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052162102X - Gender and Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Rachel G. Fuchs

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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To write a book about gender and poverty in nineteenth-century Europe is no simple matter. What I have attempted is 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, and reclaiming poor women and men of Europe from anonymity. By that, I don't mean by giving them names, because the records of individual poor men and women, with few exceptions, are lost to historians – except as statistics, in some criminal records, or through the eyes of their contemporary social commentators. It would be easy to portray the poor as passive, weak victims of economic, social, and cultural forces they could not control. But in fact the poor had agency. They struggled, and demonstrated both strength and resourcefulness. I want to pay special attention to the women, to attend to their human agency as much as possible, and to show how they attempted to structure a life and set of relationships.

People exercise their individual freedom, or agency, within a social order, a culture, community, or a body of laws. The poor, like others in society, could comply, or not, with that social order, doing what was necessary for their own survival. Historical sources reveal the unrelenting harshness of these women's lives, and the patriarchal domination they endured throughout the nineteenth century. Although industrialization and urbanization benefited poor women and men in some ways, it frequently made their daily lives more difficult. Of course, life on the farm was no picnic either.

In a pathbreaking article, historian Joan W. Scott argued that gender is a main category of historical analysis and “a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”<sup>1</sup> In this book, gender is the overriding organizing principle, and the lens through which we seek to understand power relationships in the history of women and poverty. The approach of this book is comparative, highlighting differences and similarities among regions and nations. It will

<sup>1</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in her *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28–50. Quotation from p. 42.

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parse subtle differences between societies and cultures but also stress connections and common social threads. Women in poverty form a polythetic group – a group in which the membership does not depend on a single set of attributes but each attribute is shared by most of the individuals in the group. Clusters of traits – such as occupations, housing and living arrangements, family relations, and income – define the group. The use of models, such as the male breadwinner model, is appropriate when models are intellectual constructs that simplify reality in order to understand it. This book will examine the social roles and behavioral patterns of poor women – their lived experiences. It will also analyze what others expected of them, and discuss representations, exhortations, and prescriptions.

Historians of the nineteenth century extend the chronological boundaries of that century to cover the period from about 1770 to 1914, the period known as the “long nineteenth century.” The periodization of this book covers that long century because the major economic developments of industrialization and urbanization proceeded at an unprecedented pace during those years. Furthermore, modern political notions of nationalism, nation building, and rights of citizenship and entitlement also took root during that era. Family life and work arrangements also changed. Categories were created, contested, and transformed as European societies and governments engaged in state building. Since the lives of the poor do not follow distinct chronological boundaries, the beginning of the nineteenth century is not precisely at 1800 and the century does not end at 1900. Moreover, in social terms, the first decade of the twentieth century is in many ways indistinguishable from the two decades that preceded it.

During the long nineteenth century, European women and men of all countries experienced dramatic and enduring alterations in their daily lives. Increasing urbanization, industrialization, and migration coincided with shifts in men and women’s responsibilities, in constructions of gender, and in society’s responses to the problems of poverty. The lives of poor women and conditions of work, within and outside the family, assumed different dimensions as the century evolved. Women constantly strove to balance their productive and reproductive lives, with or without the support of kin, neighbors, charity, or welfare. By 1914, the boundaries of poor women’s lives became transformed, setting the stage for twentieth-century developments.

**Methodologies**

This book combines the methodologies and perspectives of women’s history, social history, and cultural history. Social history, an approach long associated with histories of women and poverty, has changed over

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the past several decades. Beginning in the 1930s, and greatly accelerating in the 1960s, historians studied the everyday lives of ordinary people and the social structures that helped shape their experiences. Borrowing some of the tools and concepts of sociology, economics, and anthropology, historians fashioned new approaches to the study of ethnic and racial groups, social and economic classes, institutions, and power relationships. Building on the study of long-term social and economic structures begun by the French *Annales* school of historical methodology, many scholars devoted their attention to social history.

Some social historians concentrated their studies on the family as an institution, seeking to show continuity and change in family structure, in the responsibilities of family members, and in the roles families played in society. They tended to examine women's lives within the context of the family. Other social historians of the mid to late twentieth century concentrated on industrial development, urbanization, the development of a working class, the nature of work, and people's work experiences. Initially, they did not distinguish between men and women's work, but used the male model to analyze working-class experiences. Increasingly, however, historians sought to uncover the differing experiences of women at work. The social history of women, therefore, featured women in families and women as workers – women struggling to balance their productive and reproductive lives.

