



Utrecht University

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Louisa Niesen

[l.c.niesen@students.uu.nl](mailto:l.c.niesen@students.uu.nl)

# MODERN WOMEN?

On Practices and Experiences of 'Modernity' in the Everyday Lives of

Female White-Collar Employees in the Weimar Republic

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis examines practices and experiences of 'modernity' in the everyday lives of urban female white-collar employees in the Weimar Republic. While these women have been treated by their contemporaries as the quintessential 'modern woman', historical scholarship has long painted them as rather traditional. Many of the findings of both sides were based either on sociological literature or on representations, while the perspectives of these women themselves have been taken less into account. Drawing on ego-documents, such as a diary and essays of apprentices, my thesis aims at filling this gap. Using the approach of 'Alltagsgeschichte', it investigates female employees' everyday lives under three aspects of modernity, as identified by Weimar scholar Detlev Peukert, Max Weber, and Michel Foucault: rationalisation, bureaucratisation, and social disciplining. The main body of the thesis consists of three chapters, each treating one of these characteristics. Every chapter is divided into a part that focuses on the work environment of female employees, and one that looks at life outside of work. Three interdependent conclusions can be drawn: first, in some areas of female employees' everyday lives, modernity was clearly articulated, in others it was less evident. Female employees' experience of modernity was thus characterised by strong tensions and contrasts. Second, within these tensions, female employees knew how to reconcile their own demands with the requirements and challenges of modernity. They shaped their own lives, thus exhibiting agency. Third, female employees were neither the quintessential 'modern woman' invoked by their contemporaries, nor the backward-looking, naïve women they appeared to be in some scholarly literature. Being modern and being traditional were not mutually exclusive. Female employees showed characteristics of both extremes, thus appearing as ambivalent figures. With its orientation towards Weber's and Foucault's diagnosis of modernity, this thesis is based on a rather constraining conception of modernity that leaves categories, such as 'cultural modernity', aside. An expanded conception of modernity would prove valuable as a further avenue of research in this field.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

In April 1927, 20-year-old Hedwig Rahmer made the first entry in her newly acquired diary. After introducing herself as a brown-haired woman from Mannheim, born under the sign of Capricorn, she revealed her profession. Rahmer was an assistant in “in judicial service”, whose duties included the issuing of decisions, settlements, and court rulings.<sup>1</sup> As a young woman, working as an office clerk in the 1920s, she belonged to the emerging class of white-collar employees and embodied the new ‘type’ of the working woman of the Weimar Republic:

“If you walk through the business district of a big city shortly before 8 o’clock in the morning, or after closing time of offices or businesses in the evening, you will encounter as a characteristic impression an army of young girls and women [...]. Today they have actually become the type of the working woman; the female employee is the typical working woman of the masses.”<sup>2</sup>

While it was already common for German women to work in sales and offices before the First World War, this type of employment only became a mass phenomenon in the Weimar Republic, where it shaped the imagination of contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> In popular culture as well as in academic studies, these white-collar women were high on the agenda, both in positive and negative terms: films like *Das Fräulein von Kasse 12* flickered across the screens of the cinemas, whilst intellectual luminaries like Siegfried Kracauer ruminated on their nature, lamenting their supposed “spiritual homeless[ness].”<sup>4</sup> In all of these representations of female employees of the Weimar Republic, the

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<sup>1</sup> Hedwig Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, Projekt Sozialisation in Frauentagebüchern vom Wilhelminischen Kaiserreich bis zur Gegenwart 2 (Frankfurt/Main: Projektgruppe Frauentagebücher, 1993), 28.07.1927, diary no. 1, 2. Translations of German quotes by the author, otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Susanne Suhr, *Die Weiblichen Angestellten: Arbeits- Und Lebensverhältnisse* (Berlin: Zentralverband der Angestellten, 1930), 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview on female employees in the German Empire, see Ursula Nienhaus, *Berufsstand Weiblich: Die Ersten Weiblichen Angestellten* (Berlin: Transit Buchverl., 1982). Although the majority of women in the Weimar Republic still worked in family business or in the factory, compared to other occupations, white-collar employment had developed far above average in relation to the general growth of the population. Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (London: Verso, 1998), 88; Erich Schönfelder, *Das Fräulein Von Kasse 12*, with the assistance of Dina Gralla, and Werner Fuetterer (Berlin, 1927).

narrative of the 'modern woman' was omnipresent – they were perceived as her embodiment.<sup>5</sup> But to what extent was 'modernity' indeed reflected in their everyday lives? And what about these women themselves? Did they feel they were in fact embodying modernity? Did they even strive to be modern? And if so, how did they make themselves into 'modern women'? Thus, my research question is: to what extent did the female white-collar employees of the Weimar Republic actually practice and experience 'modernity' in their everyday lives?

