

Pavla Miller, *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

Pavla Miller ends her ambitious book with an highly unusual prediction: that many of those reading her book “will at times be seized by blind terror” (299) given the complexity and scope of her work. Certainly her project tackles epic problems across an enormous canvas. Primarily she aims to explore the remaking of gender relations in the transition from early modern to modern life and the associated evolution in subjectivities. Her focus spans much of the globe, from the United States and Canada to many European countries to Australia and New Zealand. Her familiarity with an extraordinary range of theoretical and empirical literature is breathtaking. Yet in the end, she approaches these issues and data through a narrow lens: the role of education and in particular the rise of state-sponsored, publicly-funded school systems. Readers reluctant to endure terror may find some assurance in this focus.

This is a work of synthesis, albeit that Miller synthesizes a vast literature smoothly and coherently. Her discussion of the various sources of change (political, economic, demographic, intellectual, and so on) in early modern European society, for instance, in the first three chapters is a model capsule summary of much recent scholarship. She integrates a variety of theoretical conceptualizations, with particular debts to Foucauldian and materialist approaches as well as to the work of Norbert Elias, with the goal of broadly rethinking and particularly gendering scholarly understandings of the intricate complexities of a process as slippery as the transformation of personality.

In highlighting evidence from so many regions of “the West” (broadly defined here), Miller focuses attention on the diversity of experiences and the unevenness of regional development even while she seeks to develop or at least create an opening for a new grand narrative about the development of self. A certain headspinning quality results as, in one typical two page section for example, consecutive paragraphs foreground examples from Prussia, South Australia, France, and Canada. Nevertheless, the commitment to embracing fully the variety of experiences that different classes, generations, and sexes faced in diverse industrializing as well as rural areas and in colonial as well as metropolitan countries guards against the weaknesses of over-generalization and over-simplification that commonly bedevil many grand syntheses.

Although a central concern with the evolving desire of elites and governments to promote self-control and mastery through education seem at first glance to suggest a simple disciplining or social control thesis, Miller’s embrace of complexity and ambiguity lead her to make a careful and provocative argument about the nature of agency in the development of modern consciousness. She notes, for example, that while the promotion and expansion of universal public schooling was part of a broad bureaucratization of western societies with the concomitant appearance of professionals, testing,

uniform regulations and other markers of surveillance, the relationship between schools and states was far more symbiotic than a simple imposition from above of certain desirable models of behaviour. Miller uses her familiarity with a wide range of local studies in this instance to demonstrate, for example, that the development of schools also propelled local people in their own communities to engage with questions that were central to the formation of state power, such as how were schools to be paid for, where were they to be located, and how were teachers to be appointed. Thus she argues that the rise of public schooling shaped the development of states as well as being the outcome of that process.

Although the title suggests that gender is at the center of the analytical framework proposed here, that does not always seem to be the case in practice. Miller argues that patriarchy in its early modern form experienced a crisis during the revolutionary decades of the late eighteenth century that continued as industrialization took hold across much of the West in the early nineteenth century. Her thesis that subsequently a transformed patriarchy emerged as part of a mid-nineteenth-century stabilization seems compelling, but resonates with much feminist work in a variety of fields over the last decade or more. Nor is it particularly clear what role public schooling played in this process.

In the end this fine book seems almost like two texts that sometimes overlap. The first three chapters engage explicitly with the projects of exploring patriarchy and education's role in it within a sophisticated and broad exploration of the early modern West and its culminating crises. The last chapter, a wonderful one dealing with the late nineteenth-century demographic transition, also brings together the issues of gender and schooling as key themes. The intervening four chapters which begin with the author's acknowledgment that she is "radically altering our field of vision" (112) focus clearly on the complex relationship between the emergence of public education and state formation as a nexus in which key changes in subjectivity took place. In this section, gender seems largely peripheral either as subject or as an analytical tool.

Nothing, though, perhaps better attests to our own post-modern subjectivity than this reaction! Nor to the difficulty of the project Pavla Miller has valiantly undertaken. Her efforts challenge historians of many fields to reconceptualize the ways in which they think about some of the very biggest historical problems.

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