

INTRODUCTION

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CATEGORIES OF GENDER AND  
WORK IN CONTEXT  
Ways Towards a Research Agenda

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This book aims to bring a new understanding of the fabric of categories of gender and work and their impact on different groups of actors. It focuses on the circulation and transformation of categories, through distinct institutions – such as language, science and research, statistics, law, social policies – and on the dynamics of social conflicts and resistance which over time have led to the institutionalization of specific categories.

Despite broad research regarding the gender–work nexus, surprisingly little is known about modes of classification and transformation over time (see, e.g., Allen and Eby 2016; Jeanes, Knights, and Martin 2011; Powell 1999). This book brings together a range of chapters on the categorization of gender and work from a historical-sociological perspective (Clemens and Cook 1999; Zimmermann 2015). Our aim has been to provide a fresh analytical perspective on long-term transformations in two national contexts, France and Germany. Both were European colonial powers facing multiple tensions of empire (Cooper and Stoler 1997). We argue that they are increasingly embedded within and between the transnational and the global while eliciting different understandings of that embedment.

The ten chapters are based on case studies conducted in France and Germany, by a team of sociologists, political scientists and historians who have worked together on an integrated research project over a period of

four years. They examine gender categorization and labour regulation while citing numerous examples of their institutionalization and transformation: the dynamic of legal and statistical categorization of female labour in the context of the family business; professional gender equality through the lens of statistical classification and remuneration; contested legal categories of women's night work; struggles over women's employment quotas on the boards of large firms; as well as shifting family policy measures, such as parental leave schemes.

By viewing gender and work as institutionalized cultural structures and forms of knowledge, the case studies presented here illustrate how work has been a major field in the restructuring of gender relations, while gender has increasingly determined and limited access to and status in the world of employment in the course of the twentieth century. This world of work, at the same time, was embedded in colonial structures and discourses about civilization (Zimmermann 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Suspecting categories and categorization to have a particular hand in these social processes, and elaborating just as much on their social as on their contingent quality, the chapters emphasize a sociological way of taking categories and categorization seriously. Actors engage in serious debates about and with categories; categories are at the basis of their struggles and they reveal contradictory ways of viewing the interactions between work and gender.

## **Taking Classification and Categories Seriously**

With this book and our empirical studies, we aim for a sociological comprehension of classification as a social practice, embracing both everyday categorization and technical-scientific classification. Classification encompasses the ordering of objects into groups or sets on the basis of their assumed relationships as similar or different (Starr 1987), or a set of boxes into which people and things can be put (Bowker and Star 1999: 10; Hacking 1986). Classification informs the processes of making distinctions between things entailing two dimensions, that is, 'lumping and splitting', a process in which, on the one hand, entities are lumped in distinct clusters and, on the other, separated into different entities (Zerubavel 1996; see also Czarniawska and Sevón 1996). The recognition of both similarity and difference is at the core of self- and collective identification (Jenkins 2000; Jepperson 2001). Put differently, categorizations that are used on a daily basis across various social fields touch on elementary social operations, as they rest upon social conditions and cultural expectations (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991). They gain their authority as

they are collectively produced, sustained and enforced (Douglas 1986; Durkheim and Mauss 1903; Fourcade 2016).

Interrogating the social order of sexual classification together with that of 'work' and its categorical framework constituted the very beginning of women's and gender studies. The reclassification of 'sex' and 'gender' itself, and the controversies it initiated, were the outcome of throwing new light on the arrangement between the sexes and its cultural representation (Scott [1988] 1999a). In her book on *Deceptive Distinctions*, Cynthia Epstein Fuchs (1988) explored the conceptual boundaries that define the categories of sexual difference, which are both symbolic and social in the world of work. Furthermore, historians (Bock and Duden 1976) and sociologists (Lopata 1971; Oakley 1974) redefined housework as 'work' rather than 'love', a 'natural' female disposition or a residue of 'tradition'. The emergence of modern housework was put into the context of social transformations, namely the rise of market-oriented 'gainful employment', which, around 1900, also triggered the classification of homework. However, global labour history offers a more nuanced global picture of the various kinds of domestic, care-giving and wage work (Van Nederveen Meerkerk, Neunsinger, and Hoerder 2015). As the dichotomous distinction between market-related and home-related work shows, categorization flags the social territories of belonging, which in turn matter for social status (Canning 1996; Epstein 1989; Wobbe and Renard 2017; for methodological elaboration see Goertz and Mazur 2008). Following Erving Goffman (1977: 302), sex-class placement provides an exemplary case, 'if not a prototype, of social classification'. As Cecilia Ridgeway shows, sexual categorizations often function as cultural 'super-schemes' to make sense of persons in the workplace so that we are framed 'before we know it' (Ridgeway 2009: 145, 2011).

