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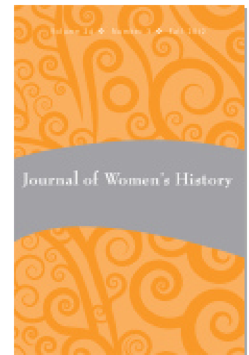

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Sexuality, Morality, and Single Women in Fin-de-Siècle Central Europe

Catherine L. Dollard. *The Surplus Woman: Unmarried in Imperial Germany, 1871–1918*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. xi + 272 pp.; tables. ISBN978-1-84545-480-7 (cl).

Tracie Matysik. *Reforming the Moral Subject: Ethics and Sexuality in Central Europe, 1890–1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. xiii + 302 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4712-9 (cl).

Julia Roos. *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Woman's Emancipation and German Democracy, 1919–1933*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. viii + 314 pp. ISBN 978-0-472-11734-5 (cl).

Agatha Schwartz, ed. *Gender and Modernity in Central Europe: The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Its Legacy*. Ottowa: University of Ottowa Press, 2010. vi + 337 pp. ISBN 978-077660726-9 (pb).

Melissa Feinberg

Last week, I went to see the exhibition "Vienna 1900: Style and Identity" at the Neue Galerie in New York City. Not surprisingly, the objects on view highlighted some of the historical debates over sexuality, morality and women's right to self-determination that the authors of the four books under review explore. I gazed at the golden sumptuousness of Gustav Klimt's portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, with her thin white throat poking out of the sparkling mosaic that covers most of her body, suggesting that the wallpaper and the woman were somehow of one piece, and I stood for a while looking at Oskar Kokoschka's psychically acute painting of Lotte Franzos, with her tortured, twitching fingers. But I found myself most taken with a simple glass box. In it hung a reform dress, high-necked and shapeless, and next to it, a woman's corset, empty, but laced to show the tiny waist and prominent bust typical of 1880's fashion. The display implied that the woman of the time faced a choice between two discrete identities. In the reform dress, she was mobile and free, feminist, but sexless. In the corset, she embodied femininity and exuded sexuality, but at the cost of independent movement and the ability to breathe deeply.

The four books under review all consider how Central European women (and to a certain extent also men) at the fin de siècle tried to balance

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these competing views of feminine identity. For the most part, the people in these books believed that women were essentially different from men. But they pondered the meaning and the nature of that difference. What role did sexuality have in shaping a woman's subjectivity? Was motherhood the core of femininity? And if so, what role did unmarried women have in modern society?

Tracie Matysik's book, *Reforming the Moral Subject*, is an elegantly written intellectual history of ethics reform in German-speaking Central Europe. Ethics reform was not a movement of like-minded individuals, but a protean phenomenon that brought together a wide cast of characters, united only in their belief that ethics needed to be rethought for the modern world and that sexuality "was somehow constitutive of the modern moral subject" (6). In Matysik's work, there is sometimes a slippage between the idea of a sexed or sexualized subject and a gendered one. This seems to come from her sources themselves. The ethics reformers she discusses are the products of a society influenced by new discourses of sexology, psychoanalysis, eugenics, Darwinism, and even pronatalism, all of which considered the relationship between sexuality and identity in some fashion. But because they assumed, for the most part, heterosexuality, their ideas generally rested on essentialized categories of masculinity and femininity.

Matysik ably shows how this emphasis on sexuality as the core of ethics could bring thinkers to a wide variety of conclusions. For radical feminist Helene Stöcker, a liberated sexuality was the source of what she called the new ethics. As Matysik points out, it was far from obvious that sexual liberationists would be concerned with ethics (which inevitably implies some kind of personal regulation) at all. Stöcker's aim was to insist that supposedly private matters, like sexuality and reproduction, were tied to politics and the public. Traditional morality, embodied in the different standards for sexual conduct deemed appropriate for women and men (the *Doppelmoral*), had not only been used to oppress women, but to deny their own feminine sensibility. Suffrage alone could not liberate women; they needed to gain access to their own uniquely gendered morality. Stöcker's New Ethic would enable a specifically feminine ethics based on love, as opposed to the "purely analytical" ethics of men (68). As Matysik remarks, for Stöcker, women claimed their moral autonomy "precisely through the *affirmation* of her desire, not its suppression" (70). Stöcker did not only theorize her position, she based her activism on it. At the helm of the League of the Protection of Motherhood (*Bund für Mutterschutz*), she advocated for legal contraception and abortion, free love, and rights for unwed mothers.

