Woman as Academic Citizen in Imperial Germany

Patricia Mazón, associate professor of history at SUNY Buffalo, has written an elegant and thought-provoking book on a classic topic of women’s history. She examines the Imperial German debate on the Frauenstudium, or women’s university study. This debate led to the admission of women first as auditors (Hörerinnen), then as regularly enrolled students. This debate was most intense between 1887, when the leading feminist Helene Lange published her “Yellow Brochure,” and 1910, by which time all German states had legalized university admission for women.

As Mazón sums up her findings, “[t]his study shows that the admission of women did not involve merely eliminating a barrier to women but rather carefully selecting which women could enter the university” (p. 7). She effectively portrays the wrinkles in what would superficially seem to be a straightforward story of increased access to higher education. For example, the presence of women auditors in the 1860s and 1870s provoked an newly explicit ban on women at universities before it led, after over a decade of feminist struggle, to their admission as regular students. This debate was most intense between 1887, when the leading feminist Helene Lange published her “Yellow Brochure,” and 1910, by which time all German states had legalized university admission for women.

Mazón’s substantial introduction lays out all the themes of her book—indeed, it serves as a précis of the book. She discerns two “competing discourses” that structured the debate: “academic citizenship,” the concept she develops usefully to refer to a longstanding, explicit and implicit code of conduct and membership in university life, and the “women’s question,” which stressed women’s rights, needs, and social contributions (p. 3). As Mazón shows in nuanced detail in chapter 1, the German university was anything but gender-neutral and academic citizenship was profoundly masculine. To be a student was to undergo a specific “life stage” (p. 29), in which honor, self-cultivation (Bildung), and freedom to experiment were key. These values had inescapably masculine connotations: honor was defended by dueling, which also forged a link to the military world. Self-cultivation meant exercising one’s freedom to study any subject as one wished, an encounter one academic described as choosing a bride (p. 38), and engaging in the quasi-father-son relationship of professor and student. That relationship was to entail trust and confidentiality that, so many professors felt, was violated when...
women were present in the lecture hall. Experimentation entailed detaching oneself from the family home; flouting social conventions, including sexual conventions; cementing friendship through, for example, heavy drinking; and generally answering to no higher authority than oneself. It was especially hoped that this period of personal freedom would immunize the student from a materialistic and careerist outlook while he cultivated his mind. These hopes, in turn, were linked to the universalism appropriate to later careers in the civil service. True university study was not to be seen as mere career preparation. A photograph of Karen Horney with her medical class (figure 19 and also on the cover) perfectly illustrates the conceptual impossibility of a woman as a full academic citizen on those terms. Her male classmates carry sabers, a traditional symbol that she could not appropriate; instead, another symbol appears in her hands: a skull to represent the study of medicine. In addition to these strongly gendered values surrounding academic citizenship, Mazón emphasizes the contemporary sense of crisis among academics in the late-nineteenth century (p. 5). Between 1871 and 1914, academics became worried about overcrowding of the professions that might lead to competition and even careerism, the maintenance of high standards in the face of increasing pressure to matriculate, the marked increase in the enrollment of foreign students, and increased class, ethnic, and religious diversity among German students (p. 24). The challenge from women applicants and the women’s movement augmented academics’ worries on all four counts. The traditional structure and values of the German university seemed to be threatened.