To answer this research question, this thesis uses the approach of 'Alltagsgeschichte', or 'history of the everyday', and examines the everyday lives of female office and sales clerks in German urban centres from 1919 to 1933.<sup>6</sup> The beginning of the period under study is marked by the enactment of the Weimar Constitution, which not only brought women's suffrage, but also changes in law, regarding breaks and working hours.<sup>7</sup> It also marked a turning point in the awareness of women working in more publicly visible, non-manual jobs. The period of investigation extends to 1933, i.e., the election victory of the National Socialists. In the run up to this date, attitudes towards female professional work and their role in public had changed. From 1929 onwards, women were increasingly driven out of public space and a change in their self-image, expectations, and representation could be observed.<sup>8</sup> 1933, then, brought the decisive cultural and ideological break, and therefore, the subsequent period requires its own investigation.

The focus on urban areas results, on the one hand, from the fact that administrative institutions as well as department stores were usually located in cities, and thus a significant proportion of female white-collar employees worked in urban areas. On the other hand, cities held

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<sup>5</sup> Annette Koch, "Die Weiblichen Angestellten in Der Weimarer Republik," in Gold; Koch, *Fräulein Vom Amt*, 165.

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation of continuities and discontinuities and the problem of when exactly the Weimar Republic began and ended, see Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 3–6.

<sup>7</sup> Renate Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," *Central European History* 6, no. 2 (1973): 151.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hung, "The Modernized Gretchen: Transformations of the 'New Woman' in the Late Weimar Republic," *German History* 33, no. 1 (2015).

defining characteristics related to working and living conditions that differed from those in rural areas, and thus need to be considered separately. For instance, Karl Christian Führer has shown that modern mass culture was to be found above all in large cities, such as Berlin and Hamburg.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in consideration of the research question, cities, as the often invoked 'site of modernity', are given preference here.

When answering the central research question, this thesis takes a social constructionist approach to gender and sex. It focuses on people who were *read* as female. While the terms 'women' and 'female' are used, this does therefore not imply that the historical subjects also identified with this gender identity.<sup>10</sup> To further nuance the relevance of the question, the existing academic discussion on the topic will be discussed below.

## 1.1 Historiography

Despite being a much-discussed topic in the Weimar Republic, female employees were not treated as a separate field in scholarly literature for a long time, but rather as part of general research on white-collar workers.<sup>11</sup> This changed in the course of the second feminist movement from 1960-80, when female social historians addressed this gap and began to research the history of female employees of the Weimar Republic in more detail.

In particular, historian Renate Bridenthal's influential essay 'Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche', published in 1973, is to be mentioned here.<sup>12</sup> In her paper, Bridenthal responds to the argument of

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<sup>9</sup> Karl C. Führer, "High Brow and Low Brow Culture," in McElligott, *Weimar Germany*.

<sup>10</sup> On the construction of sex and gender, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge classics (New York, London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> On the former, see, for example, Kracauer, *The salaried masses*; Hans Ulrich Howe, *Die Berufstätige Frau Als Verkaufsangestellte: Ein Beitrag Zur Handelsgewerblichen Frauenarbeitsfrage* (Lübeck: Paul Berneck, 1930). On general research, see, for example, Ulf Kadritzke, *Angestellte - Die gedulden Arbeiter: Zur Soziologie und sozialen Bewegung der Angestellten*, Studien zur Gesellschaftstheorie (Frankfurt/Main: Europ. Verl.-Anst, 1975); Jürgen Kocka, "Zur Problematik Der Deutschen Angestellten 1914-1933," in *Industrielles System Und Politische Entwicklung in Der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Hans Mommsen, Dietmar Petzina and Bernd Weisbrod, Athenäum-Droste-Taschenbücher: Geschichte 7207 (Kronberg/Ts.: Athenäum Verlag, 1974), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work."

the economic liberation of women in the Weimar Republic which until then had been widely accepted. For instance, David Schoenbaum states in his study 'Hitler's Social Revolution' that since the Weimar Republic had brought "the economic liberation of thousands of women sales clerks [ , the] [...] campaign against the democratic republic was a repudiation of the equality of women."<sup>13</sup> Investigating women's work in various sectors, including white-collar employees, Bridenthal argues that this much-vaunted emancipation did not really exist. She further suggests that in some cases, there had even been a backwards trend, which made these women susceptible to Nazi propaganda that promoted a romanticised image of 'children, kitchen, and church'.<sup>14</sup> According to Bridenthal, one of the main reasons for the supposedly worsening social and professional situation of women was 'modernisation', which in the case of female employees led to a great importance of women's appearance and age for their work, as well as poorer opportunities for career advancement.<sup>15</sup> Instead of organising themselves into working unions, however, "they dreamed of marrying the boss rather than uniting against his exploitation of their labour and sex."<sup>16</sup>

While white-collar employees only make up a part of the observed women in Bridenthal's essay, historian Ute Frevert has dealt exclusively with them in several contributions from the late 1970s onwards.<sup>17</sup> Investigating, for instance, the fact that female employees were much less frequently organised in associations than men during the Weimar Republic, Frevert argues that the mass employment of these women did not bring about a great change to their self-image. In their

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<sup>13</sup> David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany 1933-1939* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 178.