Social history has also included demography, as scholars with a positivist philosophy of history paid keen attention to quantitative methodologies. These historians were unwilling to rely upon the extant reports of social reformers and government officials to tell us about poor women's lived experiences. Furthermore, quantitative history allowed us to ask questions about poor women who left no direct records. Aggregate numbers that historians culled from censuses and from records of hospitals, prisons, births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths were sometimes the only indicators available about their lives. These data allow historians to discern trends and changes over time. Some historians tried to extract more information from these numbers, teasing out a further sense of the lives of the poor. Historians soon discovered that numbers do not always indicate "facts" about women's lives, and the very categories reveal the biases of the data collectors. Realizing the limitations of quantitative history, many historians increasingly sought to combine cultural history and microhistory with social history. The few extant working-class autobiographies and the dossiers from police archives provide glimpses into the lives of poor women. Using information from qualitative social history, historians then recreated a story of a person's lived experiences, seeing that person's life as emblematic or sometimes distinct from the collectivity.

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Women's history had roots in two important trends – the flourishing social history of the 1960s through the 1980s, and the feminist movement that began in the 1960s. In the early 1970s, when women historians chose topics for study, some combined their interests in the history of women with their interests in social history and that of the working classes. The growing feminist movement beckoned others to write women's history that broadened the scope of political and intellectual history. This branch of women's history included the history of feminism and a concentration on the histories of notable and worthy women. It put her-story into history. By the end of the 1980s, feminist theory came to supplant, or at least supplement, Marxist or liberal-Whiggish theories as a theoretical underpinning of much of the work on women's history. Feminist historians studied women's lives, infusing history with new questions, new historical categories, new analysis, and new chronological markers. Research in women's history began to examine not only the lives of the famous, but poor nameless women as well, becoming more sophisticated and complex.

Starting in the late 1980s, historical methodology turned away from the dominant emphasis on social structures, typical of social history, to a post-structural approach that is the hallmark of cultural history. Concentrating on words, meanings, symbols, rituals, and representations, and taking the "linguistic turn," historical scholarship assumed new dimensions. Historians use a range of sources, turning from demographic and economic data to greater use of literary and artistic sources. The movement away from quantitative and social history to a more cultural analysis changes the questions that historians pose. It is not sufficient to know how many of the poor died in childbirth, left home to work as domestic servants, or wound up in old-age homes. Historians seek to understand the quality of their lives, their particular values and their culture. Doing this for a group that left no written record is difficult, requiring a vivid historical imagination and some of the tools of social history. The methodologies of cultural history allow historians to consider concepts of agency and culture that elude quantitative history. They also allow historians to question the very organization of data and the language the writers and politicians used to describe poor women. Cultural historians ask questions about categories themselves, including categories of woman and gender.

This book is attentive to the cultural approach to gender and women's history that emphasizes the construction of gender and the power of discourse. This post-structural attention to language and symbols is important for understanding the culture and representations of the poor. However, my approach is primarily that of a social historian, paying

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close attention to the everyday life and the lived experiences of poor women and men. As much as possible, I seek to show their struggles, their families, and the interactive nature of relationships, revealing how poor women negotiated power within a complex web of family constructs, community interests, state agencies, and cultural discourses.

This book will be organized around five themes: a climate of calamities; the existence of poor women's agency; the importance of community connections; relationships of exchange and reciprocity; and the overlapping nature of the private and the public spheres. Overarching all, I develop the concept that the poor survived by fashioning a culture of expediencies. They sought creative and expedient ways to manage situations, adapting behavior as they went along, usually within the larger cultural parameters of ethics, morality, economics, and the law. The poor were usually aware of social and cultural rules, but by exercising their agency, they challenged and sometimes broke them, when doing so was expedient for their well-being.

On a fundamental level, the poor lived in a climate of calamities marked by economic or social forces and disasters usually beyond their control. Characteristically unable to save and prepare for unexpected events such as crop failures, unemployment, and unfortunate social occurrences (e.g. an unwanted pregnancy), women and men were forced to cope with what life, nature, the economy, and society dealt them. They developed sets of expediencies.

Although they had to negotiate their way in the face of various calamities, social constraints, and a controlling discourse, poor women exercised agency. A useful theoretical tool for understanding agency is sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "practice theory." This theory allows for flexible and reciprocal relationships between individuals and the social, cultural, and political settings in which they negotiate their lives. Practice theory posits individuals as strategizing (sometimes not consciously so) and struggling to find their way within a given situation. In return, the social structures become modified through the individual's behavior. Bourdieu's concept of "practice theory" supplies an analytical tool to show that individuals had design strategies for survival, improvising within a social and economic context, even that of a climate of calamities. By their social practices and behavior, the poor modified the social institutions or structures that provided the context for their lives. Structure and agency are mutually constitutive. Ever mindful that so much of the information on poor women comes to us through sources penned by propertied men, we can determine poor women's agency by what they say, by their activities, and also by what others say about them. Women have power and language that we can infer from their words and

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the representations by others. They lived in complex power relationships that were both structural and discursive. In acknowledging these power relations, we may be able to understand what constituted their individual agency.

