

Gendering European History 1780—1920 by **Barbara Caine** and **Glenda Sluga**. London: Leicester University Press, 2000. Pp. 203; \$39.95 (paperback).

In their street demonstrations militant suffragettes required that their supporters wear the delicate white gowns worn in the most genteel of homes. Is this evidence of the essentially frivolous nature of the well-heeled, middle-class suffragettes and their lack of serious political purpose, or an early example of publicity-conscious image-making? Caine and Sluga suggest it was the latter. It enabled the suffragettes to assume an ambiguous position in the light of the gender conventions of the day. While on the one hand seeming to confirm the very qualities of delicacy, passivity and purity which were used to justify the denial of their right to citizenship and participation in public life, they were, nevertheless, demanding a place for women within the public spaces of the streets and cities and within the democratic institutions of society, all places which men claimed for themselves. The authors suggest that this paradox lies at the heart of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminism; opposing the definition of citizenship which excluded women, but not wanting to challenge the definition of women's identity as defenders of moral worth, as linchpins of the family and as mothers of the nation, which accompanied that exclusion.

Contradictions within women's position in the gender order during the long nineteenth century provide one of the key themes of this book. Women throughout the period were challenging the denial of their full humanity and their citizenship; from the Society of Republican Revolutionary Women in France between 1790 and 1793 to the members of the women's clubs in France, Germany and Italy in 1848, to the female communards of the Paris commune in 1870. Yet the momentary advances, the brief opportunities for the female voice to be heard, were quickly lost in the reassertion of male authority. The

reconstruction of male hegemony often eroded even the small degree of liberty which women had previously experienced. So the advances of the 1790s were followed by the rigidly patriarchal Napoleonic Civil Code of 1804, 1848 was followed by the bourgeois liberal regimes in France, Germany and Italy whose hostility to women was so extreme that, as Caine and Sluga write, “women activists felt compelled to apologise for...their actions,” and the female communards of 1870 were labelled *petroleuses* “unruly women” and portrayed as “ugly, masculine and bad mothers.”

Caine and Sluga suggest that although they failed to dent male authority, the actions of these women ensured that in Europe it was possible, throughout the nineteenth century, to articulate the ideal of women as full and active citizens engaged in the political and social life of the nation. It led, however, to male, and also to a large extent, female, anxiety about the stability of the established gender order. Caine and Sluga demonstrate that each of the major intellectual developments of the nineteenth century (romanticism, liberalism, socialism, nationalism, imperialism) had at their heart a conception of the gender order which was inherently conservative and which reinforced male power. Within each of these intellectual strands, gender issues were being negotiated and reconstructed, but invariably in ways which denied women citizenship and equality. At the core of each was a reassertion of the centrality of male identity. Each assumed masculinity as normative and fully occupying the public spaces of power and authority.

That great nineteenth-century invention, the nation, had as its foundation a conception of the family as the site of the reproduction of both national citizens and national values. The virility, strength and martial qualities of the nation’s males were the guarantee of the nation’s own survival and greatness, and any weakness in male identity would imperil the nation itself. On women’s maternal responsibilities depended the national health and the future of the race. As Caine and Sluga declare, “the equation of the maternal with the national was promoted not merely by the state, but advocated by certain feminist groups.” It was the extension of the claims of the nation into the global arena under imperialism and during the First World War that led to the greatest assertion, and challenge, to the gendered foundations of the nation. The great “soldier heroes” played out to an enthralled national audience the qualities of national virility, yet, Caine and Sluga argue, it was in the trenches of the Western Front and in the jungles and swamps of the empire that national virility (and purity) was tested to its limits and beyond.

These great national endeavours also posed a fundamental challenge to feminism. Throughout Europe, as war loomed, feminists sidelined their feminist cause in the interests of patriotism and the maintenance of that male self-confidence on which the nation’s survival was believed to depend. In the empire, Caine and Sluga suggest, feminists gained self confidence from their conviction that their protected, maternal role demonstrated a cultural superiority over the “uncivilised” races whose women laboured and entered

oppressive marriages.

The authors provide a clear and accessible survey of the impact of gender on the key episodes of nineteenth century European history. They suggest one possible answer to the argument that the “great events” of history were not necessarily the most significant events for women, by demonstrating that in all the great projects of the nineteenth century – the nation, the race, the empire, industrialisation – issues of gender were central.

Although there is a valiant attempt to be comprehensive, the book reflects the unevenness of the state of research and some of the inherent difficulties of the topic. It is commonly noted that history and its records have been largely dominated by the activities of men, yet, because the male identity was normative and unquestioned, because it was perceived as “natural,” masculinity, the processes by which masculine identity was constructed, has largely been hidden. This absence of masculinity, though not of men, from the historical record is only beginning to be tackled. It is therefore unsurprising that at times, especially when discussing the conventional wisdom regarding gender, the authors fail to find the shadows cast by invisible masculinity. At these times the analysis follows the much richer seam of research on the development of female gender constructions and of feminist resistance.

The book began as a course taught by the two authors. Like a good course it is well organised, accessible and well grounded in the historical context, but in its need to compress a big topic it communicates little of the experience of living a gendered life during the period. There is insufficient attention to unofficial methods of social control and the capacity of individuals to negotiate, subvert and ignore conventional wisdom. It tells us little about how the constraints of gender worked out in practice.

Surprisingly for a book with its origins in teaching and designed for an undergraduate audience, it lacks a synoptic conclusion, so that gender never appears as a system. The processes by which gender is negotiated and renegotiated are never adequately identified or integrated. Although some of the historical debates are signalled, they are not foregrounded. In their attempt to deal with disputes in a balanced and neutral way the authors often fail to assess or evaluate the merits of each case. Historiographical debates are also largely ignored. The metaphor of “separate spheres” is used without any hint of its contentious nature in the literature. Little reference is made to the controversies about the trajectory of women’s history during the period, the role of women in industrialisation, or the issues of continuity and change.

Despite these limitations this is a sound guide to the current state of historical work on gender in the period 1780 to 1920. It makes a lively and convincing case for its central argument that “culturally mediated conceptions of gender established the frameworks in which modern politics and society took shape.”

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