Over recent decades, economic sociology has also been concerned with classifications, but mostly with product and market mechanisms of classification. This interest later led to broadening the span of research objects of market sociology to 'populations of would-be customers' (Fourcade and Healy 2013) and thus to investigating 'market classifications' in a broader sense, that is, 'various forms of sorting, categorizing and valuating of economic subjects and objects' (Krenn 2017: 7). Following the French approach of economics of conventions (Diaz-Bone 2017; Diaz-Bone and Didier 2016) and studies in (historical) sociology of quantification and statistics (Desrosières 1998, 2011; Espeland and Stevens 2007, 2008; Heintz 2010, 2012, 2016; Porter 1995), this research field focuses on the mechanisms through which markets are ordered, value is attributed to objects and objects are ranked. By doing so, it highlights the production of hierarchies in markets by technical and thus highly social

procedures of classification and comparison, such as credit and university rankings (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Fourcade and Healy 2013). However, if classification dynamics bring hierarchies among those who are classified, they also exclude or include over time different kinds of activities and groups from the visible economic activity and state statistics. They also engender a process of framing and eventually a process of definition of identities and social groups.

Another field of sociological research has turned to the cultural and discursive dimensions of categories touching on unsettled and transgressing identities of individuals and groups, on their politics of difference and differentiation (for overviews, see Brubaker 2015, 2016; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Lamont et al. 2016). This focus on ‘identity’ and ‘group’ has been challenged by perspectives beyond ‘groupism’ (Brubaker 2002; Lamont et al. 2016) and ‘identity’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) to take categories as culturally contingent phenomena instead of essential and fixed properties. More recent debates underscore the need to reconnect cultural processes to social inequality to explore how inequality is produced through the mobilization of common categories and classification systems (Epstein 2007; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014).

Building on both approaches, we propose to look at classifications as collective representations of gender and work, how they configure and reflect the boundaries of categories that manifest in the structures of institutions, such as occupational classification, legal categories, recruitment schemes or branches (Anderson 1994; Rudischhauser 2017; Wobbe 2012; Zimmermann 2006). We understand categorization as the result of definition and differentiation of social groups in political and legal institutions through technical-scientific procedures of ordering (*ibid.*).

Our ten cases show that even in different national contexts, the categorization of gender and work is always a double process. The first process is one of substantive co-definition. Whether discussing women’s night work laws throughout Europe, or equality labour laws, controversies refer to women’s social, economic and private roles. Similarly, controversies in both countries led to the assessment of new definitions of work and labour. This is what we call a process of ‘substantive co-definition’. The second process we have highlighted is the definition of boundaries as a ‘dynamic-relational process’. Through time, since the nineteenth century, categorization processes have led to an evolution of boundaries between private and public spheres as well as an evolution of boundaries with regard to the gender division of labour. At the same time, these boundaries are unstable and reveal the attribution of certain work activities performed by women at the intersections between these fields to ‘grey zones’, as a way of stabilizing the emerging system. Our common understanding of

the categorization process consequently builds on this double process of co-definition of, on the one hand, substantive categories and, on the other, dynamic frontiers of work, through the comparative approach of our case studies.

With this book, we aim to broaden the research by exploring categorization and its transformation in the world of work over a longer stretch of time, namely from around 1900 up to the present. This approach allows for exploring the emergence, alteration and decline of categories, which reveals a complex interplay of durability and change. For example, the category of gainful employment, institutionalized around 1900, would not become only one type of work among others. Rather, it came to be the standard and norm of market-related paid work, closely coupled with a gendered coding of labour, which is still with us in certain sectors (Folbre 2001; Topalov 2001; Wobbe 2012; Wobbe and Renard 2017).