Survival was a collective activity and responsibility, especially for the poor. This book stresses the centrality of community and family life, even while attempting to recognize agency. The smallest unit of this group was the family, but the collective widened to include a larger household, neighborhood, village community, as well as public institutions at local, regional and even national levels, such as schools, poorhouses, and parishes. Mother–daughter ties were especially important in the lives of the poor. Typically it was women who bound families together. Women negotiated and renegotiated power within the family and in presenting the family to the outside world. Women held responsibility for feeding and housing their families by their own work and the wages of their husbands, by relying on family and kinship networks, and by accepting religious charity or state welfare as they could. However, they often used these resources to their own ends, not necessarily those of the providers.

The poor often found work through family and friends; these kin and neighbors helped out in hard times in multiple ways. Neighbors could support or could turn against one another, constructing a family's and individual's reputation as they established social mores and regulated the community members' behavior. Important connections also could result from chance encounters. Sociologists refer to "the strength of weak ties," the ephemeral relationships rather than strong bonds of intimacy that often enabled poor women to find work, housing, or welfare. The European poor relied on various communities – such as those of kinship, neighborhood, churches, religious organizations, work, or region of origin. Community connections were as important in large urban areas as they were in the rural countryside or small towns, and rested upon an ethos of exchange, among both ephemeral relationships and closer personal ties.

Relationships of exchange and reciprocity involved trading goods, services, information, and behavior among the poor, between the rich and the poor, and between the poor and social agencies. Families and neighbors gave when and what they could, expecting recipients to give back, in kind, when they could. Or they gave to a needy relative in return for protection of the family honor. Religious donors gained solace and sometimes perceived salvation in giving, and in return expected pious and religious behavior from the recipients. Others, notably public welfare organizations, expected social order and social discipline in exchange. Sometimes reciprocity failed as people held on to what they had and

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refused to help a neighbor, or agencies eschewed welfare, even in return for the hope the poor would behave differently. Social control theory that postulates welfare as a means by which the dominant classes sought to control the behavior of the poor has some, but limited, value in understanding the topic of women and poverty.

Historians of the mid-twentieth century, following nineteenth-century representations, regarded the nineteenth century as a time when men and woman operated in separate spheres – men in the public sphere of industry, commerce, politics, and the professions, and women in the private sphere of home and garden. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, historians argue that the analytical framework of public and private spheres was a discursive category that had limited relevance to how people actually lived their lives. The idea of separate spheres was a bourgeois or middle-class male ideal. Nineteenth-century women in poverty lived in an era when bourgeois gender norms clashed with the experiences and necessities of working-class life. For the poor, the separation of the public and private spheres was primarily a prescriptive category that even in the discursive realm had little applicability for them. Poor women worked, and many worked outside the home in public space. Moreover, the middle-class writers who positioned women in their homes as dutiful daughters, submissive spouses, and model mothers also needed the labor of working-class women who operated outside their own homes. The concept of the public sphere becomes meaningful to historians if we consider it as not one idealized bourgeois public sphere, but as a variety of public spheres, even contested public spheres that are discursive as well as spatial.<sup>2</sup> Many poor women lived in the interstices of the public and private.

### Defining gender

During the 1980s, historians of women began to question categories of historical analysis and wonder what the category of “woman” meant. Questioning the essential nature of “woman” as fixed and based mostly on biology, they postulated that the category of “woman” indicated different things at different times. There were so many differences among women that historians came to understand “woman” as an unstable gender construct, changing according to time, place, class, and culture. Although the category of “sex” is biological, some scholars are now questioning the stability of “sex” as a category. Gender is not

<sup>2</sup> Harold Mah, “Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians,” *Journal of Modern History* 72:3 (March 2000): 153–182.



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synonymous with woman. Gender is socially constructed to assign or describe the roles that men and women play in society. Gender refers to the culturally, socially, and politically negotiated roles of men and women in society and in relationship to each other. Gender relationships vary according to class and are critical to understanding the characteristics of work and social life. Therefore, gender has become the primary lens through which to examine issues of poverty in nineteenth-century Europe. It provides a way of organizing relationships and signifying relationships of power. Throughout the nineteenth century, gender relationships were prescribed as hierarchical and unequal. In seeking to understand how gender mattered and what it meant to be a poor woman in the nineteenth century, this book challenges the male models in the history of the poor.

