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Dölling, Irene

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Irene Dölling

The "New Woman" of the Weimar Republic: Visualization and Standardization of Modernization Processes

Siegbert Feldberg was known to compensate artists whose self-portraits he acquired for his collection with a suit, in a sort of bartering deal. Feldberg owned a company for elegant men's clothing; perhaps that is one of the reasons his collection contains relatively few self-portraits by women. Jeanne Mammen's (1890–1976) self-portrait would definitely have fit well into a collection whose portraits reflect the thrust, conflicts, and ambivalences of the Roaring Twenties (fig. 1). For one thing, in a certain way Jeanne Mammen embodied the modern woman of the 1920s metropolis. After studying at art academies in Paris, Brussels, and Rome, she set up a studio in Berlin in 1919; until 1933 she worked for fashion magazines and produced drawings and water colors for magazines such as *Jugend, Simplicissimus, Uhu,* and *Ulk.* She was among the pioneers of women who took the big city and public space by storm. As Annelie Lütgens determined in her study, Jeanne Mammen was a "female flaneur" who moved "through the well-off western and poor eastern parts of the city; through pubs, dives, and dance halls; through the pleasure centres of the rich, the demi-monde, and the underworld... Small and inconspicuous, wearing an old raincoat and a beret pulled down over her bobbed hair, holding a drawing pencil in one hand and a cigarette in the other – we can imagine her vividly – Mammen enjoyed the freedom of being overlooked. She herself, however, did not overlook a single woman. Women are at the centre of her stories of the metropolis."[1] The last point refers to another reason why Mammen would have been well-placed in Feldberg's collection. With a glance as unsentimental as full of solidarity

1
JEANNE MAMMEN
SELF-PORTRAIT

she catches in her works women whose behavior, whose style of fashion and body shape, were just as much a part of 1920s discourse and collective fantasies of emancipation and sexual liberty, democratic egalitarianism, progress, motorization, and enthusiasm for technology, as were warnings against the blurring of social boundaries, endangerment of the nation and the "healthy body of the nation." Jeanne Mammen was interested in the female employees at the low end of the pay scale as well as in the "loose girls" [2] and the self-assured, provocative women in the pleasure establishments and the lesbian subculture. Her drawings, watercolours, and fashion sketches are part of the archive of images that gave the New Woman of the Weimar Republic a sensuous, visual form.

Much has been written about this New Woman of the Weimar Republic in numerous publications and from the diverse perspectives of various academic disciplines. In the comments that follow on this question, I shall concentrate on a primarily sociological perspective –

how, and in what ways, through the New Woman the Weimar Republic painted its own portrait. I should like to show how the Weimar Republic used visualizations of the New Woman to link and mesh two things: delegitimating previously valid and generally accepted standards of gender arrangements, and interpreting and standardizing modernization processes. In other words, rather than concentrating primarily on self-representations, I shall discuss some cultural and social contexts that facilitate the interpretation of self-representations from this time as being tied to society. In my view the Weimar Republic is exemplary of the transformations that modern, industrial societies went through at this time (and continuing into the 1950s) and which sociologist Peter Wagner called "organized modernity."[3] According to Wagner, modern societies can be identified basically through the conflict between autonomy of the individual and universal, egalitarian claims (universal human rights), on the one hand, and the necessary practical, political limitation of this universal project and its socially threatening openness, on the other. He divides the history of modern societies into phases, each of which offers a different way of stemming this basic conflict – intellectually (that is, culturally and legitimating), institutionally, and through forms of exclusion – thus resolving it, at least temporarily. The phase of "organized modernity" is characterized by the "postliberal compromise," by limiting individual freedom and autonomy in favor of – as Wagner put it – "collective arrangements." Collectivizing and homogenizing processes connected to "organized modernity" can be outlined using such notions as: building a social or welfare state that assigned members of society to places in well-defined collectives according to age, occupational status, marital status, health status; the tripartism of workers/firms/the state; the homogenization of work processes through Taylorism, or "scientific management," and Fordism; standardized mass production and mass consumption; and so on.[4]