<sup>14</sup> Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 148-149, 166.

<sup>15</sup> Appearance played an important role in sales and customer contact, for example. Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 161-62.

<sup>16</sup> Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 162.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ute Frevert, "Vom Klavier Zur Schreibmaschine: Weiblicher Arbeitsmarkt Und Rollenzuweisungen Am Beispiel Der Weiblichen Angestellten Der Weimarer Republik," in *Frauen in Der Geschichte: Frauenrechte Und Die Gesellschaftliche Arbeit Der Frauen Im Wandel Der Zeit*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Gerhard Schneider, *Geschichtsdidaktik. Studien, Materialien* 6 (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1979); Ute Frevert, "Kunstseidener Glanz: Weibliche Angestellte," in *Neue Frauen: Die zwanziger Jahre*, ed. Kristine von Soden and Maruta Schmidt, *Elefanten-Press BilderLeseBuch* 262 (Berlin: Elefanten-Press, 1988); Ute Frevert, *Frauen-Geschichte: Zwischen bürgerlicher Verbesserung und neuer Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

professional lives, women saw themselves first and foremost as women, confined to their traditional gender roles, and only secondly as employees.<sup>18</sup> She further states that a traditional role pattern continued to exist in the supposedly modern society of the Weimar Republic: despite their employment, female employees remained financially and socially committed to their families of origin and preferred marrying over working.<sup>19</sup> In line with Bridenthal, Frevert portrays the women as rather naïve and strongly focused on appearances. In their “narcissistic fashion fetishism”, however, she identifies an attempt to compensate for the monotonous working day and to find elsewhere the appreciation they presumably lacked in the workplace.<sup>20</sup> The image of the naïve employee is also reflected in Frevert’s statement that for many shop assistants the “choice of profession was decided in the cinema“, after they had seen an unrealistic portrayal of work in a department store.<sup>21</sup>

In 1988, Ellen Lorentz also investigated the emancipatory potential of the female white-collar profession. Taking Frevert’s findings as a starting point, she argues that the biographies of middle-class female employees did depart from traditional and family-based trajectories, but at the same time took on new gendered forms which “established [women’s] inferiority in the workplace.”<sup>22</sup> Lorentz further suggests that the Association of Female Commercial and Office Employees (VWA) supported this segmentation, educating female employees towards a post-professional phase as wives and mothers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ute Frevert, “Traditionale Weiblichkeit Und Moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen Im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 7, 3/4 (1981): 516–17.

<sup>19</sup> Frevert, “Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933,” 514, 516.

<sup>20</sup> Frevert, “Vom Klavier zur Schreibmaschine,” 100.

<sup>21</sup> Frevert, “Kunstseidener Glanz,” 30.

<sup>22</sup> Ellen Lorentz, *Aufbruch oder Rückschritt? Arbeit, Alltag und Organisation weiblicher Angestellter in der Kaiserzeit und Weimarer Republik*, *Theorie und Praxis der Frauenforschung* 9 (Bielefeld: Kleine, 1988), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Lorentz, *Aufbruch oder Rückschritt?*, 22–27.



To this day, Bridenthal's and Frevert's contributions are among the most influential and most widely cited works on female employees of the Weimar Republic.<sup>24</sup> Both deal predominantly with questions of emancipation and social organisation, and thus strongly reflect the authors' background in women's and social history. While these studies did fundamental work on making women and their social situation in the Weimar Republic more visible, their objects of study at the same time appear primarily as victims of great processes and structures, such as 'modernisation', while paying less attention to their individual lives and experiences.

This task has partly been taken on by Katrin Völkner and Maren Dorner in 1995: in their essay on the 'lifeworlds' of female employees, they investigate women's work and leisure activities.<sup>25</sup> One of the weaknesses of this study, however, lies in the fact that many findings about these women are based on literary fiction written either *for* or *about* female employees. Even though novels, such as *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* by Irmgard Keun, can provide insight into general aspects of the lives of female employees, one must, nevertheless, be critical of using them as a depiction of reality.<sup>26</sup>

In 1999, Christina Benninghaus addressed this gap in her comprehensive study on working-class girls in the Weimar Republic, using the approach of 'Alltagsgeschichte'.<sup>27</sup> Contrasting Frevert's claim on shop assistants' career choices in the cinema, she argues that this profession was one of the few that girls generally knew well about, partly because they could see the work themselves

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<sup>24</sup> This is evident in Helen Boak's book on women in the Weimar Republic, for example, but also in numerous other contributions on women in the Weimar Republic. See Helen Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford: Manchester University Press, 2015), 150–54.