The second “competing discourse,” the contemporary women’s question, reflected the sharply increasing demand for higher education among European women. About three thousand women applied to German universities in the years before admission was legalized, most of them since the 1860s (p. 2). While exact statistics are elusive, Mazón states that about 169 women, including citizens of Germany and other countries, took doctorates (the only degrees offered) at German universities between 1754 and 1908; 77 German women obtained degrees at Swiss universities in the latter decades of the same era (1875–1908) (p. 10). A growing subset of the women applicants to German universities since the 1860s were foreigners, including Jews denied educational opportunity in their home countries, especially Russia (indeed, the tsar in effect barred Russian women from the University of Zurich by decree in 1873). The presence of these women at German universities, where they were often able to become auditors given the absence of specific regulations excluding them, spurred academics and the state bureaucracy to pronounce an explicit ban on women as either auditors or students at almost all universities by 1879. Lange’s 1887 campaign was a new effort to break through that ban. Chapter 2 contextualizes Lange’s work among that of earlier advocates in women’s education such as Louise Otto, Hedwig Dohm, and Hedwig Kettler. While these and other feminists drew their basic argument from liberalism and its promise of equal rights, they constituted the “women’s question” less in liberal-egalitarian than in corporatist terms (p. 7). Especially Kettler and Lange argued for women’s admission specifically as women, not as ungendered humans. They were above all concerned with developing suitable career opportunities for women, particularly single women of the middle classes. These so-called “surplus women,” for whom motherhood could never be an occupation and whose talents would therefore be squandered, were to claim a role of “service” (p. 75), in Lange’s argumentation. Two areas were singled out as requiring the presence of university-educated women: gynecology and teaching in girls’ schools. As it happened, the Studentinnen were concentrated in those very areas. In fact, medical education appears to have been absolutely key to the whole Frauenstudium debate (pp. 87, 108), and might have received even more in-depth treatment in Mazón’s book. In the 1890s, women auditors were once again permitted, and they became increasingly common. In some cases they took degrees.

As chapter 3 shows, the discourses of the women’s question and academic citizenship talked past each other, as it were, in several ways. Feminists saw university study as a means to an occupational end—the very careerism that academics deplored. The feminists who fought for women’s admission had not themselves enjoyed the privilege of university study (or even much formal education at all) and did not develop a thoroughgoing confrontation with the masculine norms of academic citizenship. A certain consensus emerged around the idea of women as a special group who would be visitors, not central participants, in university life: there for different (social service) purposes, and studying particular subjects requiring feminine sensibilities (especially gynecology, pediatrics and the teaching of girls) (p. 106). Women came to be accepted as students by male academics on the understanding that they would be concentrated in fields that least threatened male students’ ambitions.

Chapter 4 describes the state-by-state decisions to admit women as regular students and the concurrent definition of which women, as opposed to whether women, were to be admitted (see the second paragraph of this
Like the preceding chapter, this one is well-written and filled with valuable insights. At the conclusion of chapter 4, it seems to me, the main goals of the book are accomplished. The two chapters that follow are interesting, but mark out two of many equally valid directions in which an expansion of the manuscript could have gone. They are not as tightly woven into the book as a whole as are the first four chapters. Chapter 5 turns the reader’s attention to literary images of the Studentin, an issue Mazón previously explored in an article in the Women in German Yearbook (2000), and chapter 6 devotes attention to the recorded experiences and impressions of actual Studentinnen.

In terms of historiography, Mazón defines her study as a contribution to the history of women’s higher education; an analysis of the Frauenstudium debate as a “cultural artifact” of German society and politics; and a case study of the “problems of access to higher education for a previously excluded group” (p. 4). She is completely successful regarding the first and third of these methodological approaches; the second remains only implicit as a specific approach to her sources except in chapter 5. Her own specific historiographical aim for the book, which sets it apart from other scholarship on the topic (described on pp. 12-15), is to combine two previously distinct approaches: the history of the university (which has ignored the story of women’s admission or treated it as marginal to the history of the university itself) and the feminist history of women’s admission as students (which has taken the university as a static entity, rather than one in the grip of important transformations during these years) (pp. 11-12). Here too, she is successful. However, almost all of the history of the university that she offers is in the introduction and chapter 1. I found myself expecting that material to be extended and deepened over the entire course of the book. While Mazón’s treatment of university history is certainly adequate to her own purposes in this highly articulate, polished account, the title phrase “the modern research university” reminds the reader, upon finishing the book, that history has been introduced here but not substantially explored.

Altogether, this is an important and highly readable account, thankfully available in English. (Much of the work on this topic since James Albisetti’s 1988 Schooling German Girls and Women has been in German.) One hopes that it will become available in paperback for courses in women’s studies, German and European history, and education. As it is, excerpting it with the publisher’s permission for reserve readings or course packs would be very worthwhile for instructors of such courses. This book is important for modern German history and it is also filled with acute observations for all who are interested in educational opportunity and social change.

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9304

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.