

*H-France Review* Vol. 21 (October 2021), No. 197

Isabelle Berrebi-Hoffmann, Olivier Giraud, Léa Renard, and Theresa Wobbe, eds., *Categories in Context: Gender and Work in France and Germany, 1900-Present*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2019. iv + 276 pp. \$135.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-78920-187-1; \$34.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-78920-188-8.

Review by Susan Milner, University of Bath.

This book presents the fruits of a Franco-German collaborative project carried out between 2011 and 2016, covering a broad historical period (from around 1900 to the early twenty-first century). As well as offering insights into the gender-work nexus, it illustrates the complexities and benefits of in-depth comparison, in this case of two closely matched countries operating under similar external pressures. It sets out to take “classification and categories seriously” (p. 2) by examining the ways “work” and “sex” and “gender” are used across various social fields, including in public discourse, in legal definitions which confer rights and entitlements, and affect wider social practice. Defined in this way, the use of the term “categories” can be relatively narrow, referring to for example the way “employment,” “unemployment,” or “self-employment” is defined in law, or broad, referring to the way in which public claims are justified discursively. The authors seek to investigate ways in which these processes of classification and claim-making are gendered, whether explicitly or implicitly.

The first six chapters present six pairs of areas of investigation which do not follow a standard template but nevertheless highlight in comparative context the importance of changes in legislation regarding recognition of women’s legal and economic status, classification of work, and forms of women’s activism (such as the formation of women’s self-employed or business groups): family businesses, corporate boards, and night work. The chapters on family businesses raised questions about the “grey” zones between work and non-work, including that between women’s domestic labour when it is classified as “housework” and when it is categorised as economic activity contributing to a family business. This set of grey zones is still valid today as forms of economic activity multiply and may be difficult to compare consistently across countries. Although the category “family workers” may form a sub-category of occupational status in European and international statistical standards, the category appears to have been recognised as a specific occupational class in Germany in 1925, whereas in France the categorisation appears to have followed a different path towards the definition of “independent” workers.

Prima facie, it is more straightforward to define women’s position in relation to corporate boards and chart in comparative perspective the (very recent) progressive inclusion of women on them. However, the link with categories and categorisation seems less clear, particularly in the French

chapter where these terms are not used. Instead, both country case studies highlight the social (gendered) construction of corporate leadership. Both are interesting in different ways which relate to the interplay of national and international levels of analysis. In the French case, there appears to be a globalising (Americanising) influence whereby French multinationals spontaneously adopted boardroom quotas in anticipation of their being required by US law, preparing the way for political acceptance of legislation. In the German case, on the other hand, strong societal norms of gender specialisation outweighed other rationales (or frames, although the term is not employed here) such as those of social justice and anti-discrimination. The association in the public debate between formal systems of qualification and gender norms of differentiation recalls the older comparative tradition understood as the “societal effect,” with its emphasis on the structuring effect of education and training systems.

The paired case studies on night work also pick up on gendered discourses. In France, the categorisation of female labour as vulnerable and in need of protection led to the prohibition of night work for women in 1892, enabled by an underpinning cultural assumption about women’s predominant role in the private sphere which allowed male trade unionists to pursue exclusionary male breadwinner practices. However, it was gradually undermined by competing economic preferences, such as the use of shift work in manufacturing, or residential work in schools or care settings. Nevertheless, governments resisted their European and international obligations to remove the legal prohibition until as late as 2000, largely on health grounds. Whilst similar arguments were used in Germany to justify the prohibition of night work for women factory workers in 1891, there was a stronger emphasis on sexual difference and the need to separate men and women spatially. The comparison raises some interesting questions about the impact of globalising economic norms led by the action of multinationals, and about how and why arguments on health or protection of vulnerable workers may hide other motivations, which are not fully addressed, not least because the focus of the two chapters is different: the German case does not consider the removal of the prohibition and broadens out to consider the regulation of working time through gender and racial categories.

The chapters on Germany reveal a highly segmented approach to labour market regulation, as well as a persistent familialism, both characteristic of conservative welfare states. Recent changes in the regulation of working time have disrupted this regime only to a certain extent: Arnaud Lechevalier’s explicitly Franco-German comparative chapter (covering a more recent period, 1995-2015), refers only briefly to Sigrid Betzelt’s overview paper on gender regimes,<sup>[1]</sup> which makes a number of pertinent observations about the use of this concept in (principally Anglophone) feminist scholarship, including its focus on policy interventions. The term “gender employment regimes” is deployed in this chapter to highlight ways in which labour market regulation initiatives are gendered, with attention drawn particularly to ostensibly gender-neutral regulation of working time, which in practice in the German case has led to a marked decline in full-time employment, particularly for men, and polarisation of hours and income for both sexes but especially for women. Meanwhile Germany’s male breadwinner model has been inflected rather than transformed by investment in childcare and the creation of more gender-equal leave schemes (as discussed also in a chapter on “the family’s economic charm” in Germany). The trajectory in France during the same period was one of more gradual change, and work-family reconciliation appears to have weak political salience, whereas it emerged in Germany around the time of the financial crisis, as a factor of sharpened party competition.

As the focus elsewhere in the book is on the law, public policy and public discourse, and given the book's ambitions, it would have been fruitful to develop the theoretical discussion in relation both to the interplay of gender and work, and to comparative frameworks. Similarly, in the chapter on France's response to EU policy norms, there is a missed opportunity to deploy Heather MacCrae's [2] work on the EU's gender regime and its leverage in domestic contexts, not least by non-state actors (women activists, whether self-defined as feminist or not), whose attempts to redefine classifications were influential at several junctures throughout the book but whose role is not analysed systematically.

