

The Surplus Woman: Unmarried in Imperial Germany: 1871–1918

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Author: Catherine Dollard

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The Surplus Woman is an important contribution to a growing international literature on the history of single women. Its chief strength is its affirmation of marital status as a central category of analysis for historians. Catherine Dollard focuses on female singleness, not simply in a descriptive sense, but rather as a lens through which to analyse contemporary anxieties about the supposed demographic surplus of women in late 19th- and early 20th-century Germany and to chart the ways in which this idea inspired feminist thought and activism.

These anxieties were by no means confined to Germany and the book speaks to a wider agenda in which spinsters were 'singled out', perceived as a particular problem and often labelled 'surplus' or 'superfluous' during this period in Europe and elsewhere in the western world. Dollard sets her study in the context of other scholarly work in this area, particularly in France and Britain but more might have been done in this respect. No mention was made of analyses of surplus women in Britain in the mid 19th century by Kathrin Levitan and Judith Worsnop which cover some of the same territory including, in the latter case, the links to feminist activities. This literature is particularly pertinent since Dollard's view that the surplus woman debate was uniquely German challenges Levitan's statement that 19th century concerns about surplus population were unique to Britain as the first industrialising nation.⁽¹⁾ It appears that neither of these claims is in fact correct.

One of Dollard's main aims in the book is to show that these demographic concerns were not related directly to any real statistical increase either in numbers of women over men in the German population or to a decline in marriage rates in this period. Rather she sees the concept of the 'surplus woman' as an important cultural marker for Imperial Germany which helped its citizens make sense of profound changes in their world. The *Frauenüberschuss* was a leitmotif which demonstrates the strength of the idealisation of marriage and motherhood for women and helps us understand the origins and particular directions of the early reform programme of the German women's movement.

Rather than examining the lived experience of unmarried women, as most other studies in this field have done, Dollard's concern is to unpick cultural constructions of the surplus woman by a number of different authors in some depth and detail. She gives a nuanced account of how these constructions were drawn upon and reconfigured by the German feminists with different agendas and political viewpoints to stimulate

reform programmes aimed at ameliorating single women's plight. However Dollard's claim that the book provides a glimpse of 'what it felt like to live in German society as a single middle-class woman' is not supported by much material or biographical evidence about anyone other than the leaders of the women's movement. I wanted to know more about the unexceptional unmarried women whose position in German society had inspired so much concern and to assess how far the new career opportunities and lifestyles offered to them changed lives in this period. This is not a criticism of this volume as it stands since it could be argued that this absence is inevitable in a book which concentrates primarily on didactic texts and literature about single women's campaigns and that another book would be needed to do justice to unmarried women's material conditions and lifestyles. However the albeit brief biographical information on the unmarried leaders of the women's movement does offer a taste of what such an approach could offer the reader.

An introductory chapter stakes out the territory covered in the book and outlines the main thesis and argument. The body of the book is divided into two parts. Part one focusses on different ways in which the iconography of the surplus woman was constructed, including chapters on imagery of the old maid, the influence of sexology, imagined demography and social and spiritual maternalism.

In chapter one imagery of the *alte Jungfer* (old maid) is explored against a familiar backdrop of a society bound by feminine ideals which had dominated centuries of western thought. Marriage was the central institution which all German women were expected to embrace, positioning them within the family, controlling and constraining them physically and economically, and subjugating them to a husband's authority. Women who did not conform had no obvious place in German society and as such were perceived as a threat to this order. It is hardly surprising therefore to find that the dominant literary construction of the single woman was that of pariah. Dollard argues that because industrialisation removed production away from the bourgeois home, the middle-class single women became an economic encumbrance and images of idle old maids depicted variously as, shrews, simpletons and desperate co-dependants became the norm.

Chapter two charts the significance of sexology in widening the parameters of the stereotype. In Germany, as in Britain, the increase in professional opportunities for single women in the early twentieth century did not herald the disappearance of the old maid. Rather she re-emerged in a new guise informed by the emerging field of sexology whose proponents highlighted the importance of the female sex drive. The view first established by Krafft Ebbing that regular sexual intercourse was important for women's mental health and well-being meant that single women's celibacy became a problem. The female surplus was cast as a serious threat to women's health and the dried up, sour old maid contrasted with the fertile blooming wife. Freud took this further by arguing that sexual repression was the cause of female hysteria and recovery was only possible through marriage. These views had serious consequences for single women's organisations which were labelled deviant and likely to encourage perverse sexual inclinations including homosexuality.

In chapter three, Dollard surveys a number of contemporary statistical accounts of the German population which highlighted the problem of the surplus women, pointing out the flaws in their calculations and supporting her analysis with nearly 50 tables and graphs. I found their placement at the back of the book unsatisfactory and would have found them much more useful as evidence if they had been fewer in number and integrated within the text. The analysis shows that for the German population as a whole there was no significant surplus of women. In Berlin however, the rise in marriage rates was not sufficient to counter major population growth which resulted in a visible surplus of women. Dollard points out that the urban middle-class woman of marriageable age 'would likely would be amply aware of her status' and became a 'rhetorical victim'. While she offers no direct evidence of this awareness, my own study of concerns about 'superfluous women' in Britain after the First World War does show that unmarried women's understanding of demography (whether imagined or real) could have an impact on their career decisions and subsequent life course.[\(2\)](#)

In the final chapter of part one, Dollard begins her account of the views and writings of the German Woman's movement with the reaction of the BDF (Federation of German Women's Association) to the

female surplus. This organisation, led by moderate activists, linked the concept to a vision of spiritual maternalism which became a central tenet of all their reforms. No longer would unmarried women be consigned to the ranks of miserable old maids. Work, whether paid or voluntary, would be their salvation and since they could not themselves experience the benefits of having their own children, they could become spiritual mothers to the German nation, a possibility denied to men. Women's capacity for motherhood would have a transformative power which would alter the nature of school, state, the workplace, social relations and the home. These campaigns were opposed by satirists and anti-feminist groups who derided the woman who stood alone as depressed and embittered, and their organisations as desperate attempts to replace home and family. Faced with this attack, moderates did not fight back directly by rejecting the stereotype, but rather argued the importance of opening up new career paths and opportunities for women in order that they could avoid the old maid's fate. In this way the image of the surplus woman sparked the movement into activism.

