

Meyer on Craig (2017)

Craig, Béatrice. *Female Enterprise Behind the Discursive Veil in Nineteenth-Century Northern France*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. x +303, ISBN 978-1-137-57412-1

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Methods to analyze effectively women's economic activities in the past have presented persistent problems for historians. Questions have aimed to uncover women's activities through a maze of ahistorical and gendered terms. We have records of many of the routine activities of women, but were these occupations characterized as "work"? Craig takes a new approach in her fascinating study, *Female Enterprise Behind the Discursive Veil*. Previous scholarship has contended that with industrialization, the ideology of separate spheres forced middle-class women away from economic activities and towards domesticity and leisure. This monograph is the latest to correct historians' universal application of this separate spheres theory. Craig's exhaustive study of records from Lille offers new insight into the diverse range of normal and acceptable entrepreneurial activities for middle-class women and reminds us that other interests, such as family survival, undercut gender even in the more conservative societies of the nineteenth century.

Craig examines women's participation in businesses, their activities, contemporary reactions to women in the economic sphere, and the influence of the separate spheres' philosophy. An additional layer of complexity comes from community memory and family histories that corroborate historians' portrayal of women as retreating to the home. Yet records, from tax rolls to notary documents, clearly show women operating in a variety of ventures into the twentieth century. If not because of restrictive gender concepts, why were women concealed?

Craig brings her expertise on gender and business to bear in answering these questions in a thorough, statistical analysis of records from the regional capital of Lille and nearby Tourcoing. Lille was the most economically advanced city in France, and industrialization and mechanization have been linked to the model of domesticity. Craig examines women involved in a variety of endeavors on their own, with family, or with non-familial partners. By reframing her study as one of women's involvement in managing companies, she circumvents the focus on wages, output, and location of the work. This does not mean that she is not faced with other terminology issues, such as the restrictive uses of "entrepreneur" and "firm."

Craig traces women's continual presence in entrepreneurial activities throughout the nineteenth century, exploring fifty-year stages. Economic enterprises were often established through legal partnerships, which included both sexes. While married women were under the legal authority of their husbands, both wives and unmarried women created a range of associations with family members and unrelated individuals. Many women ran their own firms independently of their husbands, and even legally separated their property. Women ran the offices, oversaw employees, and managed production that required technological knowledge. Craig asserts that what was normal behavior in the region would have been unacceptable within the ideology of separate spheres. Nevertheless, women who elected or were obliged to engage in entrepreneurial activity encountered no explicit obstacles in northern France.

With only a slight ebb, women's participation remained constant into the twentieth century, even through the emergence of new service industries and business structures (such as shareholding societies). Though these additions could be restrictive for women, there was no general trend towards gendering certain occupations or activities. Instead, factors such as generation and class shaped expectations about women's activities for better or worse. A key element was the growing separation of ownership and management in business. The hiring of managers for routine administration did limit the role of women in the governance of family firms. Many widows, however, retained executive authority. And the more distant oversight by women did not represent the bias of separate sphere ideology, according to Craig, because women were not ousted and often held positions of authority over grown sons. Craig found no clear patterns regarding a widow's role that would indicate the influence of an overarching ideology about women and the economy.

Having established that there was no exodus of women from economic ventures during the nineteenth century, Craig explores various reasons for why women were not redefined as domestic creatures. These span the Napoleonic Code's treatment of couples as economic partners and the conservative, Catholic culture of Lille. Significantly, generation continued to dominate gender in hierarchies of authority, and family interest directed all other concerns. Consequently, women acting in the interest of their families were shielded from criticism. Moreover, wives and daughters were expected to contribute economically. Gender was a factor, but not the primary filter.

Craig returns to the question of why women vanished from popular and scholarly narratives of business in the region, arguing that it was an intentional response to economic and political instability in the early twentieth century. Businessmen edited out female predecessors in order to reaffirm their position as natural and successful economic leaders. This is an interesting contention and requires further investigation. As Craig has shown, the relationship between gender and business is more complicated and diverse than previously portrayed. Her assertions that business was not considered part of the public sphere in the nineteenth century and that the concept of separate spheres was particularly tied to Republicanism in France raise even more questions about the political aspects of gendering business.

Overall, Craig convincingly demonstrates that the eighteenth-century ideal of wife as deputy husband or help mate persisted as the norm through industrialization and the corresponding socio-economic shifts until the Great War. Women enacted both agency and authority within the economic arena. There was no one experience for women in business, just as there was not a singular male or middle-class identity. This work is an important revision of economic and women's histories and encourages new pathways to understanding the activities of middle-class women, whether those actions are characterized as "work" or not.

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