<sup>25</sup> Katrin Völkner and Maren Dorner, "Lebenswelten Der Weiblichen Angestellten: Kontor, Kino Und Konsum?," *Neue Frauen zwischen den Zeiten*, 1995. Other contributions that have dealt with the topic are Koch, "Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik", and internationally Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890 - 1940*, The working class in American history (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Theresa M. McBride, "A Woman's World: Department Stores and the Evolution of Women's Employment, 1870-1920," *French Historical Studies* 10, no. 4 (1978).

<sup>26</sup> Irmgard Keun, *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, 5th ed. (Berlin: List, 2003). In one of her articles on female employees, Frevert also very briefly discusses their situation based on protagonists of contemporary novels. Frevert, "Kunstseidener Glanz," 28–29.

<sup>27</sup> Christina Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen: Arbeitermädchen in der Weimarer Republik*, Reihe Geschichte und Geschlechter 16 (Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl., 1999).

when they went shopping.<sup>28</sup> Benninghaus also contradicts Frevert's claim that female clerks were merely looking for an escape from their monotonous working day with their focus on fashionable clothes, and instead attributes to them a certain leeway for self-expression.<sup>29</sup>

Bridenthal's overall perspective has, furthermore, recently been challenged by Helen Boak, who agrees that Schoenbaum's interpretation of women's work in the Weimar Republic is too optimistic, but argues that it can nonetheless "be seen as the cradle for German women's position in employment to the present day."<sup>30</sup> Regarding white-collar work, however, Boak also states that it was hardly emancipatory for women.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned above, in much of the contemporary literature, female employees were depicted as the 'modern woman' per se, which makes them a particularly relevant object of study for an inquiry into practices and experiences of modernity. In the research on the Weimar Republic, the 'modern woman' is one of the most intensively discussed topics. While earlier studies focussed primarily on exposing the 'new woman' as a media construction, more recent studies increasingly point to liberating and emancipatory aspects.<sup>32</sup>

Of particular importance in regard to the research question is the article of Atina Grossmann on the 'Thoroughly Rationalised Female'.<sup>33</sup> Grossmann argues that the 'new woman' in the Weimar Republic was by no means just a phenomenon constructed by the media or "paranoid"

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<sup>28</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 244.

<sup>29</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 250.

<sup>30</sup> Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 170.

<sup>32</sup> On constructionist approaches, see, for example, Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work"; Katharina Sykora, "Die Neue Frau: Ein Alltagsmythos Der 20er Jahre," in *Die Neue Frau: Herausforderung Für Die Bildmedien Der Zwanziger Jahre*, ed. Katharina Sykora (Marburg: Jonas, 1993). On liberating aspects, see, for example, Rüdiger Graf, "Anticipating the Future in the Present: "New Women" and Other Beings of the Future in Weimar Germany," *Central European History* 42, no. 4 (2009). For an overview also see Kristine von Soden and Maruta Schmidt, eds., *Neue Frauen: Die zwanziger Jahre*, Elefanten-Press BilderLeseBuch 262 (Berlin: Elefanten-Press, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Atina Grossmann, "Eine 'Neue Frau' Im Deutschland Der Weimarer Republik?," in Gold; Koch, *Fräulein Vom Amt*. The article is the revised and translated version of Atina Grossmann, "Girlkultur or Thoroughly Rationalized Female: A New Woman in Weimar Germany?," in *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change*, ed. Judith Friedlander et al. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986).

researchers, but a “social reality.”<sup>34</sup> She relates the emergence of this ‘new type’ of women to the increasingly rationalised economic system of the Weimar Republic. Examining women’s everyday lives and representations under this aspect of modernity, Grossmann argues that rationalisation increasingly entered various areas, such as housework for example, which she sees as a necessary consequence of the fact that women were no longer just housewives but also had a profession.<sup>35</sup> While also addressing female employees in her article, Grossmann’s main focus, however, remains on working-class women.<sup>36</sup>

Whereas Grossmann focuses on ‘rationalisation’, the authors of the anthology ‘Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture’ cover broader aspects of ‘modernity’.<sup>37</sup> Analysing contemporary cultural and representational discourses, such as Fritz Lang’s ‘Metropolis’, they investigate the “emancipatory potential of modernity for women and explore women’s problematic relationship with the process of modernization.”<sup>38</sup> The scrutinised discourses offer valuable insights into the pressing issues and prevailing mentalities of a certain time, yet they, nevertheless, remain representations and imaginations. Especially in the articles that deal with men’s cultural productions, it is, furthermore, the ‘male gaze’ on the ‘modern woman’ that becomes the main focus. It has thus been less researched how the represented women practiced and experienced ‘modernity’ themselves.

While the ‘new woman’ is strongly associated with the women of the Weimar Republic, the authors of the edited volume ‘The Modern Girl Around the World’ have devoted themselves to

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<sup>34</sup> Grossmann, “Eine 'neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?,” 136.

