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Rachel G. Fuchs, *Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. New Approaches to European History. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xi + 267 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-521- 62102-X; \$22.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-521-62926-8.

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In some respects, social history has slipped away from the study of the poor and poverty as more and more is learned about luxury, consumption, and polite society as part of the rediscovery of elites. Of course, the poor are always with us. Many older studies of poverty were more concerned about the legislative reforms and the development of welfare systems that shaped how poverty was dealt with. Few studies have tried to tackle Europe, and gender has often been only tangentially discussed by studies of poverty.[1] Thus, Rachel Fuchs' survey of *Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe* is a welcome addition to the literature.

Fuchs sets out to "provide a social and cultural history of poor men and women, depicting the texture of their everyday lives, providing a human face to poverty..." (p. 1). This is an attempt to get to the essence of poor people's lives, and she leads the reader into how their lives were shaped, what their alternatives were, and how they constructed their lives using a variety of strategies and relying on a range of supports, that she describes as "fashioning a culture of expediciencies" (p. 5). Fuchs is aware of the potential to romanticize these lives, which she clearly eschews. In her introduction, she explores the approaches that can be used to understand these lives, and, in doing so, she presents a snapshot of where social and cultural history is with regard to methodology, gender and, ultimately, the study of poverty. This is useful for the student coming to the topic for the first time, but is also helpful to the scholar as a reminder and synthesis of several important milestones in recent historiography. She manages this with grace without sounding like she is doing an obligatory review of historiography. Instead it is concrete, succinct and useful. If it reads a little telegraphically at times, this is surely because she has little space in which to explore exceedingly complex ideas. The reader can sometimes feel many hours of research, thinking and writing by numerous historians behind each sentence.

Her emphasis, and central approach, is to emphasize community and family, and the ways they developed their culture of expediciencies. She argues that women and men fashioned their cultural expediciencies depending on their needs, their kin and neighborhood support networks and the availability of charity and welfare. Throughout, she reminds the reader of the significance of gender and the fact that poor people operated within a framework of unequal power relations, whether of class or gender. The importance of agency to her analysis is similarly paramount, in that people could decide whether or not to conform to social and cultural rules. Thus, Fuchs' approach shifts away from the understanding of poverty from an administrative, top-down approach that prioritizes the emergence of welfare systems or one that sees the poor as only victims.[2] This is a useful and salutary refocusing of the study of poverty that builds on a corpus of established works.

Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-century Europe is clearly intended as a survey. It is part of a series dedicated to providing concise but authoritative textbooks on key themes of European history since the Renaissance. Fuchs' book sits well in the series, drawing as it does on her original research and acknowledged authority in the fields of gender and French poverty.[3] Because of the series requirements, some of the scholarly apparatus is lighter than in monographs and the work is therefore a bit frustrating at times. But Fuchs has nevertheless managed to cite the most important works and

provides a careful and fairly lengthy bibliography, grouped by chapter headings. Thus, she provides a good guide to following up the material in her text that is useful to students, general readers and academics alike.

The geographical coverage nominally reflects the whole of Europe, but there is a clear emphasis on Western Europe and even within that, her own knowledge and strengths are obvious. There is a fairly French or even Anglo-French feel to the book as a whole, though to some extent this geographical scope also reflects where the key research has been published in English. She does, however, convey a “European” sense, rather than linking together snapshots of individual countries. The central portion of the book covers the period from 1815 to 1914, but a chapter dedicated to the revolutionary period and the revolutionary settlement (1770-1815) provides a useful prelude to the main discussion. Many of the studies of poverty center either on a narrower (or wider) time frame or on a single country, or even region. This book draws a much wider net and enables readers to see the similarities and differences in poverty across Europe.[4]

She begins with the revolutionary era, which allows her to identify the impact of the industrial and French revolutions on the poor, particularly in how social and economic structures altered to reshape the world of the poor. Thus, she sets the stage for changes in Poor Law and other legislation related to poverty and welfare, which had long-term impact in the nineteenth century and led to tighter control of the poor and also contributed to the redefinition of gender, especially for females, that was crucial to understanding the nineteenth century. Also Fuchs shows how the poor responded, not as passive victims but by actively claiming their rights, mainly to bread, but also as part of the revolutionary polity. As she says, the revolutions “framed the debates that played themselves out in the nineteenth century” (p. 42).

