

## The Rise of the New Woman

WORLD WAR I and the advent of the republic significantly altered the role of women in German society. Although the Wilhelmine world of patriarchal domination classically portrayed in Theodor Fontane's novel *Effi Briest* was no longer intact, the so-called New Woman of Weimar was under considerable pressure to conform to traditional expectations. The war had placed many women in the workplace and opened the doors to higher education, the revolution had brought them to the polls, and Weimar voters would elect 111 women to the Reichstag. But the struggle for full equality on all fronts was by no means victorious, as many of the parties who paid lip service to women's rights failed to make good on various promises. Not even the SPD was ready to support equal pay for equal work. And despite the Communists' paeans to working women, they consistently subordinated gender to class considerations.

Ever since the pioneering efforts of Luise Otto-Peters in the 1860s, women themselves had been organizing to demand improvements in their situation. In 1894 the Bund deutscher Frauenvereine (League of German Women's Associations) became the umbrella for a wide variety of bourgeois women's organizations. By the eve of the war it had some 300,000 members. Led by Helene Langer and Gertrud Bäumer before the war, and Marianne Weber, Max Weber's wife, afterwards, the BDF emphasized educational reform, founded homes and recreational centers for unmarried working women, and established kindergartens.

The BDF was nevertheless relatively conservative in matters of family and sexual policy and grew increasingly nationalist during the war. Combating the "new morality" of Helene Stöcker's Bund für Mutterschutz (League for the Protection of Mothers) in the name of "spiritual motherhood," it rejected demands for both abortion rights and governmental support for unmarried mothers. The BDF was less radical politically (and also somewhat smaller in size) than the socialist women's movement which had been created in the wake of August Bebel's 1878 classic *Woman and Socialism* and was led by the revisionist Lily Braun. Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin countered Braun's position with a more class-oriented perspective on the plight of women in their newspaper *Die Kommunistin*. Typical of the BDF's attitude was Marianne Weber's 1918 plea in *Die Frau* for women to fulfill their special cultural

mission as moral reformers of society. Significantly, women were assigned a similar task a decade later by Max Brod in an essay on their relation to the New Objectivity. Here too they were asked to function as an antidote to the coldness and impersonality of a "masculine" style.

But the New Woman of Weimar seemed unwilling to play this role. She lived instead, according to Elsa Herrmann, for the present and according to her own desires. Like the fictional father and son whose conversation Alfred Polgar concocted in 1928, men too were themselves often confused about the behavior expected of them by changing times.

One of the most volatile issues for Weimar women was the prohibition of abortion, articulated in paragraphs 218 and 219 of the legal code. Sympathetic men like Manfred Georg, a writer for *Die Weltbühne*, argued strongly in 1922 against the state's right to control birth at a time when it had given up universal conscription, the right to control bodies after birth. (Paradoxically, he also argued for the discontinuation of suffrage for women because they seemed to be voting for the conservative parties of the right). Drawing upon the Gretchen story from *Faust*, Gabriele Tergit articulated the impact the increasingly stringent application of the law had upon women's lives. Nevertheless the anti-abortion laws remained on the books and in 1931 were invoked during the chancellorship of the Center Party's Heinrich Brüning in order to jail the Communist writer and physician Friedrich Wolf who advocated abortion in his play *Cyanide*, and Dr. Else Kienle who actually performed abortions.

The new role of women in the work force, which became especially contested during the Depression, was another critical issue. In 1931, Hilde Walter contemplated the "twilight of women" caused by resentment from all across the political spectrum at the perception that women had taken "men's jobs." The subsequent year Siegfried Kracauer followed his classic study, *Die Angestellten*, with a sobering analysis of the actual situation of working women, which he contrasted with the glittering media image of the New Woman.

Under these stresses—social, cultural, and political—women in the Weimar Republic were understandably ambivalent about the effects of their newly won freedoms. As Alice Rühle-Gerstel noted toward the end of the republic, the woman's movement had run out of steam. Many women in fact voted for conservative, even radical, right-wing parties because these promised a restoration of order through traditional roles. Once in power, the Nazis carried out a ruthless reversal of all the gains women had made during the republic. Sadly, a few former members of the BDF, formally dissolved in 1933, found ways to accommodate themselves, if uneasily, to the new order. In this way, Gertrud Bäumer was able to continue publication of *Die Frau* until 1943.

## ELSA HERRMANN

### This is the New Woman

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To all appearances, the distinction between women in our day and those of previous times is to be sought only in formal terms because 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. In fact, however, the attitude of the new woman toward traditional customs is the expression of a worldview that decisively influences the direction of her entire life. The difference between the way women conceived of their lives today as distinguished from yesterday is most clearly visible in the objectives of this life.