The discourse on the New Woman in the Weimar Republic of the 1920s must be understood from a sociological perspective against this background, in my view, as both a process and a product of cultural

options to interpret and standardize social transformations in the developing "organized modernity." This is bolstered by the observable shift in discourse on the New Woman over the course of the 1920s. After the Weimar Republic was declared, a democratic state established, and suffrage for women introduced, the emancipatory impetus was predominant and the New Woman–an "employed, intellectually educated and politically active woman"[5] – stood especially for a "social fantasy of breaking out".[6] In the years that followed, the New Woman was characterized using attributes such as independent, fashionably up-to-date, youthful, athletic, and motorized.[7] In the assignment of these characteristics, as I hope to show in what follows, new scopes of action as well as constraints and disciplinization in "organized modernity" are brought up, conventionalized, and standardized.

Starting in the early 1920s a change took place in the street scenes in Berlin, a big city developing into a metropolis. The picture was marked increasingly by younger women, "striding quickly to work in the large office buildings or returning home exhausted – the masses of female salaried workers".[8] The streets were filled with women strolling along the magnificent avenues of the metropolis, hastening to an afternoon dance or evening entertainment in one of many establishments, and whose outward appearance did not reveal at first glance whether they were part of "high society" or were "small" sales clerks, whether they were "real ladies, or fast ones"(fig.2).[9] Women sat in the cafés without male escorts; they smoked, drank, and amused themselves, showing their legs with fake silk stockings. The dances of these "wild years,"[10] such as the Shimmy and the Charleston, broke down the traditional, hierarchical style of dancing in couples, expressing a feeling of freedom and independence through their impetuous, uncontrolled, and spontaneously invented body movements. These women embodied a type of woman who stood for modernity, urbanity, and equality, as well as liberal sexuality. This type replaced the traditional woman of the nineteenth century; it thus defined as old-fashioned that which corresponded to the norms of the bourgeois separation of breadwinner and housewife, of excluding women from the public

2
WOMEN ON KURFÜRSTENDAMM BOULEVARD: "THERE ARE MANY WOMEN ON KURFÜRSTENDAMM. THEY ALL HAVE THE SAME FACES AND A LOT OF MOLE FURS – THAT IS, NOT REAL FIRST-CLASS, BUT CHIC NONETHELESS" – IRMGARD KEUN: *DAS KUNSTSEIDENE MÄDCHEN* (THE FAKE SILK GIRL)

sphere, of subordinating sexuality to reproduction, and of defining women to be mothers. Hans Ostwald, who wrote a history of life and customs in the 1920s, characterized the New Woman as follows:

> The slender Diana type who storms around in a loosely fitting, thin garment almost revealing the knees gained more and more ground. This type was also athletically trained and seemed doubly delicate and frail in her heavy, hanging fur. On top of that, her hair was cut short, her mouth was made up into a red-lacquered heart form, and her apparel deliberately lacked a train, décolleté, and ornaments of earlier women's dress, and was actually nothing but a shirtlike hanging something – it all created a type of appearance beyond the woman of yesterday and earlier, a type whose main effect was through remarkably slender legs that seemed to have only two purposes: dance and sports.[11]

3
SUMMER DRESSES

4
AFTERNOON DRESSES

The emergence of this new type of woman was furthered, for one thing, by real developments, especially the chances for women to work in the expanding service sector.[12] In addition – and I find this more significant – the New Woman was the product of discourse and images that were sustained especially in and by the new mass media such as magazines, film, and photography. This involved the construction of a woman's body and its images using fashion, cosmetics, and athletics; it spoke of new freedom and at the same time provided acceptance for the discipline needed to shape the individual body according to the new standards, and – as casual yet self-evident consequences of this modernity – for new kinds of social constraints and controls.