<sup>35</sup> Grossmann, “Eine 'neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?,” 136.

<sup>36</sup> Grossmann bases many of her findings on essays from female textile workers. Grossmann, “Eine 'neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?,” 153–58. For the essays, see Alf Lüdtke, ed., *“Mein Arbeitstag - mein Wochenende”: Arbeiterinnen berichten von ihrem Alltag 1928* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse-Verl., 1991).

<sup>37</sup> Katharina von Ankum, ed., *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, Weimar and Now: German Cultural Criticism 11 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For a similar approach see Vibeke R. Petersen, *Women and Modernity in Weimar Germany: Reality and Its Representation in Popular Fiction* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> “Introduction,” in Ankum, *Women in the Metropolis*, 7. On Lang, see Janet Lungstrum, “Metropolis and the Technosexual Woman of German Modernity,” in Ankum, *Women in the Metropolis*.

examining the phenomenon from an international perspective.<sup>39</sup> They find that modern girls were a global phenomenon in the interwar period, existing across imperial and national boundaries and characteristically incorporating both local and international elements; however, they did not place a separate emphasis on female employees.<sup>40</sup>

The historiography on female employees and on 'modern women' thus displays three interacting characteristics: first, the research on German female white-collar workers, as discussed above, has often focused on socio-historical and emancipatory aspects, while neglecting other categories of modernity. Second, in the cultural-historical academic literature on the 'modern woman', German female employees have not been examined as a separate group yet. Third, scholarly works in both fields often rely on representations as well as on statistical material from contemporary social studies, while the perspectives of these women themselves are taken less into account. It thus shows that, despite the fact that the employees were the most important representatives of the 'modern woman', the question in what ways they actually experienced and practiced 'modernity' themselves, has not profoundly been dealt with yet. Bringing the different strands together, this thesis aims at filling this gap. Using the approach of 'Alltagsgeschichte', it examines how the characteristics of 'modernity' and the narratives of what it meant to be 'modern' were indeed reflected in the lives of female employees – to what extent they practiced and experienced 'modernity'. By doing so, this thesis also aims at giving these women a voice of their own within the larger processes, as Weimar's female employees are a group that has frequently been written *about* in this context, but whose own life experience has often been marginalised. To approach these questions, I will first define the characteristics of 'modernity' 'against' which the lives of the employees are to be examined below.

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<sup>39</sup> Alys E. Weinbaum, ed., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, Next wave (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Alys E. Weinbaum et al., "The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation," in *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Alys E. Weinbaum, Next wave (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

## 1.2 'Modernity'

The term 'modernity' carries various meanings and is not uniformly defined. Not only is it used differently by a variety of disciplines, but even within the humanities it is often not clearly delimited what this term refers to.<sup>41</sup> In the interpretation of the history of the Weimar Republic, the concept of 'modernity' has been central. One of the most influential and widely received assessments was made by the German historian Detlev Peukert. He suggests that during the Weimar years, 'classical modernity' was at its 'peak' and penetrated all areas of society. Peukert further argues that thereby the contradictions and weaknesses of modernity were intensified and eventually manifested themselves in an "open crisis": the argument that modernity showed itself in its extremes, makes this period a particularly interesting object of study in regard to the research question.<sup>42</sup>

Peukert's definition of classical modernity is strongly oriented towards the sociologist Max Weber, in whose writings he identifies essential features that shape his own ideas of classical modernity. These characteristics will also serve as the foundation for this thesis. The everyday lives of female employees in the Weimar Republic will thus be examined 'against' the following characteristics of modernity:

According to Peukert and Weber, classical modernity is characterised above all by **rationalisation** and **bureaucratisation**.<sup>43</sup> In Weber's words, rationalisation is "the knowledge or belief that *if we only wanted to* [,] *we could* learn at any time that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things — in principle — can be *controlled*

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<sup>41</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of these issues see Peter Wagner, *Theorizing Modernity: Inescapability and Attainability in Social Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000); Richard Wolin, "Modernity: The Peregrinations of a Contested Historiographical Concept," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011). The concept of 'modernity' is often criticised for following a very Western idea of what is 'modern'. For a problematisation and other conceptions see Dilip P. Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities*, A millennial quartet book (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Detlev Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne*, Kleine Vandenhoeck-Reihe 1548 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 66. Also see Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, xiv. For criticism on Peukert's narrative of 'crisis' see Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf, eds., *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl., 2005); Anthony McElligott, ed., *Weimar Germany*, The short Oxford history of Germany (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne*, 64.