The woman of yesterday lived exclusively for and geared her actions toward the future. Already as a half-grown child, she toiled and stocked her hope chest for her future dowry. In the first years of marriage she did as much of the household work as possible herself to save on expenses, thereby laying the foundation for future prosperity, or at least a worry-free old age. In pursuit of these goals she helped her husband in his business or professional activities. She frequently accomplished incredible things by combining her work in the household with this professional work of her own, the success of which she could constantly observe and measure by the progress of their mutual prosperity. She believed she had fulfilled her life's purpose when income deriving from well-placed investments or from one or more houses allowed her and her husband to retire from business. Beyond this, the assets saved and accumulated were valued as the expression of her concern for the future of her children.

The woman of yesterday pursued the same goal of securing the future in all social spheres, varied only according to her specific conditions. The woman defined exclusively by her status as a lady determined the occasions when she would allow herself to be seen in public by considering the possible advantages to herself and her family, a standpoint that would often determine the selection of the places she would frequent and where she would vacation. Less well-off women often kept a so-called "big house." They invited

guests and took part in social functions to give the impression in their milieu that all the financial and social requisites for their husbands' career advancement were at hand. For every genuine woman of yesterday it was quite natural to make all manner of sacrifices in a completely selfless fashion, provided they served to advance the social ascent of the family or one of its members.

Her primary task, however, she naturally saw to be caring for the well-being of her children, the ultimate carriers of her thoughts on the future. Thus the purpose of her existence was in principle fulfilled once the existence of these children had been secured, that is, when she had settled the son in his work and gotten the daughter married. Then she collapsed completely, like a good racehorse collapses when it has maintained its exertions up to the very last minute. She changed quickly, succumbing to various physical ailments whose symptoms she had never before noticed or given any mind.

The woman of yesterday was intent on the future; the woman of the day before yesterday was focused on the *past*. For the latter, in other words, there was no higher goal than honoring the achievements of the "good old days." In their name she strove to ward off everything that could somehow have disturbed her accepted and recognized way of life.

In stark contrast, the woman of today is oriented exclusively toward the present. That which is decisive for her, not that which should be or should have been according to tradition.

She refuses to be regarded as a physically weak being in need of assistance—the role the woman of yesterday continued to adopt artificially—and therefore no longer lives by means supplied to her from elsewhere, whether income from her parents or her husband. For the sake of her economic independence, the necessary precondition for the development of a self-reliant personality, she seeks to support herself through gainful employment. It is only too obvious that, in contrast to earlier times, this conception of life necessarily involves a fundamental change in the orientation of women toward men which acquires its basic tone from concerns of equality and comradeship.

*The new woman has set herself the goal of proving in her work and deeds that the representatives of the female sex are not second-class persons existing only in dependence and obedience but are fully capable of satisfying the demands of their positions in life. The proof of her personal value and the proof of the value of her sex are therefore the maxims ruling the life of every single woman of our times, for the sake of herself and the sake of the whole. [ . . . ]*

The people of yesterday are strongly inclined to characterize the modern woman as unfeminine because she is no longer wrapped up in kitchen work and the chores that have to be done around the house. Such a conception is less informative about the object of the judgment than the ones making it, who have adopted a view about the essence of the sexes based upon various accidental, external features. The concepts *female* and *male* have their ultimate origin in the erotic sphere and do not refer to the ways in which people might engage in activity. A woman is not female because she wields a cooking spoon and turns everything upside down while cleaning, but because she manifests characteristics that the man finds desirable, because she is kind, soft, understanding, appealing in her appearance, and so on. [ . . . ]

Despite the fact that every war from time immemorial has entailed the liberation of an intellectually, spiritually, or physically fettered social group, the war and postwar period of our recent past has brought women nothing extraordinary in the slightest but only awakened them from their lethargy and laid upon them the responsibility for their own fate. Moreover, the activity of women in our recent time of need represented something

new neither to themselves nor to the population as a whole, since people had long been theorizing the independence and equality of woman in her relationship to man.

The new woman is therefore no artificially conjured phenomenon, consciously conceived in opposition to an existing system; rather, she is organically bound up with the economic and cultural developments of the last few decades. Her task is to clear the way for equal rights for women in all areas of life. That does not mean that she stands for the complete equality of the representatives of both sexes. Her goal is much more to achieve recognition for the complete legitimacy of women as human beings, according to each the right to have her particular physical constitution and her accomplishments respected and, where necessary, protected.