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ON THE HORIZONS OF A NEW DISCIPLINE: EARLY WOMEN SOCIOLOGISTS IN GERMANY

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I

In the introduction to his *Sociology* (1908), Georg Simmel describes the new discipline, which was still in the process of carving out its territory alongside other disciplines, as the El Dorado of the homeless and uprooted. Simmel himself knew very well that both Jews and women belonged to those groups for which sociology, as a new field of knowledge, was opening up intellectual experiments and professional training.[1] As a matter of fact, the first women sociologists entered German academia simultaneously with the new discipline of sociology itself.[2]

Almost forty years later, Viola Klein, born in Vienna in 1908, described these two phenomena in a similar way. Klein, who received her first Ph.D. in literature from the University of Prague in 1937, emigrated to Britain in 1938, where she wrote her second dissertation, in sociology, with Karl Mannheim (Sayers 1989; Kettler and Meja 1993).

1. See Simmel's classic text on the ambivalence of the 'stranger' in modern society (1908, 1950). With regard to Simmel's reflections on women and outsiders, see Coser 1977; on Simmel and social theory, see Frisby 1992.

2. On the emergence of sociology between 'literature and science' in Germany in comparison with Great Britain and France, see Lepenies 1988.

In her book, *The Feminine Character* (1946), she stresses the dilemma of equality in modern society.[3] As newcomers, it was almost impossible for women, Jews or immigrants to enter the established professions. Instead, they depended on the emergence of innovative fields in order to obtain professional positions. Klein argues that during the nineteenth century, two newcomers, social reform and the women's movement, shared important similarities due to their break with traditional ideas of social order. In her words, 'the humanitarian interests which formed the starting point of social research, and practical social work itself, actually provided the back door through which women slipped into public life' (1946: 17).

These observations by Simmel and Klein form the point of departure for this survey of the first generation of women sociologists in Germany. My intention is to make a contribution to the history of sociology and of women sociologists in the formative years of the discipline in early twentieth-century Germany. The connections between modernity, knowledge and gender relations in the field of an emerging academic discipline will be illuminated. In the following sections I will first present a framework situating female sociologists born between 1884 and 1895 as a particular intellectual and political generation, and secondly offer as examples the intellectual projects of Frieda Wunderlich and Mathilde Vaerting.[4]

3. In 1946 another book by a German-speaking émigré was published in the field of sociology. This was *Women and a New Society* by Charlotte Luetkens (Mendelsohn-Bartoldy), a former student of Alfred and Max Weber (see *Biographisches Handbuch* 1980). Luetkens received her Ph.D. in 1921 from Heidelberg University. Among early women sociologists, she linked politics, journalism and scholarship. Together with her husband Gerhart Luetkens, she emigrated to Britain and was involved in the circles of the Social Democratic Party in exile. She succeeded in obtaining a professional position as a lecturer at the University of London (1937–49), during which period she worked as Mannheim's research assistant. However, from different sociological perspectives, Klein and Luetkens focused on modernity and gender relations from the point of view of historical and social change. Luetkens's book deals with the transformation of the personal and social type of woman, a change which took place from the nineteenth-century Victorian female ideal to the modern woman of the 1930s and 1940s. The book was deeply inspired by social and political changes in Britain, which seemed to promise new social and personal horizons to women. Against the background of the emerging welfare state, Luetkens identifies shaping gender relations and modified ways of inclusion.

4. The arguments in this paper are based on my research project 'Frühe Soziologinnen (1920–1960): Intellektueller Aufbruch, institutionelle Hindernisse, Politische Zäsuren' (Early Women Sociologists, 1920–1960: Intellectual Departure, Institutional Obstacles and Political Ruptures), submitted to the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Free University Berlin in May 1995 as a habilitation thesis.