But others in the ethics reform debate came to radically different conclusions. For F.W. Foerster, it was not a celebration of sexuality that created a moral person, but the ability to resist and overcome sexual drives. Echoing

psychoanalytic thought, Foerster claimed that civilization was possible only if these drives were regulated, both internally and institutionally. Foerster turned to Christianity, which he saw as a useful tool for enabling individuals to overcome their natural drives. While they might seem far afield of each other, both Stöcker and Foerster, Matysik argues, saw sexuality as inextricably tied to the formation of moral persons.

Yet another quite different perspective came from philosophy professor Friedrich Ehrenfels. Ehrenfels's primary objective in discussing sexuality was protecting the white race from dissolution. While others have argued that Ehrenfels's work on ethics was distinct from his writing about sexuality, Matysik argues that they need to be seen as part of the same oeuvre. Both sprang from a "Darwinian framework" that rested on concepts of evolution and competition (120). Like Foerster, Ehrenfels believed that an individual's ethics should take the needs of society into account. However Ehrenfels also believed that European society needed to be invigorated to fend off racial challenges ("the yellow danger" from East Asia). Ehrenfels thus called for an end to monogamous marriage, like some radical feminists. But while radicals like Stöcker saw women as oppressed by current ethical standards, Ehrenfels suggested that these standards undermined natural male virility. A new sexual ethics would allow the most eugenically fit men to take many wives, creating more white babies and saving the white race. Matysik's careful exegesis of Ehrenfels's writing shows that his views, which seem extreme taken out of context, were written "in dialogue with Stöcker and her circle" and with others involved in the project of ethics reform (126).

Matysik's goal is to write the history of a "discussion" about ethics, particularly the relationship between the private individual and the public sphere. Like any conversation, this discussion could meander and run into very different venues, including Social Democratic circles, the United Races Congress of 1911, and policy debates over the criminalization of lesbian sex acts in Germany. This makes for a book in which the chapters do not always fit together neatly. It also makes the book exceedingly difficult to summarize in anything but vague terms. Nevertheless, this approach allows Matysik to illustrate how a set of intellectual and activist concerns could infiltrate what we might otherwise see as separate or even opposed arenas. The reader gets a vivid sense of how ideas about sexuality and ethics percolated through German-speaking Central Europe at the turn of the twentieth century.

Gender and Modernity in Central Europe, edited by Agatha Schwartz, aims to explore similar issues in the Habsburg context. As Schwartz writes in the introduction, the entry of middle-class women into new spaces and professions sparked heated debates over the meaning of masculinity and femininity (2). By the beginning of the twentieth century, she notes, women in the Habsburg Monarchy were no longer merely objects waiting to be

defined by male theories or illuminated by a male painter's brush. Enabled by feminism, women made their own theories about gender or sexuality and created their own representations of feminine identity.

Schwartz describes this book, which is composed of papers originally presented at a conference at the University of Ottawa in 2008, as "multi-disciplinary" (47). The contributors, while they do not, for the most part, attempt to work interdisciplinarily, do hail from a number of different fields, including history, literary criticism, sociology, and psychology. While it is certainly a worthy goal to gather scholarship from different perspectives together, little seems to have been done to turn the original conference presentations into a cohesive volume. The fourteen essays in the collection are grouped into five sections that seem chosen to fit the papers received rather than to suit any intellectual rationale. Some of the sections are disciplinary ("Impact of Viennese Modernity in Literature" and "Early Psychoanalysis and its Legacies"), while others are thematic ("Contributions of Jewish Women to Viennese Modernity" and "The Historical and Cultural Legacy of Austria-Hungary"). The individual essays tend to be on rather specific and disparate topics, such as the imagery in Klimt's painting "The Kiss," or Jewish women at universities in fin-de-siècle Vienna. They do, for the most part, speak to each other very well, nor do most of the authors engage the overarching themes of the volume in anything other than cursory way. This makes the book of limited use to the non-specialist reader.

