational allegiances across the Cold War divide, but also the difficulties faced by those who sought to foreground gender in existing political narratives, such as antifascism. Women activists (let alone women as a whole) were divided along multiple lines, not least ideological ones. It should not surprise us that in none of these cases was the process of cultural

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exchange straightforward, nor progress towards greater gender equality smooth or uncontested. There is little evidence to be found for the Whiggish narrative here. Indeed, the editors stress early on in their introduction that, despite increasing and sometimes successful women’s activism, ‘we live in a world of increasing inequalities’ (p. 2).

The second book, *Women and Gender in Postwar Europe*, edited by Joanna Regulska and Bonnie G. Smith, also emphasises the uneven nature of developments in gender equality. By focusing on twelve case-studies, it aims to ‘avoid homogenization’ and demonstrate a ‘manageable complexity’ (pp. x–xi). The scope of the book is indeed ambitious—thematically, chronologically and geographically: topics range from Michal Shapira on Donald Winnicot’s post-war BBC broadcasts on motherhood to Arturas Tereskinas’ analysis of ‘wounded’ masculinities in present-day Lithuania.

Some of these essays bring novel and important work to a new audience: for example, Young-Sun Hong’s outstanding piece, in which the frustrating and often humiliating working lives of Korean nurses in West Germany demonstrate the intersecting factors which shaped the experiences of female migrant workers. Darja Zaviršek’s essay on social work in Slovenia offers a compelling thesis of socialist modernisation as a process of re-gendering and re-masculinisation, with the socialist state as a ‘universal patriarch’ (p. 65) to which both men and women had to answer. What is more, rather than simply offering a broad range of case-studies, the book also aspires to offer an overview. Francisca de Haan’s excellent article on women’s work in Eastern and Western Europe fulfils this function beautifully, providing both a helpful overview of the topic, and a nuanced analysis of the complexities of women’s situation. While the book excels in providing variety, there is, at times, an element of confusion: its dual ambitions of offering an overview for an undergraduate audience, and showcasing specialist research do not always prove compatible. There are excellent examples of both to be found, but in some cases the article titles promise the former, only to deliver the latter.

Finally, the third volume, Rebecca Pulju’s *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France*, addresses the tensions between the expectations raised by women’s enfranchisement and the demands of social and economic reconstruction. What sort of role might French women play in a post-war society where gender hierarchies were being quickly reasserted? ‘It’s incredible’, wrote an exasperated journalist, ‘that women, who were so brave, so decisive, so chic during the war, capitulate before the mocking smile of an imbecile!’ (p.37). One way out of this dilemma was to refigure consumption as an economic act. As French society came to terms with both rapidly rising living standards and women’s changing role, the figure of the citizen consumer allowed cautious recognition of women’s claim to an increased stake in society, while holding tight to comforting certainties about gender. ‘[T]he desire for “normalcy”, the recognition
that women had become full citizens, the drive for reconstruction and productivity, and the belief that consumer decisions drove the postwar economy, all made consumer citizenship an attractive construct at this moment’ (p. 18). Pulju does not claim to be the first scholar to point out the phenomenon of housewife as an economic stakeholder. But a number of things make this a fascinating and significant book.

Firstly, Pulju draws our attention to the ways this process played out in the French countryside. Rural women were as keen to access the material advantages of the post-war period as city-dwellers. As early as 1952, groups of five to ten families in the Maine-et-Loire region clubbed together to buy a shared washing-machine, which had to be rolled from farm to farm—or even carried across the fields (p. 171). Social scientists saw women as the ‘secret agents of modernity’: rural women were keen to mechanise both farm and home, in a quest for increased leisure time and a ‘modern’ home. Secondly, Pulju points out that contemporaries had a keen awareness of the economic value of housework. Women’s organisations and social scientists quantified both the hours spent working in the home and the notional costs of replacing them. ‘The most important French industry, in terms of the quantity of work expended, is the industry of housework,’ concluded the magazine *Productivité française* (pp. 69–70). As Pulju astutely points out, this discourse ‘both celebrated and infantilized housewives’ (p. 61), including them in the national economic effort, but leaving them open to unlimited quantities of advice on how to become yet more productive. Indeed, the ‘citizen consumer’ proved to be a very short-lived solution to the problem of women. As early as the 1960s, women were starting to question the assumption that consumption and home-making alone could provide emancipation. For all the seeming stability of the 1940s and 1950s consensus on gender, the tensions inherent in the post-war settlement were quick to come to the surface.