II

Professional women sociologists belong to the first generation of female scholars who were able to make a university career in Germany, where women obtained the right to work as professors in academic institutions after only 1920. Following Karl Mannheim's concept of generation (1928), these women formed a generation because they established a specific relationship with the political events and social opportunities of their time. Their entry into the academic profession took place against the same background. They could enrol as students and become members of the academic community only in roundabout ways. Only from the academic year 1908/9 could they enrol regularly as students at universities in Prussia, the largest state in the German Empire.[5]

However, the First World War provided further steps towards modernization with regard to the integration of women into the work force and the professions. The political change from empire to republic signalled reform in several respects. For the first time, women were offered access to professorships at German universities. The main requirement in obtaining a chair had been the habilitation thesis, which at the end of the nineteenth century had become the normal requirement for obtaining the Venia Legendi and with it a professorship (Schmeiser 1994). The habilitation can be described as a cognitive and social process of socialization into the academic community. It formed the most powerful instrument of self-recruitment and social closure the academic community possessed.

In view of the German tradition of *Bildungsbürgertum* ('the educated classes') and the social content of the notion of the *Akademiker* ('academics'), we know that the status of university graduates was more than just possession of professional skills or particular knowledge. The *Akademiker* were at the core of the social strata forming the specific cultural milieu which M. Rainer Lepsius, with reference to Max Weber, identified as *die ständische Vergesellschaftung des Bildungsbürgertums* ('the corporate socialization of the advanced classes') (Lepsius 1992, Ringer 1969, Mommsen 1987, Clark 1987). With regard to the cultural aspects of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, Huerkamp and Lepsius point to the relevance of the division of labour between the sexes. In contrast to the men, who produced public status and power, the women of the *Bildungsbürgertum* continually reproduced this milieu with regard to socialization, marriage patterns and cultural conventions (Huerkamp 1994a, 1994b).[6]

In 1920, the highest official in the Prussian Ministry of Education, Carl-Heinrich Becker, issued a decree that women were no longer to be excluded from

5. For a comparison of the participation of women scholars in Britain, see Perrone 1993; with regard to the United States, see Rossiter 1982.

6. On the historical traces of the gendered dimension of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, see Frevert 1989.

participation in the habilitation.[7] Thus the Weimar Republic introduced several reforms which opened the gates to academic and professional careers for women scholars. Besides the habilitation, the *Berufsbeamtentum* ('tenured civil service') also became accessible to women, though with certain restrictions. The celibacy traditionally required of women in this professional field, as for instance for teachers, was only partly abolished (Albisetti 1986).

The Weimar Republic also brought about a change in cultural respects. Karl Mannheim identified this process in his well-known phrase 'die Demokratisierung des Geistes' ('the democratization of the mind') (1928, 1936). Margarete Susman focused on the symbolic horizon when she pointed out that the change in gender relations implied a 'struggle over language and imagery' (1926: 144).[8] With the rise of National Socialism, this political and cultural process was ruptured. Many of the first women scholars in Germany were dismissed from their university positions. Out of a total of seventy-two female teaching scholars at German universities, thirty had to leave their posts because of the Nazis' *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*, or 'Law for recreating the tenured civil service' (Habeth 1985).

In addition to these external factors, the first generation of women scholars participated in the same professional frameworks and patterns. According to Gabi Förder-Hoff, despite these changes most women during the first three decades of the twentieth century did not establish careers when they entered academia. As a result, the experiences of this generation were shaped by a lack of collective professional experience and of professional precursors. We may compare this generation with the 'heroic' type of 'female warrior' to whom Marianne Weber (1917) introduces us in her essay 'Der Typenwandel der studierenden Frau' (Changing types of female student), in which she focuses on the German female student who had to fight her entry into university by herself. Weber's 'heroic type' provides a useful description of the first generation of women scholars. Through their great persistence and endurance, the first female professors overcame a great variety of problems. Their actions were shaped by the knowledge that they belonged to the 'first' for whom the barriers to a university career had been raised. To define this generation as pioneers and warriors touches the very heart of the matter.

