

Calvert, Katherine E. *Modeling Motherhood in Weimar Germany: Political and Psychological Discourses in Women's Writing*. Camden House, 2023. pp. 178.

Katherine E. Calvert's timely monograph *Modeling Motherhood in Weimar Germany: Political and Psychological Discourses in Women's Writing* brings nuance to discussions around motherhood in the Weimar Republic while also holding up a mirror to the current feminist moment in both the United States and Germany. Calvert uses a "critical discourse analysis approach" to not only apply leftist psychoanalytic and political readings but also assess the evolution and ambiguities of the ideologies themselves (2). Through a survey of philosophical, journalistic, and fictional texts across leftist and liberal political spectrums, Calvert highlights the Weimar Left's at times problematic and essentialist treatment of motherhood, while acknowledging its attempt to better the lives of women and children alike.

From the very onset of the book, Calvert highlights that an essentialist attitude towards motherhood dominated across the political spectrum. Most feminists today will recognize this same frustrating attitude replicated in our own political environment. While the right wing continues to work towards destroying access to all forms of birth control, so as to better dominate women and birthing persons, feminists will also recognize disappointing betrayal from leftist and liberal circles. (I cannot count the number of times I've had a white male leftist tell me abortion is not a labor issue or a liberal wax poetic about how "no woman really wants to abort.")

Calvert also engages with the equivocal figure of the "new woman" and motherhood in Weimar culture. As to what extent this figure remains simply a marketing narrative trick versus actual political figure during the era remains up for debate. Moreover, Calvert suggests that the extent of gender conservatism during the era does not completely belong to the complete gender subversion posited by several historians and the simple historical continuation of these roles posited by others. While leftist and liberal circles never completely broke with the idea that women had an intrinsic draw to motherhood, they also worked to improve material conditions for many mothers, including those unmarried. The strategic decision might have seen short term gains, but it ultimately thwarted entire reproductive liberation.

Calvert foregrounds her analysis of contemporaneous leftist texts by looking at the little-known work of feminist Alice Rühle-Gerstel, *Die Frauenproblem der Gegenwart* ('Women's Issues in Contemporary Society'). The Weimar feminist drew on Marxist-Individual psychology to analyze women's relationships to the family, work, and other gendered social structures. As a result of the blatant misogyny of Freud and many of his fellow psychoanalysts, this particular theoretical field seems an odd choice for a framework of women's

liberation. Calvert cites the existence of feminist psychoanalyst scholars from the turn-of-the-century onwards. (Of course, contemporary theorists such as Laura Mulvey have used psychoanalysis to draw attention to structures of misogyny.) Calvert argues that Rühle-Gerstel challenges a gender essentialist vision of women as mothers who do not wish to work outside the home. While this particular belief has never disappeared, it has gained new traction with J.D. Vance and the social media trad-wife phenomenon. In another passage, Rühle-Gerstel draws attention to Weimar era men's self-perceived victimization and juxtaposes it with actual structural injustices inflicted on women. This analysis of the Weimar era narrative compares with the contemporary media manufactured panic around the alleged male loneliness crisis, where the damage inflicted on women appears of little importance. Hence, as Calvert demonstrates through Rühle-Gerstel's writings, the theoretical groundwork already existed during the era for women's liberation from gender essentialism, but in end effect, Weimar feminist and women's movements failed to put these liberatory theories into practice.

Abortion remains an integral component of the politics of motherhood, and in a canny move Calvert devotes the middle chapter of the book to the Weimar "abortion debates." Tied to an essentializing vision of motherhood, complete reproductive liberation through unfettered abortion access still remained the minority position of feminist circles. Instead, there still remained emphasis on abortion as a last resort due to medical issues or extenuating circumstances. Weaving literary analysis throughout, Calvert deftly recounts the complex history of abortion during the Weimar period. She also reminds the reader that abortion remains extremely limited in contemporary Germany, still adhering to the essentialist view of women as mothers.

Abortion continues to resurface as a theme in the Communist didactic fiction and novels addressed in the second half of Calvert's book. Didactic fiction focuses for the most part on women's role in the Communist family as a bastion against capitalist exploitation. Unfortunately, traditional gender dynamics continue to be reinforced throughout this didactic fiction with women ultimately answerable to their husbands. Calvert's final chapter in turn focuses on intergenerational conflict, particularly the figure of the New Woman as a single mother. In this model, women can pursue motherhood outside of a heterosexual partnership and receive social support at large, but maternalistic assumptions still remain.

In conclusion, Calvert provides a fantastic overview of the political and literary treatment of motherhood in the Weimar era. Her promotion of the largely untranslated work of Alice Rühle-Gerstel is of particular value. Calvert's book would work well for a German Studies graduate level or an upper-level content course, as well as for those teaching courses on Weimar history or gender in German history. Not only does Calvert deftly interrogate motherhood discourse and its key concepts in early twentieth-century Germany, but she also draws lines to the

politicization of motherhood today. It throws into stark light how severely limited German women's reproductive liberation remains today.

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