### **Comparison in Context: Ways Towards a Historical-Sociological Comparative Approach**

In the following chapters, we try to take categorization processes in the long term seriously and highlight differences and similarities between two national contexts. By doing so, we aim to combine historical sociology with French-German comparison. We assume that comparison between contexts, as a heuristic tool, can help to shed light on critical processes, which a single case study would have missed out. In this enterprise, we can build on a long and productive tradition of intellectual relations and historical comparative analysis between France and Germany, specifically in the domain of work and forms of labour mobilization. At first centred on the nation viewed as a contained entity and as the most relevant frame for comparative analysis, this bilateral comparative perspective has been opened up to other spaces of social interaction including concepts of 'work' and 'unemployment' (Zimmermann 2006) and gender in the world of work (Lallement et al. 2015; Wobbe, Berrebi-Hoffmann, and Lallement 2011).

In the 1980s, the comparative tradition between France and Germany was marked by an approach in terms of 'societal effect' (Maurice, Sellier, and Silvestre [1982] 1986). In order to account for the differences between the two models of work organization, according to these authors, it was necessary to look for meaningful differences both in the nature of the industrial relations systems and in the structure of the education system of both countries. These results made the case for a fruitful comparative approach apprehending cases as entirities and as separate

entities. Focusing on the embeddedness of the compared objects in their national contexts, the compared objects were related to a large set of social domains, institutions, actors and so on in each national context in order to identify meaningful relations between variables. This ensured a comprehensive analysis of the case in line with the Weberian tradition of comprehensive sociology. By extending the search for relevant social mechanisms to various domains and mechanisms in society, it demonstrated the variety of causal relations between one social phenomenon and various elements of its national social context. This view of (multiple) co-variation led directly to the central argument of institutional complementarities that has been at the core of the institutional approaches of the 1990s and 2000s (e.g. Hall and Gingerich 2009) and is also mostly in line with the dominant approaches in the field of comparative history (Haupt and Kocka 2009), which frequently relays to detailed case studies (e.g. Frader 2008; Rudischhauser 2017). They are intrinsically idiosyncratic and consider multiple inferences.

However, from the 1990s onwards, a crucial turn emerged in the field of social history, away from the comparative analysis of closed systems towards the comparison of related entities in which the concepts of transfers (Espagne 1994; Osterhammel 2001), circulations (Kaluszynski and Payre 2013), entanglements (Conrad 2008) and *croisements* (Werner and Zimmermann 2006) have been key. Gender history in a transnational perspective is going beyond interstate relations to discover obscured biographies, networks and institutions (see, e.g., chapters in Janz and Schönplflug 2014), conceiving in contrasting ways the nature of the relations between cultures or countries, the importance of the transnational spaces or, conversely, of the nation. These approaches propose to further broaden the apprehension of the contexts of the historical phenomenon to be compared by considering their connections and mutual construction, which are not ‘coloured by methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002: 302).

The common integration of France and Germany into the context of the European Union (EU) and their strong level of attention to the normative framework of international organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) have created an increasingly important further shared context between these two countries. The research on knowledge circulation stresses the embeddedness of national pathways in a transnational framework, which goes far beyond European supranational policies and international organizations. By doing so, a renewed approach in historical sociology attempts to pass over the ‘occlusion of the global and transnational’ in historical-sociological studies: ‘The issue is that, for too long, comparative historical sociology has failed to look beyond, through,

or across national processes and international systems to explore *transnational* and global dynamics: that is, connections, relations, and processes that traverse conventional state boundaries' (Go 2014: 122–23). According to Go, one of the main reasons comparative historical sociology has long occluded transnational processes is situated in the search for causal explanations when comparing separate cases (2014: 127–30). The global and transnational matter not in a causal way to explain national pathways of change, but because they are intertwined in coalitions of actors and configurations of meanings, which, together, can provide us with explanations for mechanisms. Thus, the analysis of the specific channels and mechanisms and the relations between national objects and transnational dynamics are crucial elements of our comparative approach.

In her book on *Economists and Societies*, Marion Fourcade (2009) deploys a similar approach, which she considers a critical organized comparison. Accordingly, we have to reflect the categories used in the comparison as contingent, culturally defined terms and to explore how they 'combine into fairly coherent constellations' (ibid.: 13). In order to investigate the historical and social conditions that enabled the concepts of gender and work across national contexts, we connect the comparative perspective with the historical one. The period around 1900 provides a point of departure, since only then did 'work' come to be classified as gainful employment, together with the sexual distinction between market-related and home-related work. During the twentieth century, particularly its second part, reclassifications of gender distinctions took place.