Most of these women received their fundamental political inspiration from the feminist movement of the German Empire. They were part of an emerging professional generation within an expanding women's movement linked to the development of social reform and social research. Once again we may refer to Weber's essay, where she describes the disposition of the heroic type as a

7. The decree was administered by the philosopher Edith Stein, previously assistant to Edmund Husserl (see Wobbe 1996b); for the correspondence between Stein and Becker, see Wobbe 1995.

8. Susman's statement has a specific connotation in the context of the German cultural tradition of literature; see Lepenies 1988.

'powerful virginity'. The first generation of woman scholars also demonstrated this disposition, which offered both moral strength and innovative power. In addition, the friendships and networks which emerged between these women created a context for new patterns of acceptance and solidarity, allowing them to develop social concepts of womanhood and female roles transcending those of family life.[9] Thus, the first female sociologists interacted within a framework, the normative basis of which had already been established before 1914.

With regard to this group of women, we can define the term 'generation' even more precisely. According to Hans Joas (1992), new generations contribute new motives and paradigms which often result from specific generational experiences and become productive in intergenerational communication. The feminist movement provided something like a catalyst while linking ideas of social reform to those of social research. Against this background, a new cognitive generation tried to connect their academic careers and intellectual projects to ideas of social reform and to the women's movement.[10]

In defining this first generation of women sociologists as a group, precise criteria are needed. With regard to the distinctive history of German sociology, that is, its institutional formation late in history, I have delineated the pool of possible entrants according to criteria laid down by Dirk Käsler (1984; also Deegan 1991), defining as sociologists those who fulfil at least one of the following five criteria:

(1) occupation of a chair in sociology and/or teaching sociology
(2) membership of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (the German Sociological Society)
(3) co-authorship of sociological articles or textbooks
(4) self-definition as a sociologist
(5) definition by others as a sociologist

Käsler (1984: 449ff.) distinguishes five generations in early German sociology, the grandfathers (1850–9), fathers (1860–9), sons (1870–9), grandsons (1880–9) and great-grandsons (1890–9). He places the first professional sociologists in the cohort of the grandsons and defines the last generation, that of the great-grandsons, as those who represent the sober mind of the twentieth century. The First World War meant a break in their intellectual and political world-view.

As we have seen, in comparison with their male colleagues, female scholars had restricted access to the resources of higher learning and the professions. Because of these unequal opportunities, we first find professional women in the field of German sociology in what might be called the generation of the

9. On Germany, see Stoehr 1991; on the United States, see Vicinus 1985, Cott 1987; for an international and comparative perspective, see Bosch and Klostermann 1990, Offen 1988.

10. On the link between social reform, social research, and the women's movement in the United States, see Fitzpatrick 1990, Kish Sklar 1991, Ross 1996.

granddaughters and great-granddaughters. The former include Mathilde Vaerting (1884), Frieda Wunderlich (1884), and Charlotte Leubuscher (1888), the latter Käthe Bauer-Mengelberg (1894), Charlotte Lorenz (1895), Charlotte Luetkens (1896), and Gertrud Savelsberg (1899). In what follows, I will discuss as examples the careers of the first two members of this cohort—that is, Vaerting and Wunderlich.

III

Mathilde Vaerting (1884–1977) was one of the first two female professors to receive a chair at a German university. Her career is a striking example of how political constellations and intellectual projects were linked to each other in the context of the Weimar Republic. It was made possible by political reform politics in higher education (Ringer 1969); it came to an end with the rise of the Nazi regime.

In 1923 Vaerting was appointed to a chair in education at the University of Jena. Her employment was part of a Sachsen-Thüringen government programme to reform teacher training (see Kraul 1987; Wobbe 1992, 1994, 1995). The faculty never accepted their new academic colleague and immediately organized opposition to her, led by Ludwig Plate, one of the editors of the *Archiv für Rassenhygiene* and occupant of the chair of Ernst Haeckel. Plate attacked Vaerting's competence and her suitability as a scholar and university professor. In 1933 she was dismissed from the University on the basis of the *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*, recently decreed by the Nazis. Vaerting was thus one of those professors who were dismissed because of their lack of political correctness.

