

The Impact of Bebel's *Women under Socialism* (c. 1890)

Abstract

Although August Bebel's *Women under Socialism* [*Die Frau und der Sozialismus*] (1879) was explicitly banned under the Anti-Socialist Law (1878–90), it circulated widely. For many working-class and lower-middle-class women it was the first window to the aims and ideals of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The following excerpt testifies to the impact of Bebel's book on the young Hildegard Wegscheider (1871–1953), the daughter of a Protestant pastor in Berlin. In 1892, Wegscheider became the first Prussian woman to receive the *Abitur* (a secondary-school certificate or diploma); she went on to study in Zurich and in 1898 became the first German woman to receive a doctorate. She subsequently worked as a teacher, then as a secondary school inspector. She sat as an SPD deputy in the lower house of the Prussian state parliament from 1919 to 1933.

Source

At home, I was first trained in domestic chores. I learned to sew with a sewing machine, learned to cook, learned to sew [by hand] and to do the laundry: I did not like these chores, but they simply had to be done. Apart from that, the *so-called higher education* continued: singing lessons, piano lessons, even drawing lessons, for which I had no talent whatsoever, and in the evenings we recited plays, each of us reading a part, one week in German, the next week in French, and the week after in English. I also taught French to some older ladies. When we sat over our needlework in the evening, father read to us: Ranke's *History of the Popes*, Strauß: *The Life of Jesus*, Renan: *The Life of Jesus*, Beyschlag: *The Life of Jesus*. But there were also texts that were even more difficult: from Kuno Fischer's *History of Philosophy* [we read] the volumes on Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant. Once a week, as the eldest child, I had the privilege of joining my father in reading the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. He also made a modest effort to penetrate Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.

We were gradually introduced to social life; we learned to dance, we gave parties and were invited in turn. I had no luck in this, for I loved talking about things I did not understand because I considered any university-educated man a source of wisdom. My girlfriends told me how difficult it was to talk any young gentleman into having me as a dinner partner.

More harmonious were the evenings when young candidates of theology were invited to our house. On those occasions, we engaged in intense discussions of various trends in theology, we were together in private, and we all got along well. In those days, I secretly read Bebel's *Women under Socialism*. The book was still outlawed, but, as is already known, was read everywhere. I discovered it on my mother's bedside table and had to make sure that no one noticed I was reading it. It struck me like a bolt of lightning. We had already read Stuart Mill and had recognized his liberal position on sexual equality as a demand for justice. This, however, was something else. It has been rightly said that if Marx was class-consciousness become reason, then Bebel was class life become flesh and blood. The impact was incredible. The whole form of education and training given to girls in our social circles vanished into thin air; and, on top of it all, we heard that Bebel had written the book in prison. This was not true, of course, but it endowed his words with the seriousness of a martyr's gospel.

Source: Hildegard Wegscheider, *Weite Welt im engen Spiegel. Erinnerungen*. Berlin-Grunewald, n.d.

[1953], pp. 21–22; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, pp. 103–4.

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