*through calculation.*"<sup>44</sup> Whereas, by this definition, rationalisation primarily describes the belief in a world that functions according to rational principles, in the context of the Weimar Republic it took on a further dimension: rationalisation was used in the sense of striving for productivity and efficiency. In the workplace, it was, above all, characterised by mechanisation and schematisation. The former brought the introduction of typewriters, for instance, and the latter built on the employment of scientific management principles according to Frederick W. Taylor. These included, for example, breaking down the work progress into separate steps.<sup>45</sup> During the Weimar years, rationalisation was increasingly seen as desirable not only in the workplace but also in people's private lives.<sup>46</sup> In practical terms, this was reflected in the rationalisation of housework, as found for example in the concept of the Frankfurt kitchen.<sup>47</sup> For this thesis, the following subquestions thus arise: to what extent did the female employees practice and experience rationalisation at their workplace and after hours in their private lives? Was their work, for example, broken down into separate parts? Did they indeed adopt rational household techniques?

Turning to bureaucratisation, according to Weber, the term 'bureaucracy' refers to the administrative form of a legal and rational authority, based on fixed and consciously set rules as well as on professional employees who work in offices ('Büro').<sup>48</sup> Further key characteristics of a bureaucracy are, moreover, the "principle of hierarchy" and the possibility of a career thanks to a "system of 'promotion'".<sup>49</sup> Although Weber distinguished between public authorities and private

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<sup>44</sup> John Dreijmanis and Gordon C. Wells, *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2007), 189. Italics in the original.

<sup>45</sup> Ellen Lorentz, *BÜRO 1880 - 1930: Frauenarbeit Und Rationalisierung*, Arbeitsheft der IG Metall zur Humanisierung der Arbeitswelt 11 (Frankfurt/Main: IGM, 1984), 62–64; Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Düsseldorf: Verl. Wirtschaft und Finanzen, 1996), 14–15.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>47</sup> As the historian Mary Nolan has pointed out, housework, for example, was increasingly supposed to be done as efficiently as possible, an aspect that is reflected not only in the Frankfurt kitchen but also in the publication of numerous guidebooks on rationalised household management. See Mary Nolan, "'Housework Made Easy': The Taylorized Housewife in Weimar Germany's Rationalized Economy," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990). For advice literature see, e.g., Erna Meyer, *Der Neue Haushalt: Ein Wegweiser Zu Wirtschaftlicher Hausführung* (Stuttgart: Franckh, 1927).

<sup>48</sup> Max Weber and Seymour M. Miller, *Max Weber: Selections from His Work*, Major contributors to social science series (New York: Crowell, 1963), 64–65.

<sup>49</sup> Weber and Miller, *Max Weber*, 66, 69.

enterprises, the structural bureaucratic features he described were aimed at both forms.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, female commercial employees can also be studied under this aspect. Weber's definition of bureaucracy also had relevance to life outside of work, as it stipulated that the wages of employees should enable them to live a 'lifestyle befitting their social status'.<sup>51</sup> Thus, on the one hand, female employees' workplaces will be examined: how hierarchically was the work of an office clerk organised? Did female employees have the chance to pursue a career? On the other hand, their leisure practices will be investigated. Did female employees have the possibility to live a modern 'life of status'? And if so, what did their leisure practices mean to them?

One further aspect of bureaucratisation identified by Weber is the "strict and systematic discipline and control in the conduct of office."<sup>52</sup> This reflects yet another characteristic of 'classical modernity', as Peukert and Weber attest that it involved a high degree of **social disciplining**.<sup>53</sup> While Weber understands 'discipline' in a rather military sense – as a matter of "obedience and command" – this thesis also takes an extended Foucauldian sense of 'disciplining' into account.<sup>54</sup> According to Michel Foucault, power is not only exercised 'top-down', but "everywhere" and closely linked to 'knowledge': in order to discipline, modern institutions increasingly rely on the observance of bodies, on examinations, and on imposing norms that have to be met, thereby exerting disciplinary power.<sup>55</sup> Subjected to constant observation and correction, and evaluated against a constructed norm, modern individuals are transformed into 'docile bodies'.<sup>56</sup> Following this conception of 'disciplining', this thesis explores its presence in female employees' everyday lives.

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<sup>50</sup> Max Weber, "Bürokratismus," in *Herrschaft*, ed. Max Weber et al., *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlaß 4 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2005), 157. Also see Weber, "Bürokratismus," 158–59.

<sup>51</sup> In the German original, it says "standesgemäß", a word without literal English translation. Weber, "Bürokratismus," 168.

<sup>52</sup> Weber and Miller, *Max Weber*, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne*, 64.

<sup>54</sup> John O'Neill, "The Disciplinary Society: From Weber to Foucault," *The British Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (1986): 54.

<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998), 63.

<sup>56</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), Transl. by Alan Sheridan, 136–38.

In what ways did they experience bodily disciplining in the workplace and how did they cope with the increasing attempts to control women's sexuality and reproduction that modernity brought?<sup>57</sup> How did female employees experience their supposed transformation into docile bodies? Having outlined the conceptual framework of this thesis, in the following section I will discuss the approach of 'Alltagsgeschichte'.