Gender and Modernity in Central Europe is particularly noteworthy for its attempt to move beyond the Austrian capital of Vienna. While the authors (except for Tina Bahovec) say little about nationalism or national identity, they do at least take us to other parts of the Monarchy. Quite a few of the essays are about Hungary, including Judith Szapor's engaging look at the cult that was created around Sissi (the Habsburg Empress Elisabeth) in Hungary, and Miklós Hadas's examination of bicycling in Budapest in the 1880's and 1890's. The latter, however, despite its title of "Modernity and Masculinity," has nothing to say on the subject of gender other than to note that few women cycled during this period. Several authors are interested in how ideas circulated around the Monarchy. In his analysis of gendered imagery in Czech modernist poetry, Marcin Filipowicz considers the extent to which Czech poets adopted the misogyny of their Viennese counterparts. Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski not only looks at the reception of (German language) Austrian writer Robert Musil in Italy (especially in formerly Habsburg Trieste), but also compares his work with that of Italian writer Italo Svevo, who is often said to have also created characters who were "men without qualities." Finally, the three contributions on psychoanalysis (by Anna Borgos, J. Edgar Bauer, and Ferenc Erős) all make clear that this was a truly Habsburg creation. To varying extents, the three essays examine

the personal and intellectual relationship between Sigmund Freud and his Hungarian disciple, Sándor Ferenczi.

The first essay in the volume, by Helga Thorson, analyzes a short story by Austrian writer Grete Meisel-Hess entitled "Two Amusing Days." The story is about Ottokar Kralik, a young man from Prague, who wanted to spend a nice weekend in Vienna with a woman. Not having one handy, he put an advertisement in the paper for a female companion, telling interested parties to meet him at the train station waving a red scarf. Unfortunately for Ottokar, he arrived to find the station full of women waving red banners, each, however, shadowed by a secret policeman. In a case of mistaken identity, the authorities were convinced that Ottokar was trying to stage a nationalist demonstration in support of a free Macedonia. Ottakar was forced to spend his precious weekend being interrogated by the police, without the accompaniment of any lovely ladies. What had drawn all the women to the station to wave their red scarves in the hope of a weekend jaunt with a man they had never met? Were they not plagued by questions of morality? Meisel-Hess, tellingly, does not give the women in the crowd a voice. However, she had written about such women in other contexts. They were the "surplus" single women of the fin de siècle, whose only hope of marriage seemingly lay in accosting a stranger at the train station.

It is this belief that there was growing, desperate horde of bourgeois single women in Central Europe that Catherine Dollard analyzes in *The Surplus Woman*, which investigates this phenomenon in the context of imperial Germany. The first part of Dollard's book examines the idea of the "female surplus" (*Frauenüberschuß*) and its product, the old maid (*alte Jungfer*). Dollard argues that the idea of this new "surplus" of middle-class single women is not borne out by the available demographic data. The percentage of German women who never married in fact seems to have remained fairly constant over the nineteenth century. But while the *Frauenüberschuß* may have only been imaginary, it nonetheless formed the subject of intense cultural discussion. As Dollard shows, marital status served as the signifier for a range of personal qualities. The characteristics associated with singleness were generally quite pejorative. In literature, old maids were useless creatures who could either be foolish and silly or bitter and shrewish. Meanwhile, sexologists, who assumed that single women had to repress their sexuality, characterized them as pathological and deviant, prone to mental illness because of their enforced abstinence.