Against this backdrop, we propose a comparative approach that we call 'comparison in context' in order to combine two research lines in historical sociology. First, it considers the compared objects as embedded in specific social and historical contexts (Werner and Zimmermann 2006). The *histoire croisée* approach emphasizes the historization of the objects and categories of analysis, 'with the processes back to the temporal and spatial interactions that make up the category' (ibid.: 44), which is contextual itself. In line with the comparative-historical analysis perspective, the various chapters ground their demonstration in a thorough knowledge of empirical situations making up the contexts at stake (Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 13) and enabling us to make use of 'empirical mechanisms' to elucidate the cases under scrutiny (ibid.: 15).

Second, our approach focuses on the dynamics of transnational mechanisms (Conrad 2002; Go 2014). We believe that valuing the idiosyncrasy of a specific situation neither hinders the capacity to compare, nor implies restriction of the analysis to the national frame. Due to the ontological peculiarities of the social, George Steinmetz (2004: 372) suggests seeing case studies and so-called small-N comparisons 'as privileged forms of

sociological analysis', as our only access to underlying structures is via the empirical event. Comparison in context analyses how a context, made up of various possible spaces or scales of social interaction, relates to the comparative object, and how the specific logic of embeddedness of each case is to be put in perspective with that of the other cases, in a manner inspired by Michael Burawoy's 'extended case method' (Burawoy 1998; Crozier [1964] 2010). While studying the process of categorization through deep case studies in comparison, we deal with a level of deep granularity – local, historical moments, actors, power struggles, political conflicts, language of labour and conceptions of gender and equality – as well as a global and transnational level of analysis. We argue that this allows us to contribute genuinely to ongoing issues of equality and identity in different contexts and at different levels today.

### **Cognitive Options, Driving Forces, Coalitions of Actors, Scales**

Our comparison is carried out with the help of a series of case studies. Both teams of French and German researchers elaborated integrated analytical and methodological frames of analysis and engaged in empirical study. As we assume that categories are at the basis of social controversies between actors, we selected four debates at the intersection between work and gender: (1) women's night work and its legal regulation; (2) the categorization and legal regulation of the work of family workers; (3) legal categories of employment equality; and (4) quotas for women on company boards.

Combining a historical perspective with analytical tools stemming from the sociology of public controversies, the sociology of knowledge and of institutions, our case studies focus on critical issues touching upon the recognition of women's labour or the structuring of gendered power relations in regard to labour. As a consequence, the studies are rooted in the systematic and compared analysis of the semantic scripts underlying the – mostly competitive or even contentious – process of institutionalizing categories. The role of social actors in the formation and imposition of categories is at the centre of our analysis. But interactions between social actors systematically refer to the sociohistorical context made up of cultural repertoires, institutions or socioeconomic conditions. In order to make sense of the tension between contextual elements such as culture or institutions and the interplay of actors in relation to a specific issue, all case studies are structured around two (or more) sequences, with the genesis of categorization and its institutional formation organizing a form



of social order. We thereby build on the sociological tradition of neo-institutionalist research (Jepperson 1991; Thelen 1999) and especially focus on ‘critical junctures’ (Collier and Collier 1991) as moments of crystallization in which mechanisms of redefinition and reinterpretations of categories become salient. This allows empirical insights about historical ruptures and continuities in the way public problems are formulated. Thus, the focus of the comparative analysis is on the various problematizations of issues related to gender and work, which could be similar or different according to specific contexts and settings (Clemens 2007; Haydu 1998).

In order to uncover the mechanisms responsible for institutional changes from an inductive, empirical perspective, our analytical framework articulates four main elements. First, the chapters examine dominant semantic scripts about gender and their specific articulation in the social spheres at hand. Mainly, these articulations are related to structuring oppositions such as work/non-work, work/family, tradition/modernity, equality in values/equality in rights, and so on. These cognitive options inform the apprehension of the analysed objects, as well as the multiple dimensions for reframing in terms of norms, discourses, regulatory forms and so on. Second, our case studies look at driving forces. These are context-related social transformations and cultural concepts, such as globally shifting social and economic rationales like the internationalization of labour law after World War I, the United Nations Decade for Women, the feminist agenda since the 1960s and the agenda of work flexibility since the 1980s; they contributed to destabilizing former collective representations of gender roles in the social field of labour. Third, actors and actors’ coalitions play an important role in the phrasing of social, political and economic issues that have influenced the structuring of the domains in which our comparative research objects are embedded. Finally, scales are explored as spaces of social interactions and, more precisely, as areas for the formulation and circulation of categories, social mobilization and institutional regulation. The analysis of rescaling processes – both up- and downscaling – helps us to understand the tensions and transformations of discourses, expertise and statements regarding a social phenomenon at different stages of circulation between the various spaces of social interaction.