### 1.3 Methodology: 'Alltagsgeschichte'

The approach of 'Alltagsgeschichte' emerged in West German historiography in the mid-1970s.<sup>58</sup> Turning away from structure-oriented social history, its aim is to question a unilinear and centrist view of history that is often reflected in the narratives of 'grand processes', such as 'modernity'.<sup>59</sup> Yet 'Alltagsgeschichte' does not aim to fundamentally contest the existence of the major processes, but rather tries to look at them from a different perspective, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding.<sup>60</sup> It thus often focuses on groups that have long been neglected in historical scholarship, on "marginalised and disenfranchised classes [...], cultures and gender[s]."<sup>61</sup>

The definition of 'Alltag' (the everyday), however, is not universally agreed upon. Norbert Elias emphasises the different uses of the term in various disciplines as well as the fact that it is often used primarily in demarcation from something 'non-everyday'.<sup>62</sup> Historian Peter Borscheid

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<sup>57</sup> Kathleen Canning, "Women and the Politics of Gender," in McElligott, *Weimar Germany*, 154.

<sup>58</sup> Geoff Eley, "Labor History, Social History, "Alltagsgeschichte": Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday - a New Direction for German Social History?," *The Journal of Modern History* 61, no. 2 (1989): 297–98.

<sup>59</sup> Detlev Peukert, "Neuere Alltagsgeschichte und Historische Anthropologie," in *Historische Anthropologie: Der Mensch in der Geschichte*, ed. Hans Süssmuth and Michael Erbe, Kleine Vandenhoeck-Reihe 1499 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 57; Hans Medick, "Missionare im Ruderboot? Ethnologische Erkenntnisweisen als Herausforderung an die Sozialgeschichte," in Lüdtkke, *Alltagsgeschichte*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> John Brewer, "Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life," *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 96.

<sup>61</sup> Medick, "Missionare im Ruderboot?," 57. On the connection between 'Alltagsgeschichte', see Dorothee Wierling, "Alltagsgeschichte und Geschichte der Geschlechterbeziehungen: Über historische und historiographische Verhältnisse," in Lüdtkke, *Alltagsgeschichte*.

<sup>62</sup> Norbert Elias, "Zum Begriff Des Alltags," in *Materialien Zur Soziologie Des Alltags*, ed. Kurt Hammerich (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1978), 22.



understands everyday life as the 'repetitive' and locates the possibility of bringing about historical change merely outside of this quotidian, something that, according to Borscheid, is only granted to a few people.<sup>63</sup> Differing from such a static conception of everyday life and a hierarchising notion of historical change, is the view held by Alf Lüdtke and the other authors of the seminal volume 'Alltagsgeschichte'.<sup>64</sup> The same understanding also underlies this thesis. According to their approach, a contribution to historical change can also be found in the everyday life of the 'common people'.<sup>65</sup> In this perspective, the **practices** and **experiences** of the individuals become the focus of interest.<sup>66</sup>

According to the definition of sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, practices are routinised courses of action that contain several inseparable elements: these consist of *bodily practices*, such as cooking or hygiene practices, *mental activities*, in order to understand how and why to exercise bodily practices, and *objects*, which in many cases are required for the performance of the bodily practices.<sup>67</sup> Practices are thus "routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things."<sup>68</sup> In this conception, historical change is located in a rupture or transformation of these practices.<sup>69</sup> It thus follows for this thesis that, for example, the practice of women cutting their hair, can be analysed and interpreted as a practice of emancipation.

My use of 'experience' is informed by E.P. Thompson's approach, who understood it to be "the lived realities of social life" and the driving force behind people's actions: "Experience walks in

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<sup>63</sup> Alf Lüdtke, "Einleitung: Was ist und wer treibt Alltagsgeschichte?," in Lüdtke, *Alltagsgeschichte*, 11–12; Peter Borscheid, "Plädoyer für eine Geschichte des Alltäglichen," in *Ehe, Liebe, Tod: Zum Wandel der Familie, der Geschlechts- und Generationsbeziehungen in der Neuzeit*, ed. Peter Borscheid and Hans J. Teuteberg, Studien zur Geschichte des Alltags 1 (Münster: Cöpppenrath, 1983).

<sup>64</sup> Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl., 1989).

<sup>65</sup> Lüdtke, "Einleitung," 9, 12.

<sup>66</sup> Lüdtke, "Einleitung," 12.

<sup>67</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 2 (2002): 249–50. Reckwitz's approach to a 'practice theory' has been informed by the works of cultural theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Michel Foucault: While "elements of a theory of social practices" can be found in their works, they have, however, not "systematically elaborated" on them. See Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices," 244.

<sup>68</sup> Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices," 255.