The three books under review suggest that there is much still to be learned about the ‘problem of women’. Yet they also highlight the fact that, despite the outstanding quality of research in this field, it still faces a number of yet-to-be resolved problems and challenges. Most strikingly, there is a mismatch between the urgency and importance of these historians’ questions and the tentative nature of many conclusions. Again and again, an essay ends by stressing the ambiguities, contradictions and complexity of women’s lives. The de-essentialising of female experience, the point that one woman’s meat was another’s poison, is important. But it is frustrating to find that so many shy away from broader conclusions, and few attempt to explain what difference these findings might make to our understanding of the post-war period as a whole.13

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12 See, in particular, Erica Carter’s pioneering work, *How German Is She?*.

13 ‘If we retreat into detailed histories valued for their specificity alone we might find a safe harbor in terms of knowledge claims and attention to difference, but we will have rendered women’s and gender history innocuous within the discipline and irrelevant to the political imperatives of feminism: J.M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia, PA, 2006), p. 154.
Why, more than four decades after the arrival of women’s history as a field of study, is this not a more bullish field? And why has its fundamental and justified scepticism about the Whiggish narrative of increasing gender equality not filtered through to more general understandings of the period? In part, these are not questions that can be answered in a discussion of the literature itself. There are complex professional issues at play here, regarding the status of gender history and gendered structures of authority within academia.\textsuperscript{14} Some may feel, consciously or not, that there is little point addressing one’s findings to a wider audience if that audience is not listening. While the ‘redefinition’ of modern history is dominated by men, research findings by and about women are unlikely to be brought to the forefront.\textsuperscript{15} We need more male historians to make the history of women central to their own professional practice, by reading, teaching, citing and researching it. And we need to continue to discuss and reflect on the implicit biases about gender (and race, class, age and disability) that shape academic norms.

Nevertheless, the books under review suggest that there are three interesting methodological challenges for those currently working in the field. Firstly, we face the problem of ‘women’ as a category of analysis. Historians are now rightly wary of generalisations about women’s experience across social, ethnic, geographic or political divisions. Many of the scholars in these volumes take great pains to emphasise the particularity of the groups of women they study, and the things that distinguished and separated them from other women. Where does this leave the history of women? Should we conclude that analysis is impossible beyond the level of the individual? The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined to draw attention to structural problems, not to privatise them. It challenges an analysis that rests solely on gender by drawing attention to other means of signifying and distributing power, thereby making us think about the interplay and intersection of gender, class, ethnic and other identities. This certainly problematises and complicates the categories of ‘women’ and ‘gender’, but does not abolish them, any more than it abolishes class or ethnicity. In fact, it could be argued that this challenge is precisely what is required to give the history of women some analytical bite. As Joan Scott puts it: ‘It’s not just that women have different kinds of possibilities in their lives, but that “women” is something different in each of these moments’\textsuperscript{16}


The second problem is the problem of men. While the caveats about generalisation and intersectionality apply to men’s experience as much as women’s, there is nevertheless a great deal to be learned about men’s changing lives in the post-war period. Where did norms of masculinity change the fastest, and why? What was the impact on men of changing patterns of employment, particularly the collapse of the male breadwinner model? How did fathers and sons negotiate the dynamic between generations with very different lives? We may think we know the answers to these questions in a common-sense way, but very little sustained scholarly work has been carried out in this field. This is a fascinating subject in its own right, of course. But it is also essential for a full understanding of the history of women. Men’s and women’s lives stood, for the most part, in a dialectical relationship to each other. It is impossible to understand why women continue to do more unpaid domestic work without understanding the barriers (practical, cultural and psychological) to men doing more. We cannot fully comprehend the dynamics of women’s experience in the paid workforce without knowing more about the history of men at work. Nor can the issue of domestic violence (endemic across this period) be understood solely from the perspective of its victims and activist groups. In short, the history of gender norms in this period is in large part the history of a struggle for power and resources, which cannot be told from one side alone.