A final pair of chapters consider the impact of EU classifications (and in the German case, those of the International Labour Organisation) for the period after 1914 (up to 1988 in the German case, and 2014 in the French case). As the multi-author chapter on Germany highlights (the chapter on France more fleetingly), the ILO—as part of the postwar peace-building and cooperation efforts coordinated by the United Nations—established a standard-setting which is still used today. From its initial gender-protective position it moved to an influential equality approach, notably through the adoption of Convention 100 on equal pay for work of equal value. Later, the European Community adopted a narrower, weaker version of the principle of equal pay which required several years of case law to become operational (and even then, unevenly so). In Germany, domestic case law established the principle of equal pay for equal work in 1955, and it was not until 1988 that European case law was deployed to expand the meaning of equal pay to include the need for gender-neutral job evaluation (whereas previously inequality had been possible on grounds of higher male productivity, that is, a presumption of gender difference). This chapter raises the question of mobilisation by domestic equality campaigners, which is not addressed: why did it take so long to challenge discriminatory pay settlement law?

We might speculate that male-dominated corporatist practices had some bearing on the answer, as the French chapter suggests. In France, collectively bargained job evaluation schemes led to lasting undervaluation of women's work and were translated into legally sanctioned pay classification schemes. When the formal principle of equal pay was instituted after 1945, its application remained elusive. Given that the Rome Treaty's Article 119 on equal pay was introduced on France's insistence, it is therefore unsurprising that it took several decades of case law to make it effective at European level. In France, women trade unionists and experts pressed for change, using the opportunities available in the state's institutional machinery, but the methodology underpinning valuation of women's jobs was (and remains) under-developed, hampering any attempt to make the principle operational through litigation. Both chapters highlight the mutually reinforcing effect of relatively weak (but gradually strengthening) European legislation and domestic law embedded in long-established exclusionary wage settlement practices.

Together the chapters provide a stimulating and empirically rich analysis of the ways in which the public understanding of women's work has changed in France and Germany, under the various pressures of societal change, economic change, and (shared) commitment to international norms. However, the framework of analysis shifts somewhat throughout the book, sometimes focusing tightly on categorisation and sometimes using a much broader analysis of gendered public discourse. Methodologically, too, the chapters shift between analysis of legal definitions and norms and forms of discourse analysis, with reference to party-political and wider public debates. It is not always easy to read across chapters outlining very different national contexts, particularly as the timescale and focus may differ across country chapters, so this reader would have appreciated more editorial analysis of the comparative lessons. Likewise, it would have been

helpful to have to hand a timeline table showing the major changes in law, taxation, and social policy for the two countries, including also dates of adoption of the major European and international norms.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Isabelle Berrebi-Hoffmann, Olivier Giraud, Léa Renard, and Theresa Wobbe, Introduction: Categories of Gender and Work in Context. Ways Toward a Research Agenda.

##### *Part One: Shifting Categories from a Comparative Relational Perspective*

Olivier Giraud, Making Sense of Women's Labour in the Context of the French Family Business: From Domestic Labour to Recognized Work.

Léa Renard, The Grey Zones between Work and Non-work: Statistical and Social Placing of 'Family Workers' in Germany, 1880-2010.

Michel Lallement, Night Work for Women in France in the Last Two Decades before 2000: Regulations, Discourse and Gender Issues.

Theresa Wobbe and Katja Karolin Müller, 'Women's Factory Night Work' in Germany: Changing Classification Schemes in Varying Environments, 1891-1994.

Anne-Françoise Bender, Isabelle Berrebi-Hoffmann, and Philippe Reigné, Women on Company Boards in France: French Republican Equality and Anti-Discrimination Laws Conflicting Logics, 2006-2013.

Katja Karolin Müller, Women on Company Boards in Germany: A Result of Constancy and Change in Gendered Categorizations, 1980-2013.

##### *Part Two: Transnational Interplay of Categorization*

Arnaud Lechevalier, Dynamics of Gendered Employment Regimes in France and Germany Over the Two Last Decades: How Can They Be Explained?

Theresa Wobbe, Maike Bussmann, Carolin Höroldt, and Léa Renard, 'The Family's Economic Charm': Recent Reclassifications of Maternity, Employment, and Family in German Policy from a Historical-Sociological Perspective, 1900-2010.

Theresa Wobbe, Carolin Höroldt, and Maike Bussmann, From Particular Protection to Universal Principles: Shifting Classifications of Employment Rights in the ILO, the EU, and German Labour Law, 1919-1988.

Ferruccio Ricciardi, Negotiating the Boundaries of Equality at Work: Tensions about a Gendered Employment Norm in France and in the European Community, 1914-2014.

#### NOTES

---

[1] Sigrid Beltzer, "Gender regimes: ein ertragreiches Konzept für die komparative Forschung: Literaturstudie," Arbeitspapier, Centre for Social Policy Research, University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany, December 2007. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/1091>.

[2] See for example Heather MacRae, "Rescaling Gender Relations: The Influence of European Directives on the German Gender Regime," *Social Politics* 13 (2006): 522-550.

Susan Milner  
University of Bath  
[s.e.milner@bath.ac.uk](mailto:s.e.milner@bath.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172