The second part of the book analyses the views and work of unmarried leaders of the German women's movement. Here Dollard explores a range of different arguments and campaigns relating to the problem of the surplus women starting with the moderate activists Helen Lange and Alice Salmon who pioneered opportunities for women in education and social work. Both women shared the view of the importance of work in establishing worthwhile pursuits for surplus women but also saw the family as their main sphere of activity. Yet there were also key differences in their approaches. Lange's campaigns were ideologically driven. Her vision of spiritual maternalism was rooted in a belief in the importance of different but equal roles for women and men and this led her to promote single sex education for girls taught exclusively by unmarried, childless, female teachers who would transmit maternal characteristics to the next generation. Salmon's work was inspired primarily by more practical and less ideological, social maternalist goals. Social work she believed would offer an outlet for middle-class women's maternal feelings, provide useful activities for idle girls and be of benefit to the poor. As in her own life it was also a substitute for single women's lack of romantic love and children of her own.

In the next two chapters more radical solutions for the problem of surplus women are explored through the writings of women activists who used it as a springboard for challenging the patriarchal traditions of German society. Chapter six focuses on three radical feminists' solutions to the female surfeit beginning with Helen Stöcker who became leader of the BfM (Federation for the Protection of Mothers) in 1905. Influenced by sexology but also moving beyond conservative definitions of men's and women's 'natural' social and biological roles, Stöcker argued that women should have the same sexual freedom as men and drew on the repressed, frustrated old maid stereotype as a warning of consequences of abstinence. Stöcker, like her predecessor Ruth Bré who founded the BfM, rooted her campaign in the rights of all women to become mothers but did not reject marriage or dismiss the role of the father. Bré went further. In her critique of bourgeois marriage she championed the rights women not to marry yet still to become mothers seeing spiritual maternalism as an inadequate substitute. Only by bearing children could women fulfil their maternal calling. Finally Braun used the plight of the old maid as a clarion call for the reform of marriage, seeing the 'new woman' as no longer willing to accept subordination in marriage, and arguing that women 'standing alone' no longer need to marry now that they recognised their worth outside it.

Braun's vision was rooted in socialist politics and she linked her analysis to a critique of capitalism. In chapter seven Dollard shows how another socialist feminist, Clara Zetkin, drew on economic determinist arguments and the writings of the socialist leader August Bebel to link the existence of a female surplus more directly to the capitalist mode of production. Arguing that the surplus had become an increasing problem as capitalism developed, she saw the decline in marriage rates as a symptom of the impending demise of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois women's movement had emerged out of the economic displacement of women but had a limited view and was of little relevance to proletarian women. Yet, Dollard argues, neither Zetkin nor Bebel considered how a proletarian revolution might affect the tie between female identity and marital status.

Finally Dollard examines the links between religion and the female surplus through writings of Elisabeth

Gnauck-Kühne, founder of both the Protestant and Catholic national German women's movement. Following a disastrous marriage which ended in divorce and her conversion to Catholicism, Gnauck-Kühne turned her attention to the economic plight of divorced and never-married women. Like the moderate reformists, she argued that the problem of the surplus would be solved if single women found work in maternal occupations. But they could also find spiritual solace by entering convents or other religiously inspired institutions. These acted as models for non-religious women's communities and would offer a substitute to single women for family life.

The study concludes by linking the imagined surplus in imperial Germany with the 'brutally real' surplus that emerged as a result of the First World War and shows how the conditions of war 'changed single women from a cohort that German society had to do something about to a category that Germany would not survive the war without' (p. 206). Still the cult of maternalism survived the war and celebration of maternal capacity became a powerful component of fascist ideology. As Heinemann has shown single marital status became an aberrant category in Nazi Germany. However Dollard is reluctant to 'connect the dots on the path to Hitler, pointing out the radical and socialist visions which the female surplus inspired in Braun, Bré and Zetkin which 'neither anticipated nor shared the fascist familial order that would later triumph in Germany' (p. 212).

What is of particularly importance in this book is the evidence offered that the idea female surplus was not simply linked to marriage but rather to wider concerns about the exclusion of women from the home, motherhood and family. Its significance as a leitmotif can thus be shown to be much larger, calling into the question the traditional roles of men and women within the bourgeois family and pointing the way to social and economic change. Dollard also shows persuasively how the iconic status of the female surplus for reformers of widely differing political persuasion and the debates that it inspired enables historians to make connections between groups that are usually the object of separate studies. This is a considerable achievement. *The Surplus Woman* is essential reading not only for feminist historians but also for anyone with an interest in gender politics and culture and deserves a wide audience.

Notes

1. Kathrin Levitan, 'Redundancy, the 'Surplus Woman' problem, and the British Census, 1851–1861', *Women's History Review*, 17, 3 (2008), 372; Judith Worsnop, 'A re-evaluation of "the problem of surplus women" in 19th-century England: the case of the 1851 census, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13 (1990), 1–2 [2], 21–31.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Katherine Holden, 'Imaginary widows: spinsters, marriage, and the "Lost Generation" in Britain after the Great War', *Journal of Family History*, 30 (2005), 388–409.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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