The final problem faced by women’s history is the problem of feminism, both as an object of historical study and as a present political practice. This is an exciting moment for the history of the women’s movement. Feminism was arguably the most significant social movement of the post-war Western world. It has finally begun to attract a large and vibrant community of historians. But writing the history of feminism as a political movement is not without its challenges, as historians tread a narrow path between fault-finding and hagiography. Jan Lambertz’s essay on women in the early United Nations raises important questions of significance and impact, refusing to overstate the importance of the ‘peripheral’ Commission on the Status of Women. One unspoken issue here is the connection between historical and political practice. The scholarship on the women’s movement (as with the recent history of women more generally) often has an unclarified relationship to feminism. Unlike other disciplines, in both the humanities and social sciences, historians are generally wary about nailing their political colours to the mast. It is rare for a historian to declare him- or herself as a ‘feminist scholar’ in print—although many may understand themselves and their work in this way. Why and ‘for whom’ do we write the history of women? As part of an ongoing

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17 Lambertz, “Democracy could go no further”, p. 37.
18 See Bennett, History Matters, ‘Conclusion: For Whom Are We Doing Feminist History?’, pp. 153–6.
struggle for equal rights and representation? Or because it is essential to an understanding of the history of politics, society and the family? The questions are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Nor is there a right answer. But engaging with them head-on might encourage a more lively and purposeful debate.

The problem of women, then, is far from resolved. The emancipatory narrative that informs our understanding of the period is unsatisfactory. Yet so too is a historiography that stresses difference to the point of fragmentation. One way out of this impasse could be a re-engagement with more explicit structural and conceptual frameworks. Nancy Fraser’s recent collection of essays, *The Fortunes of Feminism*, proposes ‘three analytically distinct dimensions of gender injustice: economic, cultural, and political’. Fraser, a critical theorist, sets out to make sense of both the evolution of second-wave feminism and her own changing analysis of gender inequality. She builds on the view that feminists were relatively successful in changing cultural norms, but failed to transform institutions, including the economy. Put more bluntly, while attitudes may have changed, practices have not (p. 210). Yet Fraser goes beyond this, arguing that to believe that economic and political structures will eventually ‘catch up’ with social attitudes is naïve. In her analysis, neoliberal capitalism has co-opted a ‘feminist romance’ (p. 221) of female independence, which appeals not only to would-be Sheryl Sandbergs at the top of the economic ladder, but also to those women dreaming of climbing up from the bottom. ‘At both ends, the dream of women’s emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation’ (p. 221).

What is instructive about Fraser’s analysis is the way that separating out economic, cultural and political gender inequalities clarifies her argument, as well as drawing attention to other forms of social injustice (e.g. socio-economic). These dimensions are related, of course—the differential between male and female pay cannot be understood without considering the ways in which some kinds of work are culturally coded as ‘female’. But, equally, it underlines that a ‘cultural revolution’ in gender values may take place without corresponding change in economic structures and political institutions, and that such a cultural revolution may not necessarily reflect the values of the social movement which started it off. Contradictions such as these lie at the heart of recent work on the history of women; a model such as Fraser’s might help us to analyse and contextualise them. It would involve making clear what exactly we are talking about when we talk about women and gender. It would make conflict and competition over resources a more central question, not just in relation to gender, but with regard to class and ethnicity too. It would encourage us to clarify our thinking

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about the relationship between material and cultural factors (and by extension the relationship of social and cultural history). Importantly, Fraser’s framework takes as its starting-point, and is designed to critique, capitalist societies. Yet the gender norms she sets out to historicise (e.g. the privileging of paid work over unpaid, domestic and care-work) are by no means exclusive to capitalism. Historical research has much to offer here in terms of explaining the similarities and differences between societies with different economic regimes. None of these societies truly resolved the ‘problem of women’: why this is the case remains to be explained.

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