The following chapters are thematic. The demographic context and implications form the subject of the second chapter, where she argues that issues centered on female biology shaped social thought across her period (p. 43). She outlines the two major demographic transitions of the nineteenth century, the population explosion at the beginning and the fertility decline at the end, showing the importance of fertility, and thus how ideas about women and their sexuality were central to thinking about both gender and poverty. There were also clear links in this thought to a fear of “rampant sexuality” on the part of working and poor women.

Chapter three deals with rural poverty, while chapters four and five concentrate on the city, its working worlds and its impact on gender, lives and poverty. A variety of themes emerge in these chapters such as the important point that poverty does not mean unemployed. Many of these people were working people, some part of the time, others all of the time, some virtually never. Some were of course persistent vagrants. She looks at family, kin and community, at power and authority, on the links (or lack of) between industrialization and poverty, emphasizing the endemic character of rural poverty over a long time-span. She explores rural work patterns and opportunities, and devotes a whole chapter to work in towns including domestic service, sweated labor, factories, mills and mines. Chapter five on life in the cities draws on her discussion of work, exploring the more personal experiences of living in cities and echoing themes she explored in the rural world, including, for example, morality, marriage and migration, family and community, health, housing and hygiene. It is also good to see a discussion of leisure in this context.

Anyone who has studied women’s work will understand that her concentration on work relations is not misplaced. Much of the underlying poverty came from the ability or inability of women in families, widows and single women to find work. It is also clear that the ways that wages were paid meant that women earned less, and that men were more likely to receive the “family” wage. The importance of work

as an economic necessity meant that women were especially vulnerable to “self-exploitation” in a world where there were often few choices. What is clear is that when women had a set of choices, they utilized every means to make the best of them that they could, on balance. Her analysis of the “male breadwinner model” exposes many of the conundrums faced by the working classes. Women’s work was almost always essential, either as a supplement or a replacement for a male wage, but work was usually coded male as was the income earned from it. While these women were certainly not sequestered in the home in a mimicry of the public-private model, there was a belief by many in the nineteenth century that the working-class family was best served by women looking after the home, since economically it survived better with her careful attention. And if she had to work, taking in work at home, seemed the best strategy. Ironically, this approach further fostered the idea of the family wage and disguised the work that women did, making them seem even less like workers (pp. 110-16).^[5] She points, however, to the historical debates over this model and its timing. Clearly, historians have questioned both the meaning and applicability of the concept itself.

The final chapter on charity and welfare returns to some of the points she made at the outset on how poverty was regarded and its recasting as a moral problem at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In analyzing the ways that the poor were “cared” for across the century, she also shows how it became recast again so that “Poverty became a social disease rather than a moral disorder” (p. 210) after about 1870 as doctors and public assistance officials helped to revise thinking about poverty in the context of competitive nation states who needed healthy populations for their military, economic and political aspirations. In this context, motherhood and childhood gained new primacy, and while more assistance was made available, there was also more oversight. Welfare systems were, of course, not uniform across nations and states, while needs tests might replace morality tests. At the same time, the cultures of the poor did not always correspond to the ideas of those who thought they were helping them.

The underlying theme of a “culture of expediencies” is her vehicle for understanding how the poor themselves became agents in shaping their own routes through work, poverty and living. In her conclusion, she returns to this point and to others about the relationship between gender, power and agency, and the fluidity of many of the social categories that she has been discussing. She also reminds us of the fact that people’s lives were not static; that change happened in individual lives as well as across the canvas that was Europe in the nineteenth century. While much change was uneven, and certainly varied by nation and region, her conclusion highlights the key influences that altered the ways the nineteenth-century world thought of poverty, and how people themselves grappled with a “climate of calamities” as she frames it.