Although the female salaried workers were seen as representing the New Woman,[13] their real working world played a major role neither in the texts nor in the pictures. For the New Woman was of course a working, "earning" woman; that is, wage-earning for women of all social strata became acceptable as a symbol of modernity. Women were no longer excluded from the project of modernity as they had

been in the nineteenth century and to some extent until the end of the German Empire. Instead, they participated in it as citizens and as members of the labor force.

However, the hierarchical gender order in "organized modernity" did not disappear. Instead of women being explicitly excluded, implicit limitations and exclusion based on gender were constructed and effective in practice in the nation or its various collectives and subgroups. Also, the construction of the New Woman was inherently ambivalent. It conventionalized new liberties, new scopes of action, and freedom of movement for women, while at the same time it limited these liberties to young, unmarried women.[14] And with that, the limitation of this freedom itself became normalized. The newly constructed body of young, unmarried women represented not so much an emancipatory draft of gender relations or female self-determination; instead, it served especially as a screen on which to project the promises of modernity, of technological and social progress.

The media images of the New Woman also revealed "changing gender and social boundaries" in this context that could be "copied" as it were by individuals.[15] Tendencies to cross or go beyond out-dated gender roles as well as social class divisions are obvious in these images. Women with bobbed hairstyles were, as the *Berliner Tageblatt* newspaper wrote in October 1925, "an expression of a worldview and a lifestyle"[16] that was characterized by an objective, functional, anti-elite, democratic basic attitude. Fashion was an important means of conveying these "blurred boundaries." "Deliberately plain fabrics and styles", the invention of synthetic fibers, and "improved imitation methods (e.g., synthetic leather and pearls)" all served to feed the "illusion of a democratic culture".[17] Shirtwaist dresses for the workday as well as afternoon or evening (figs. 3 and 4), jumpers and straight suits (fig. 5) covered up the insignias of traditional female beauty such as narrow waists and bustlines; together with legs visible to above the knee in silk stockings and narrow-fitting cloche hats, they formed a slender, flowing, continuous silhouette that resembled that of an "elegant young man".[18] "Masculine" accessories such as tie, cigarette,

5
LIESELOTTE FRIEDLÄNDER
PRACTICAL DAY SUIT, C.1925

6
WRITER VICKI BAUM
AT BOXING PRACTICE

monocle, sports coat, and pants signaled and conventionalized the blurring of social boundaries by women (whereby at the same time the ultrafeminine evening attire with the accompanying bright red lips and heavy perfume served to lessen the impact of the obscured borders and reduce the risk to the social order).[19] The new fashions also bade farewell to the corset; consequently, wearers of the new styles were forced – which the media suggested in countless illustrated articles – to keep their bodies trim and firm through sports, to control their weight, and to count calories. Women swam, played tennis, skied, and boxed in order to fight their way through life (fig. 6). They internalized the notion that the modern, "natural" beauty of the women's body had to be achieved through strict discipline and without external pressure (without the externally supporting and shaping corset!), much in keeping with the zeitgeist of "organized modernity," which generally attached high status to work. Media images of the

7
FROM *DIE DAME*: THE JUMPER
DOMINATES A WOMAN'S APPEARANCE

New Woman, which for many women during the Weimar Republic became a model for working on their body, had a democratizing effect. At the same time there was an obvious trend toward homogenization, toward retreat of the individual behind the masses. In 1926, for example, the magazine *Die Dame* (Woman) wrote that "Fashion makes everyone equal. Now everyone is narrow-hipped, bosomless, short-haired, heart-lipped."[20] (The design sketch in figure 7 was also taken from this magazine.) .