The importance of gender in understanding relationships and distribution of power does not negate the significance of the category of “woman.” Childbearing, and having the primary role in childrearing, made women’s responsibilities for the family both biologically and socially constructed. Women did not, however, have sole responsibility for the well-being of families. Men were primarily responsible for contributing financially to the household; they had access to different kinds of capital, depending on geography, economics, and the time period. Such a gender division of labor, resources, and services in the household influenced the gendered distribution of power both within the family and in the public realm, with men having greater social and political power because of their greater earning power. Should a man lose his earning power, the woman then gained power and became the mainstay of the family, guarding the family from destitution, and engineering a path through the labyrinth of public and private assistance. Pierre Bourdieu has observed the centrality of women in negotiating and mediating the economic and symbolic realms within the household. They were fundamental to ensure the functioning of the household.<sup>3</sup>

Gender also helps us understand the distribution of power not just within the family but also on a local and national level because of the centrality of gender and women’s roles to charity, ideas of social reform, and programs of social welfare. The history of women in poverty is part of national and political history. Throughout the nineteenth century, writers and government authorities took a keen interest in the lives, morality, work habits, and living arrangements of poor women, sometimes trying to get them to adopt middle-class norms and sometimes deciding they were

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Domination masculine* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 108.



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a different and separate group. Yet during the nineteenth century, women were not full citizens, nor were most poor men. Middle-class men defined citizenship and made the laws. The late-nineteenth-century writer and social critic Anatole France ironically wrote:

For the poor, citizenship consists of supporting and sustaining the power and idleness of the rich. They must work for those goals before the majestic equality of the laws, which forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread.<sup>4</sup>

However, looking at gender during the nineteenth century reveals how the concept of citizenship changed and became more nuanced, in part based on the needs of state and of mothers. Although denied political citizenship, some women could gain social citizenship. During the nineteenth century, motherhood and sexuality were central to the relationships of gender and poverty with citizenship and the state.

Historical studies of sexuality and the body have flourished over the past few decades, and furnished historians with new perspectives in understanding poor women. As historians examine representations of poor women in middle-class male discourse, the objective sexualization of poor women becomes apparent. Literature and laws reflect this view of working-class and poor women as sexual objects, wanton women, or childlike creatures, adding a further dimension to gender–power relationships. But poor women were not merely their representations in fiction and law, nor domestic servants of the middle classes, nor the factory workers under the eye of a male overseer, nor prostitutes disrupting the social and familial orders. Gender theory allows us to understand poverty in a new way.

### Defining the poor

Who were the poor and what did it mean to live in poverty in nineteenth-century Europe? This book considers poverty as a fluid and unstable construct. The concept of a “poverty line” is relatively modern, and is only one way of defining the poor.<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth century no government established poverty lines or minimum wages. The category of “the poor” was socially constructed, yet poverty itself was quite real. Poverty was more than a matter of income, more than counting the number of pairs of shoes that a person owned or the amount of meat consumed per

<sup>4</sup> Anatole France, *Le Lys rouge* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1923), 113. Originally published in 1894.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (London: Macmillan, 1901) established the idea of a “primary poverty line” for the “proletarian” urban families.

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week. It depended on time, place, geographical region, the surrounding culture, and those dispensing charity or welfare. Starting in the early nineteenth century, poverty was increasingly perceived as a public problem.

The middle and upper classes, state officials, social reformers, and philanthropic agencies defined “the poor,” paying keen attention to gender differences, tending to denigrate poor women and perceive poor men as a threat. They often referred to the poor in pejorative terms, calling them deviants, disease-ridden, debilitated, impecunious, and depraved. Epistemological changes during the century in the definition of the poor and of poverty are as important as the actual conditions of poverty. The poor were the “other,” and the word “poor” was encoded with other adjectives such as “dirty” or “immoral,” used to describe an immigrant group, or a group different from the middle classes. Phrases such as “poor Jews,” “poor Irish,” “poor women,” and “poor children” littered European languages. To some extent the middle classes formed their class identity in opposition to an “other” by consigning the poor to an opposing and inferior culture. Some middle-class ideologies and policies took the form of what I call “domestic colonization” to transform the habits of the poor to those of the middle classes and to keep the social peace.

Historians have a difficult time defining the poor. When writing about social classes, we have a tendency to conflate the analytical and descriptive categories of “working class” and “the poor” and use the terms almost interchangeably, especially when writing about the poor in urban areas. In his monumental and pathbreaking 1963 book, the historian E. P. Thompson showed that class was not concrete and static, but rather an ever changing category that arose from dynamic shifts over time or within a particular era when new technologies increased, changes occurred in labor techniques and industrial organization, and political and social rights shift. Thompson viewed class as a social and cultural formation, a set of cultural relationships arising from processes over time. Based on the work of Thompson, historians have analyzed the working class as dynamic and as an evolving social and cultural construction. Twenty years after the publication of Thompson’s book, historian Joan W. Scott critiqued his arguments, noting in particular his inattention to gender in defining the working class.<sup>6</sup> Later historians, however, began to include women’s work experiences. The category of working class

<sup>6</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), and Joan W. Scott, “Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*,” in her *Gender and the Politics of History*, 68–92.