Vaerting began as a scholar in the field of psychology and education. In the early 1920s she published her two-volume *Neubegründung der Psychologie von Mann und Weib* (New foundation of the psychology of man and woman), (1921, 1923). In her approach, the term 'feminine character' occurs as a cipher for power relations between men and women. Vaerting considered attributes ascribed to women as a code for the hierarchy between the sexes. In introducing this perspective, she was challenging the dominant natural-science and medical discourse on gender difference (on this discourse, see Honegger 1991, Klein 1946), using a sociological approach to deconstruct conventional discourse on the 'feminine character'. Her contemporaries made reference to the bold and striking shape of Vaerting's concept: Alice Rühle-Gerstel, for instance, described her work as a threat to the usual world-view (1932).

By concentrating on the sociology of power, Vaerting went on to deconstruct the connection between power, body and knowledge. At the end of the 1920s she published her two-volume *Macht der Massen* (Power of the masses), (1928, 1929).

As in her former research, she was interested in the stability and productivity of power relations. The main term she uses in her ideas on power was the 'construction of difference', which she saw as a 'factor of power' correlating with inequality and social distinctions. It was thus a powerful instrument of social closure.

With regard to the contemporary sociological discourse of the 1920s, I would like to focus on just two of the most striking aspects of Vaerting's theoretical conceptualizations. First, the idea of the 'construction of difference' between the sexes formed a basis for describing power relations between other social groups, for instance classes, races or ethnic groups and generations. In doing this, Vaerting demonstrated correlations between the stereotypes attributed to those groups. Women, Blacks and Jews, for instance, are all described as passive, emotional and irrational, and they also resemble one another with regard to the ways in which they are segregated and separated from other groups. By pointing out that they do not have the same opportunities for mobility as classes, Vaerting showed how social constructions could be naturalized and could thus cast light on the social construction of reality as a process which the social sciences had made their own (Mannheim 1936; Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Secondly, what makes her study innovative is her view of the coherence and stable dimension of power. Vaerting stressed the effective and productive dimensions of power in the individual him- or herself. According to her, the 'construction of difference' makes possible the coherence and continuity of the social order. It forms a constitutive process of how individuals create their social reality, that is, it forms a part of the self-interpretation of the individual. The 'construction of difference' not only reproduces the social order, in doing so it achieves validity and is accepted. The originality of Vaerting's approach therefore lies in her subtle perspectives on the 'productivity of power' (cf. Foucault) and the distinctive dimensions of power (cf. Bourdieu).

The political rupture of 1933 caused Vaerting's work to be forgotten in several respects. After being dismissed from her chair and excluded from the academic community, she never again obtained a chair at a German university right up until her death in 1977. The reception of her sociological work and theoretical approach, which was just starting in the early 1930s, was interrupted by the rise of National Socialism. As we now know, this meant the end of its reception altogether. My concern here has been to situate Vaerting in the context of the history of sociology and to provide her with a place in the academic memory of the discipline.

Frieda Wunderlich (1884–1965) is the second sociologist I would like to introduce here. Like Vaerting, she was able to make a career as sociologist thanks to the political reforms of Weimar Germany, though unlike her, her status as a student of Franz Oppenheimer meant that she belonged to an academic school as well as to a political party, the Deutsche Demokratische Partei; she was a member of the Prussian Parliament from 1930 to 1932. Wunderlich was one of the relevant

figures of the Weimar social reforms, and edited the famous journal *Soziale Praxis* (Social practice).