Vicki Baum summed up the contradiction between originality and individuality, on the one hand, and standardization and homogenization, on the other: "It is modern to be original. Consequently, all modern women are original. Consequently, since all of them are simultaneously original, not a single one of them is."[21] This contradiction, which "modern women" had to confront and come to terms with individually, refers further to tendencies toward homogenization oriented toward

8
STILL FROM THE FILM
THE GIRL FROM
THE REVUE
1928

9
TYPEWRITER SCENE
FROM THE JAMES-KLEIN
REVUE *THE LAUGHING*
BERLIN, 1925

the military that characterize "organized modernity" – in the sense of a strict, thoroughly organized system of, for example, process steps in industry and household, and mass consumption.[22] The standardizing image of the fashionably dressed, athletic, slender woman corresponded on photographs and in movies and revues to the seemingly endless rows of dancers who kicked their legs in unison in time to the music, or who represented a number or a letter in a dance scene (figs. 8 and 9). The single, individualized body disappears behind the overall body in the machinelike, automatic arrangement of the movements, with priority given to the uniformity and homogeneity of the

"individual parts" of the series. Consequently, the "modern" woman's body again served as a screen on which to project the normalization of developments which in many ways assigned and subordinated the individual to clearly defined social groups, subjecting it to homogenizing demands and norms. "The legs of the Tiller Girls correspond to hands in the factory," observed Siegfried Kracauer accurately, with an eye toward the capitalist production process. [23]

The discursively and visually produced construction of the New Woman and the related interpretation and standardization of changing social contexts and processes emerged within the context of political and cultural debates. Not all women were offered orientation or assistance in finding their true selves by the promises and presumptions of the New Woman; for older women, those working in typical domestic or agricultural professions or in industry, and those fulfilling the "traditional role" of housewife and mother, they seemed more provocative and degrading. Also, men did not necessarily applaud the new type of woman, as demonstrated in the 1929 collection of essays by male writers titled *What We Would Like to See in the Woman of the Future.*[24] Finally, the emergence and propagation of the New Woman sparked off bitter disputes, depending on the political interests, about interpretation and evaluation of the bourgeois, democratic state form and modernization thrusts and their repercussions for the stability of the social order. The Great Depression served to intensify the discourse, in which the New Woman became a synonym for the dissolution of socially stabilizing ideas of femininity and, especially, motherhood. Thus the New Woman also stood for the endangerment of the nation and the national culture by the international, equalizing effects of mass democracy and culture. Supporters saw the androgynous, boyish body of the New Woman, understating the female secondary sex characteristics, as the "symbolic refusal of motherhood as the most oppressive elements of traditional gender roles."[25] But in the counterdiscourse it was viewed as symptom and cause of "masculinization" and loss of "motherliness," and criticized in cultural terms as the "crisis of the family" and assessed politically as social decline.[26] In the early 1930s,

"wild, African" dances faced competition from "German dances",[27] fashion revealed a stronger feminine style, and the call was heard for "traditional dress" as an alternative to styles dictated by French designers and "Jewish clothing manufacturers"[28] As well, "Mothers' Day gained widespread acceptance as a German custom"[29] films and operettas[30] celebrated pastoral idyll as deliverance from the big city, and "photos of female pioneers driving racing cars, flying airplanes, or working in laboratories... were replaced more and more by idyllic scenes of mothers, the nationalist and racist tones of which became stronger with time"[31] Alice Rühle-Gerstel noted at the time: "Bobbed hair and short dresses are on the retreat, economic need has put away the office chair and reading desk and closed the counters in front of women; the ideology of the New Femininity is floating in a vacuum, empty as a deflated balloon."[32] The "good old days" in the form of "marriage and motherhood" and the "kitchen" became attractive again, not only for those women and men who never thought much of the New Woman anyway, but also for those who had been disappointed by its ambivalent promises. All of this provided fertile ground for discursive and practical, political efforts to push back the boundary-blurring impact of the modernizing thrusts of the 1920s. It also served to support the ideology and politics of the Nazis, who promoted the subordination of the individual to the *Volksgemeinschaft,* or national community, the leveling out of gender differences in favor of camaraderie within that community,[33] and ostracism and exclusion of "the Other" to an extreme – that is, annihilation. The type of the "German woman" propagated in this context by the Nazis and linked with virtually hysterical attacks against the construction of the New Woman[34] was, however, not merely the return to the "good old days" in the form of the housewife and mother. The type of the "German woman" could no longer exist without some elements of the New Woman of the Weimar Republic, since the modernization that had started after the First World War and brought shifts in the gender arrangements could not be undone. This became apparent not least by the further development of "organized modernity" after the Second World War in western Europe and the United States.