It was commonly assumed that maternity was the core of a woman's being and therefore unmarried women, deprived of the experience of motherhood, were stunted or perverted specimens of womanhood. Rather than disputing this assertion or denying the existence of the female surplus, feminist organizations like the moderate League of German Women (*Bund*

Deutscher Frauen or BDF) took the supposed existence of the surplus as the basis for action. The BDF used and attempted to alter the dominant discourse around single women and old maids. Its activists also emphasized the essential differences between women and men and agreed that motherhood was the foundation of femininity. Their task, they claimed, was to make it possible for middle-class single women to realize their maternal role through work for society as a whole, rather then working for their own family, as they would if they were married. The BDF fought for the educational and professional opportunities that would enable single women to be useful and productive, despite their marital status (which the BDF never portrayed as being a choice, but instead as an inevitable byproduct of capitalism). With the right training and job opportunities, single women would bring a "spiritual motherhood" into the public sphere. As Dollard notes, spiritual motherhood was "both ideology and strategy" for the BDF (95). Its members sincerely believed that maternity formed the basis of women's distinctive strengths, but they also saw that this approach would enable them to fight for women's rights in a way that men or non-feminist women would hopefully not perceive as threatening.

The second part of the book looks at how the idea of the surplus woman was "foundational" to the broad spectrum of women's activists in imperial Germany: moderate, radical, socialist, and Christian (11). Dollard does this by examining the work and beliefs of several prominent individuals: Helene Lange, Alice Salomon, Helene Stöcker, Ruth Bré, Lily Braun, Clara Zetkin, and Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne. This approach allows Dollard to show the intellectual relationship between the many different strands of the German women's movement, all of which were concerned with the meanings of marriage, motherhood, single-ness, and the female surplus. It also allows us to see how individuals used these concepts over time in ways that could be idiosyncratic and inconsistent. Thus, we hear about how the moderate feminist Alice Salomon conceived of social work as a form of mothering open to single women. Salomon saw social work, like motherhood, as a calling (*Beruf*) for women, rather than a mere job; indeed, for Salomon women's social work, like the work of mothering, was most ideally done without payment. Although Salomon was instrumental in opening social work to women, her convictions about motherhood as a selfless activity may have also played a role in keeping women out of prominent places in the profession. In contrast, radicals like Helene Stöcker and Ruth Bré hoped to make motherhood itself possible for single women. According to Stöcker (also a prominent figure in Matysik's book), old standards of morality, which limited sexuality to marriage, were responsible for creating old maids and prostitutes. With her New Ethic, satisfying relationships would be open even to single women.

Particularly noteworthy is Dollard's inclusion of Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne, who helped to found both the German Protestant Women's Association (DEF) and, after her conversion to Catholicism in 1900, the Catholic German Women's Association (KDF). A successful educator as a single woman, Gnauck-Kühne made a disastrous marriage rather late in her life. After divorcing her husband, she turned to activism. Like moderate feminists, Gnauck-Kühne emphasized the importance of educational and economic opportunities for single women and extolled the idea of spiritual motherhood. But her own experience with marriage seems to have been pivotal in her conversion. Gnauck-Kühne grew uncomfortable with Lutheranism's insistence that marriage was a woman's only calling. Catholicism offered a place to celibate single women. Like the other women Dollard examines, Gnauck-Kühne wanted to affirm the possibility for single women to live fulfilling happy lives.