## Structure of the Book

The book is structured in two parts. The case studies in the first part relate to similar comparative objects in the two national contexts, the genesis and transformation of which can be read in the mirror of each other. The

second part provides four individual chapters that address national and transnational changes in equality concepts. The ten chapters cover this topography in the following manner.

*Part I: Shifting Categories from a Comparative  
Relational Perspective*

Olivier Giraud and Léa Renard explore the shifting categorization of family members working in family businesses in France and Germany. Giraud demonstrates how the category of family work became a reference for a social movement of spouses of independent workers in France after 1945. In her chapter, Renard examines the statistical and social placing of ‘family workers’ in Germany (1880–2010), showing both the emergence of the category in the field of statistics and its shifting meaning over time. Michel Lallement and Theresa Wobbe and Katja Müller deal with the emerging categorization of ‘women’s night work’ as both an international phenomenon and a national protective measure around 1900 and its dissolution in the late twentieth century. Their chapters suggest that the deinstitutionalization of that category is shaped by similar transformations in the European labour market in France and Germany, even though it is embedded in different cultural trajectories and political breaks such as National Socialism. The last chapters of Part I show different semantics and driving forces shaping the controversy on women’s quotas on corporate boards during the early 2000s in both countries. For the French debate, Anne-Françoise Bender, Isabelle Berrebi-Hoffmann and Philippe Reigné reveal the reconfiguration of actors’ constellations and power relations in a national space strongly embedded in a transnational environment. They highlight the tensions between the logic of anti-discrimination present in European laws and the French definition of equality and parity. Katja Müller analyses the discourse on females’ human capital (and its potential waste as a threat) in the German debate on quotas. In comparison to the French case, she points to a very different coalition of actors anchored in national legal and economic spheres.

The comparative results exposed in this part show strong national trajectories and, at the same time, ongoing processes of convergence since the 1970s. Among other similarities, a new way of articulating social justice and economic productivity in equality discourses is common to both national contexts. Compared to protective measures around 1900, it reveals a transformation in the patterns of gender difference – based not only on moral but also on economic arguments. The results gathered in Part II give some lines of explanation, embedded first in the European integration and second in the process of globalization.

## *Part II: Transnational Interplay of Categorization*

The four individual chapters presented in Part II explore altering models of gender equality, its semantics, driving forces, struggles over classification, and rescaling. Arnaud Lechevalier starts with the question of how gender regimes in France and Germany have changed over the past decades and how these changes can be explained, while both gender regimes have been considered very different during the twentieth century. Exploring the reform of parental leave in Germany, Theresa Wobbe, Maïke Bussmann, Carolin Höroldt and Léa Renard discuss the discontinuities of German family policy, in particular its shifting configurations and rescaling in the frame of human capital and flexibility. Finally, the last two chapters address the quest for ‘equal pay for equal work’ in the national context, the EU and the ILO. Departing from the interwar years, Theresa Wobbe, Carolin Höroldt and Maïke Bussmann exemplify two German legal cases on equal pay (1950–1980s) in a transnational legal field of debate on equal employment rights within the ILO. Ferruccio Ricciardi explores the practical challenges of the EU’s early equal pay norm in relation to job evaluation schemes in the member states.

Our results show a variety of transnational networks of actors and categorizations, both within and beyond national structures and international organizations. The introduction of quotas for women on company boards in France, for instance, cannot be understood without taking into account the role of economic actors and multinational corporations. The institutionalization of the principle ‘equal pay for equal work’ has been a result of struggles and redefinition processes, involving civil society, national, supranational and international actors. Thus, the space of categorization in the field of gender equality at work seems to be a transnational one.

As Sonya O. Rose (2010) put it, if gender and work are categories, they not only have a specific history, but they also *are* history. The chapters in this book show that more work remains to be done on exploring the historicity of gender and work. Our goal has been, through this collective research and book, to show how this conflicting fabric of gender and work categories is intertwined with political and social change, and embedded both in historical domestic contexts and global movements and regulations.

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