Notes

[1] Annelie Lütgens, "Die Verschwörung der Frauen: Jeanne Mammens Grossstadtbilder," in *Frauen in der Grossstadt Herausforderung der Moderne?*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Dortmund, 1999), p. 92.

[2] Ibid., p. 95.

[3] Peter Wagner, *Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline* (London and New York), 1994; *Soziologie der Moderne. Freiheit und Disziplin* (Frankfurt/Main), 1995.

[4] See Wagner, ibid., esp. part III, "The closure of modernity".

[5] Gesa Kessemeier, *Sportlich, sachlich, männlich: Das Bild der "Neuen Frau" in den Zwanziger Jahren. Zur Konstruktion geschlechtsspezifischer Körperbilder in der Mode der Jahre 1920 – 1929* (Dortmund, 2000), p. 44.

[6] Ibid., p. 18.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Gisela Brinker-Gabler, ed., *Frauenarbeit und Beruf* (Frankfurt/Main, 1979), p. 330.

[9] Astrid Eichstädt, "Irgendeinen trifft die Wahl," in *Hart und zart. Frauenleben 1920-1970*, (Berlin, 1990) p. 9.

[10] From the title of Birgit Haustedt's book *Die Wilden Jahre in Berlin: Eine Klatsch- und Kulturgeschichte der Frauen* (Wild Years in Berlin: A Women's History of Gossip and Culture) (Dortmund, 1999).

[11] Hans Ostwald, *Sittengeschichte der Inflation* (Berlin, 1931), p. 131.

[12] The rate of women's employment grew only insignificantly from 1907 to 1925 (from 34.9% to 35.6%), but the rise in the number of female salaried workers was meteoric. "In 1925 there were almost 1.5 million female salaried workers, three times more than in 1907" (Ute Frevert, *Frauen-Geschichte: Zwischen bürgerlicher Verbesserung und Neuer Weiblichkeit* [Frankfurt/Main, 1986], p. 172). The high proportion of wage-earners among women under twenty-five was characteristic of the Weimar Republic (up to 77%). See Carmen Tatschmurat, "'Wir haben keinen Beruf, wir haben Arbeit': Frauenarbeit in der Industrie der zwanziger Jahre," in *Hart und zart. Frauenleben 1920-1970* (Berlin, 1990), p. 23.

[13] See Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten: Kulturkritischer Essay* (Leipzig and Weimar, 1981).

[14] This corresponded to the common standard that women should be wage-earning only until they get married, and that (career) training for girls was oriented toward their later role as housewife and mother. Especially the debate on two-income families, which intensified with the Great Depression, and the 1932 law that prohibited two-income families in civil service show that women served as a reserve army for the labor market; and the model according to which the man was the family breadwinner continued to be effective, both

legally and as a social standard, as did women's responsibility for social reproductive tasks and their role as mother. See Karen Hagemann, *Frauenalltag und Männerpolitik: Alltagsleben und gesellschaftliches Handeln von Arbeiterfrauen in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn, 1990), pp. 498ff.; and Ankum, ibid., p. 11.

[15] Sabine Hake, "Im Spiegel der Mode," in *Frauen in der Großstadt: Herausforderung der Moderne?* ed. Katharina von Ankum (Dortmund, 1999), p. 209.

[16] Cited in Dagmar Reese-Nübel, "Kontinuitäten und Brüche in den Weiblichkeitskonstruktionen im Übergang von der Weimarer Republik zum Nationalsozialismus," in *Soziale Arbeit und Faschismus,* ed. Hans-Uwe Otto (Frankfurt/Main, 1989), p. 228.

[17] Hake, ibid., pp. 197, 202 and 197.

[18] Kessemeier, ibid., p. 98.