The relationship between sexuality, morality and single women is also central to Julia Roos's book, *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender*. Contrary to the rather vague title, the book is a tightly focused study of prostitution reform legislation in Weimar Germany. Before 1927, prostitution (here always assumed to be women offering sexual services to men) was technically illegal, but prostitutes who had registered with the local police were allowed to ply their trade. Once a woman was officially registered as a sex worker, however, she effectively moved outside the realm of the law and into a sphere of arbitrary police power. Registered prostitutes (known as *Kontrollmädchen*) were forced to submit to various forms of bodily control, including regular gynecological exams and forced residence in certain houses or streets, often at exorbitant rents, all in the name of protecting the physical and moral health of German society. Once formally registered, it was very difficult for women to have their status changed, making it almost impossible for them to adopt a different profession. In 1927, the Weimar government passed the Law for Combating Venereal Diseases (*Reichgesetz zur Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten* or RGBG). This law made medical treatment for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) mandatory for all, male or female; anyone convicted of knowingly infecting others with an STD was subject to a possible prison sentence. In addition, the RGBG ended the state regulation of prostitution and decriminalized the profession in all municipalities of more than 15,000 inhabitants, while also outlawing the brothels that state regulation had permitted. A wide coalition of political forces supported the RGBG, from feminists to Social Democrats to German nationalists and even the Catholic Center Party. Roos structures her book around this rather progressive law, asking not only how it could come about, but also how its history can help us understand Weimar democracy and its fall.

One of Roos's goals is to show that Weimar feminism, often criticized for being ineffectual, did achieve some gains for women. Feminists led the drive to end the regulation of prostitution in Germany. For the most part, the women who fought to abolish state regulation were not advocates of free love like Helene Stöcker. They took their inspiration instead from English prostitution reformer Josephine Butler. Like Butler, they saw prostitution as enabled by men's sinful and immoral sexual urges. For them, ending the so-called *Doppelmoral* did not mean releasing women from oppressive moral standards, but requiring men to also adopt a strict code of sexual conduct. In contrast to Dollard, Roos argues that Weimar-era feminists mixed their maternalist sentiments with individualist approaches to combating prostitution. On the one hand, they advocated spiritual motherhood like older reformers. They endorsed social welfare for endangered girls as a better means of preventing prostitution and argued that female social workers and police officers were better suited to their care. They also argued that the regulation of prostitution violated the civil rights they had been granted as citizens under the Weimar constitution. Some have criticized the RGBG for allowing the state to intrude into the intimate lives of its citizens, but Roos emphasizes the positives that come out of this campaign: new civil rights for prostitutes, new access to contraception, and the establishment of new welfare centers run by and for women.

Like Dollard, Roos wants to show the connections between different strands of the German women's movement. The RGBG was supported by a coalition of bourgeois feminists, socialist feminists, and Catholic women who could all agree that the state should not be in the business of regulating prostitution. While effective for a brief moment, this coalition was soon broken by a movement against immorality. This backlash, Roos argues, actually shows that Weimar Germany was more successful at achieving progress towards gender equality than many have allowed. This very success fed increasingly virulent campaigns against immorality (213). Roos identifies several locations of growing resistance to the RGBG. One was the police force, which wanted to retain the power to control and regulate prostitutes. Another was the religious right. Unlike the police, religious conservatives did not necessarily support state regulation of prostitution (which they saw as the state supporting vice), but they were increasingly concerned about declining moral standards and wanted to see prostitutes off the streets. The Nazi Party, by promising to purify public morality and strengthen the state, was able to find a way to speak to both groups. Initially, Catholics and other conservatives rejoiced as the Nazis recriminalized prostitution and hustled streetwalkers off the boulevards. They were less enthusiastic, however, when the Nazi regime reinstituted state regulated brothels. The Nazis based their sexual morality on the race of the (heterosexual) partners,

which would quickly overshadow even marital status as the standard by which to judge the morality of sexual activity.

All four authors argue that debates over sexuality and morality did more than just reflect the concerns of the fin de siècle; they shaped those concerns in fundamental ways. But if these books show that sexuality was central to the process of coming to terms with modernity, they also emphasize that this was a process, a debate without end. In the modern world, what are the rules that should govern sexuality? In a society where all citizens are supposed to be free and equal under the law, should their sexual relationships command the same freedom and be granted the same equality, whether or not they are sanctioned by marriage? While the parameters of this debate have changed substantially over the past century, these questions are still a prominent part of the political landscape, leading us to wonder if it is not the existence of the debate itself that is central to the modern condition.