This book was not intended to break new ground. Much of the content and analysis will be familiar to academics working on or teaching topics related to gender and/or poverty in the nineteenth century. More advanced students will find also much that is familiar. However, the way that it is organized, structured and pulled together is one of its key assets. The topic is potentially enormous, and Fuchs could have limited it to welfare systems, legislation and the indigent. Instead there is breadth here so that the book is really about much more than “poverty” in a narrowly-conceived sense. It is about lives, and about how those lives engaged with the social conditions and structures around them, how they negotiated their own routes through life and how they managed when calamities intervened. It provides a holistic approach to the topic that is clearly aware of historiographical trends, newer research and the ways that a whole array of topics and themes relate in some way to the understanding of poverty in society. It is also about gender. And in this context she shows how gendered relationships in the home and out, how political perceptions of gender and how shifting concepts of class and gender interacted. Population growth, for example, is not just a numerical construction nor is it gender-neutral; it is about women having babies. And in this time period, births were clearly more significant than deaths in creating a growing population. So the implications of such growth had an impact on women’s lives and was related to women making decisions about not having babies.

As a textbook, which is how the editors position the series, this is not a straightforward narrative that skirts the difficulties of analysis. Throughout the book, Fuchs manages the balancing act between historical interpretation, historiography, and contemporary opinion of both the commentators on the poor and the poor themselves. Thus, the book is multilayered and reflective, providing much food for thought. She also takes the time to explain terms and the parameters of her discussion (e.g. pp. 69-70) and she also does not assume knowledge or understanding of some of the more knotty issues, such as landholding practices and their implications. So if much of it is not new, it is fresh and constructed in a way that makes links that are helpful, frequently explanatory, and thought provoking. It would be a useful supplementary text for courses in European history, especially on the nineteenth century, and clearly would make a useful contribution to courses focused on poverty, welfare and social change as well as courses that address issues of gender.

Students have a great deal to gain from her approach which shows the disagreements of historians and the frequent asymmetry between how the middle classes and the working classes saw the world, whether it was the world of work, family or poverty. This is where the relative lack of notes is sometimes troubling, however, since statements that start "historians think..." leaves us wanting to know *which* historians, especially when the next sentence tells us that others disagree. Thus some of the force of the analysis is lost because we cannot follow the development of the ideas she is drawing out. So students will be introduced to key ideas and themes, and will see that history is not a simple comfortable narrative; they will also see that to know more, they will have to follow her reading suggestions. As I indicated above, it is also sometimes a bit telegraphic. Thus also, students should have some familiarity with European history, and with some of the subplots with which she engages to get the most from this book.

It is very hard to provide a synthesis and survey while at the same time posing difficult questions, engaging with historiography and introducing the range of topics and themes that shape this text. There is a decided trend in producing such synthetic accounts, often aimed at students, sometimes at the general public, and the research of the last thirty or so years has helped fill some of the gaps in our knowledge. Also many historians working on women have engaged much more overtly with gender, and pushed their thinking far beyond the recovery of women in the past to seeing gender as an analytical and explanatory tool. And "men's studies" has also found a home within this interest in analyzing gender. Simultaneously there have been a number of projects, often as edited volumes, that have dealt with broad themes across "Europe". Thus arguably, Fuchs' book fits well in these trends. It is also a good example of how to do such a theme in a single authored volume. It is therefore to be recommended as a valuable overview of gender, poverty, and a great deal more.

NOTES

[1] An exception is John Henderson and Richard Wall, eds, *Poor Women and Children in the European Past* (London: Routledge, 1994). This is also an edited collection, a feature that is characteristic of a number of studies of poverty.

[2] See Alan J. Kidd, *State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth-century England* (New York: St Martins Press, 1999) or Hugh Cunningham and Joanna Innes, eds, *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform from the 1690s to 1850* (New York: St Martins Press, 1998) as two examples that focus on the shaping of charity and support systems.

[3] Rachel Fuchs, *Abandoned Children: Foundlings and Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) and *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for survival in the nineteenth century* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[4] For example, Catharina Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor: Antwerp, 1770-1860* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986) or Jane Long, *Conversations in Cold Rooms: Women, Work and Poverty in Nineteenth-century Northumberland* (London: London Historical Society, 1999).

[5] See a development of this argument in Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work, 1700 to the present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) and "Women Workers, Working Women" in Deborah Simonton, ed., *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

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