[19] See Hake, ibid., p. 197.

[20] Cited in Kessemeier, pp. 105-6.

[21] Vicki Baum, *Leute von heute,* cited in Hake, p. 194.

[22] In his *Geschichte eines Deutschen,* written in 1939-40, Sebastian Haffner described the "sports craze" that "took hold of German youth" in the mid-1920s (*Geschichte eines Deutschen, Erinnerungen 1914-1933* [Stuttgart and Munich, 2000)], p. 72). He interpreted it as "great German mass hysteria" (p. 72) that politically paved the way for National Socialism. Though sports enthusiasm had already died down by the end of the 1920s, the transition to "associations and political parties" was incredibly smooth, "where politics were conducted as one does sports" (p. 75). This assessment and judgment is certainly correct, but the solely political perspective it is based on ignores more comprehensive modernization processes that contributed to the fact that athletics became a mass phenomenon at this time. This corresponded at the discursive level, among other things, to the fact that the New Woman was also athletic.

[23] Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt/Main, 1963), p. 54.

[24] See Hanna Vollmer-Heitmann, *Wir sind von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt: Die Zwanziger Jahre* (Hamburg, 1993). Some of the writers in this anthology stressed the increased independence of women and greater honesty in erotic relations as positive. Most of the authors, however, painted a rather dismal picture of the "roughening of enjoyment" (Stefan Zweig). They criticized the "absence of excitement and the casual attitudes between the sexes" as a result of the simple "satisfaction of every desire" (Axel Eggebrecht); what has become an intolerable insecurity of men vis-à-vis women; and even the "masculinization" of women and their enslavement in an alienating wage-earning world (Stefan Zweig) and the loss of a femininity that leads to "lightness and lessening the load of our all too difficult world" (Stefan Zweig); all quotations are cited in Vollmer-Heitmann, pp. 12ff.

[25] Hake, p. 207.

[26] See Frevert, passim.

[27] Eichstädt, p. 13.

[28] See Hake, p. 203.

[29] Christiane Koch, "Schreibmaschine, Bügeleisen und Muttertagssträuße: Der bescheidene Frauenalltag in den zwanziger Jahren," in *Hart und zart. Frauenleben 1920-1970*, Berlin 1990, p. 77.

[30] In his lecture for the Literature Forum in the Brecht House in Berlin (November 2001), Albrecht Betz used the example of Ralph Benatzky's operetta *The White Horse Inn* to demonstrate how rural idyll, traditional couples, and a sense of community drawing on the "older German and Austrian music and dance forms" were effectively staged as a counterimage to urbanity and progress, indistinct gender arrangements, divorce, and refusal to have children. Albrecht Betz, "Wien oder Berlin? Querschnitt durch das Krisenjahr 1930: Schönberg, Eisler und Benatzky." Lecture with musical examples in the Literaturforum in the Brecht-Haus, Berlin, November 2001 (manuscript).

[31] Ankum, p. 9.

[32] Alice Rühle-Gerstel, "Zurück zur guten alten Zeit," *Die literarische Welt*, 9:4 (27 January 1933), p. 5f.

[33] Dagmar Reese-Nübel, "Kontinuitäten und Brüche in den Weiblichkeitskonstruktionen im Übergang von der Weimarer Republik zum Nationalsozialismus," in Hans-Uwe Otto, ed., *Soziale Arbeit und Faschismus*, (Frankfurt/Main, 1989), p. 235f.

[34] Irene Dölling, "'Ich weiß, es wird einmal ein Wunder gescheh'n'": Zarah Leander als Verkörperung der 'Neuen Deutschen Frau'. Analyse des Films *Die große Liebe*." In *Potsdamer Studien zur Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung. Themenschwerpunkt: Filmfrauen- Zeitzeichen. Frauenbilder im Film der 40er, 60er und 90er Jahre*. Vol. I: Diva. 1 (1997) Nos. 1, 2. Rev. edition 1998, pp. 13-88.