Wunderlich belonged to those women of her generation who obtained a Ph.D. in the field of national economy. It was against this background that this generation tried to combine their normative ideas of social reform and feminist movements. As a member of the first generation of female sociologists, Wunderlich has most in common with her colleague Beatrice Webb (1858–1943). Though the Berlin scholar was not a socialist like Webb, she had the same deep insight that social research was one of the most powerful instruments for changing social inequality.[11]

Wunderlich's book, *Hugo Münsterberg* (1920), and her theoretical study, *Produktivität* (1926), were well received by the academic community (see Wobbe 1995). She also became an expert on social security and social policies generally. In the German context, she wrote the first article on 'Die Frau als Subjekt und Objekt der Sozialpolitik' (Women as subject and object of social policies), (1924), which summarized the results of social reform with regard to women in Germany.[12] The article is sober and sceptical on account of the various economic crises the Weimar Republic went through.

In 1930, Wunderlich obtained a professorship in the field of sociology and social policies at the newly established Staatliches Berufpädogogisches Institut (Public institute for vocational education) in Berlin. This was the splendid height of her career. In 1933 she was dismissed as professor because of her Jewish descent. During these dramatic first months of the Nazi regime, she decided to leave her country. As a prominent democrat involved in the social reforms of the Weimar Republic, a feminist and a Jew, she could not expect to obtain any other professional position in such a climate of political pressure and hatred. In June 1933 she was offered a professorship at the New School for Social Research in New York, which she accepted immediately. She belonged to the 'Mayflower Group', that is, the founding group of the Graduate Faculty of Social and Political Science at the School. Of these first eleven professors, of whom she knew most from the Oppenheimer class, she was the only woman.[13]

Wunderlich worked in the economics and sociology department, giving classes on social security, social policy, war economy, and the labour movement. Like her colleagues, she was eager to understand and analyse the rise of National Socialism

11. On Beatrice Webb, social research and social reform, see Lepenies 1988, Lewis 1991.

12. On social policies, the welfare state and women, see Bock and Thane (eds.) 1991, Stoehr 1991.

13. For the history of the New School for Social Research, see Alvin Johnson's autobiography (1952). For the history of the Graduate Faculty of the New School of Social Research, see Krohn 1987. For the cognitive and social aspects of German scholars in exile during the Nazi period, see Srubar 1988. Kruse has *inter alia* reconstructed the historical sociology of Franz Oppenheimer (1990).

in Germany. In her view, National Socialism represented a new mentality, something like a substitute for a religion, in the sense that the totalitarian claim implied a 'belief' in the higher value of the German race. Rights were no longer a part of the liberal tradition or of the political context of belonging to a nation state but of membership of a mystic community. Wunderlich considered this 'belief' to imply a relationship of violence. To her, totalitarianism meant the undermining of the political basis of modern society and its social institutions.

With regard to the family and the position of women under National Socialism, Wunderlich took a clear view in stressing the shifting boundaries between the public and the private. National Socialism was destroying the institution of the family by claiming the whole sphere of education as the preserve of the state. Thus women regressed to a position which only allowed them the technical roles of housework and child-raising within the family. However, the family as a mental and social unity, as a medium of socialization, had also become a political organization. She also examined the population and war-economy politics of Nazi Germany (see Wobbe 1995).

As a professor, Wunderlich would have created quite an impression with the young female students who were starting to study sociology at German universities after 1945, giving them an orientation and even professional identification with regard to their own academic careers. But she did not return to Germany and work in universities there. Instead she became a US citizen and was grateful for the career opportunities she received there. Also, she noticed cultural differences between Germany and the United States with regard to gender relations, especially the higher social status of American women and the higher acceptance of social heterogeneity and of the plurality of lifestyles: 'In Germany the fundamental principle is that woman is meant for marriage, while in the United States woman's life is regarded as an end in itself which may find completion without marriage.'[14]

However, Wunderlich's situation at the New School was not always easy. First, she had to fight for her existence, which included those of her sister Eva, her brother Georg and his two children. Secondly, as a scholar with very high academic and ethical standards, she sometimes seems to have come under attack from her German colleagues at the New School. Felicia J. Deyrup, who started her career in 1949 as an assistant professor of economy at the New School, gave me the following description of her:

> The status of non-married female scholars was probably higher in the United States than in Germany, but it certainly was peculiar. Male scholars viewed female scholars either as non-entities or [as] nun-like, above academic political life (because most were powerless), or on the contrary, as extremely thorny, dangerous, manipulative people who had to be handled with caution. Dr Wunderlich's male colleagues generally viewed her as being in the last category, partly because she

14. F. Wunderlich, 'Women in Germany and the United States', ms., p. 20, in the Frieda Wunderlich Collection, Leo Baeck Institute, New York, Box2/II/5ab.

> had the loyalty of a major administrator, partly [because] she stimulated loyalty and devotion in various people whom she had helped, and partly because of her extremely strong character, her great persistence, and her willingness to wait a long time to achieve important goals. Her patience and endurance gave her enormous strength vis-à-vis her male colleagues.[15]

However, Wunderlich considered her professional situation and the social environment at the New School to be a matter of great luck.

IV

The careers of Vaerting and Wunderlich show that women sociologists entered German academia simultaneously with the new discipline of sociology itself. The profession of sociology started to become visible institutionally during the 1920s, thanks to the reform of professional education (Lepsius 1981). Viola Klein (1946) argued that newcomers depend on the emergence of innovative fields in order to obtain professional positions.

Vaerting was hired by a Social Democrat government and received a chair at the University of Jena to carry out a reform of teacher training. Wunderlich received her professorship at the newly established Public Institute for Vocational Education, which itself had been founded in the context of social and educational reform. Thus Vaerting and Wunderlich achieved entry into academic careers thanks to these reform projects.

In Germany, the profession of sociology started to progress beyond its rudimentary beginnings only in the Weimar period (see Lepsius 1981). By contrast, American sociology had been recognized as a distinct academic profession with the founding of the first graduate department of sociology at the University of Chicago in 1892. From the beginning, women participated in sociological education and teaching.[16]

The change of political system in 1933 interrupted the institutionalization of sociology in Germany. In addition, many scholars of the first professional female generation were dismissed from the universities. The stories of Vaerting und Wunderlich offered an insight into the different forms an interruption of one's

15. Letter to author, 14th May 1994. Deyrup is the daughter of Alvin Johnson, then President of the New School.

16. See Deegan 1981, 1988; Fitzpatrick 1990; Bulmer *et al.* 1991. Since American sociology emerged in another institutional and cognitive context as regards the academic system (see Wobbe 1995) and the social sciences (Ross 1991), women had more possibilities to participate in the formative years of the subject than in Germany. However, American women scholars also had to face male-dominated professions (Rossiter 1982, Cott 1987).

career might take. The newcomers were pushed out of the system. Vaerting stayed in Germany but was never appointed to a chair. The reception of her theoretical work ended. Wunderlich did not return to Germany, nor did her sociological work.

A final example of how political rupture in Germany shaped careers is that of Charlotte Leubuscher, who also belonged to this generation. Like Wunderlich, Leubuscher was dismissed as professor because of her Jewish origins and emigrated to Britain. Before 1933 her professional career had been a success. In 1921 she became the first woman in Germany to obtain a habilitation in national economy at the University of Berlin, where she worked as assistant professor. Later, in 1929, she obtained a professorship. When she emigrated to Britain, she was able to revitalize her links with Girton College, Cambridge, where she held a scholarship from 1934 to 1936. Since her main field of research was the social politics and social policies of Britain, she had many personal ties and institutional contacts, which allowed her to obtain scholarships like the one she was granted by the London School of Economics from 1942 to 1944. However, she never obtained a university professorship again.[1]

Only in the 1960s did sociology in Germany begin to reconstruct itself following the earlier ruptures in the century. This reconstruction was initiated by a generation whose personal experiences did not reach back to the Weimar Republic. The rise of a new generation of female scholars also reopened perspectives on the history of the discipline. This new generation changed the agenda of sociology in the context of the second feminist movement. In thus changing its horizons, the history of sociology is also changing the academic memory of the discipline.

17. On Leubuscher, see *Biographisches Handbuch* 1980; Wobbe 1995, 1996a.

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