<sup>69</sup> Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices," 255.

without knocking at the door [...]. People starve: their survivors think in new ways about the market. People are imprisoned: in prison they meditate in new ways about the law. In the face of such general experiences old conceptual systems may crumble and new problematics insist upon their presence.”<sup>70</sup> While Thompson has been criticised by, among others, Joan Scott for marginalising women’s experiences, I am investigating those very experiences of women, thus trying to approach their “lived realities”.<sup>71</sup> Did they, for example, approve of new rationalised technologies, such as typewriters? Did their experience of the various aspects of ‘modernity’ bring about change in their habits?

With its emphasis on practices and experiences, ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ places a strong focus on the agency of individuals – agency being understood as the belief that people are capable of deciding on their actions and shaping the course of their lives, hence, also of history. The everyday life of people, however, is not viewed in isolation from the structures surrounding them. People’s experiences and practices are always considered from the perspective of the institutional, social, and material conditions they live in, or what Thompson has termed the “field-of-force”.<sup>72</sup> To approach people’s practices and experiences, certain methods are needed, which will be explained in the following.

When researching ‘Alltagsgeschichte’, it is often difficult to trace the subjectivity of the people being studied. In order to, nevertheless, approach everyday life and thus people’s practices and experiences, this thesis primarily draws on two methods. First, female employees’ self-testimonies as well as written texts from other parties are scrutinised in close readings. In a first

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<sup>70</sup> Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 784; Edward P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*, [Repr.], Monthly Review Press classics (Merlin: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>71</sup> Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Gender and Culture (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 75–76. Thompson’s use of experience has further been criticised by Marxist historians, inter alia for its inconsistency. See, for example, Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: NLB, 1980), 26–29.

<sup>72</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?,” *Social History* 3, no. 2 (1978): 151. Also see Lutz Niethammer, “Anmerkungen Zur Alltagsgeschichte,” *Geschichtsdidaktik. Probleme, Projekte, Perspektiven*, no. 3 (1980): 232.

step, these texts are subjected to close observation and critical analysis. Attention is paid to repetitions, contradictions, and intertextual similarities. In a second step, these findings are contextualised and interpreted in regard to the research question, attempting to provide an insight into female employees' experiences and attitudes towards modernity, as well as into their self-interpretations.<sup>73</sup> Second, Clifford Geertz's 'thick description', which he borrowed from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, proves especially useful.<sup>74</sup> 'Thick description' means that the actions and expressions of the subjects studied are described precisely, while simultaneously being interpreted in their respective contexts. It is therefore not enough to simply document people's behaviour, but "the intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions their meanings" must always be taken into consideration.<sup>75</sup> This approach is based on Geertz's semiotic understanding of 'culture': "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs and the analysis of it to be therefore [...] an interpretive one in search of meaning."<sup>76</sup> For this thesis, it follows that everyday life practices allow an insight into the 'webs of significance' of historical subjects, when deciphered through precise description and interpretation.

Following these methods, an insight into everyday life – experiences and practices – is only possible with a strong interpretive approach on the part of the historian. It is important, however, to avoid the romanticising notion that these interpretations allow access to the 'objective reality' of historical subjects.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, one should try to detach oneself as far as possible from one's own assumptions, the 'known', and one's own values when studying the historical subjects. Even

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew DuBois, "Close Reading: An Introduction," in *Close Reading: The Reader*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2003) For a discussion on traditions of close reading, also see Jonathan Culler, "The Closeness of Close Reading," *ADE Bulletin*, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 6. There cannot be a complete an uncritical transfer of social and cultural anthropological methods to historical sciences, however, since the temporal distance allows historians to maintain a certain distance from their research subject and in case of misinterpretation they cannot be corrected by the subjects. Lüdtkke, "Einleitung," 19.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "The Touch of the Real," *Representations* 59 (1997): 16.

<sup>76</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

<sup>77</sup> Medick, "Missionare im Ruderboot?," 59.

though such a discarding can never be complete, the goal, according to microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg, is that of “strangeness, the ability to see familiar things as incomprehensible.”<sup>78</sup>

The approach of ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ has been criticised above all by representatives of the Bielefeld School of social history. Jürgen Kocka, for example, sees parts of research in ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ as an unscientific approach that is hostile to the Enlightenment, while Hans-Ulrich Wehler holds that it merely “gathers many details from many areas of reality, but without putting them in a structured order.”<sup>79</sup> Criticism can also be voiced insofar as ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ always bears the burden of a “generalisation of sporadic tradition” to a certain extent, due to the often thin source material.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, it can risk resulting in a mere reproduction of material living conditions, instead of offering insight into the experiences of people.<sup>81</sup> While I am aware of the flaws of ‘Alltagsgeschichte’, that is, its subjectivity and the great focus on interpretation, it nonetheless offers a unique opportunity to reveal aspects that are often ignored in the major narratives and concepts. To put it in the words of Lüdtke: “Does the image of the ‘grand coherences’ correspond with the experiences of ‘the many?’”<sup>82</sup> Below, I will discuss the source material that will be used to explore these issues.

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<sup>78</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Geschichte und Geschichten: Über Archive, Marlene Dietrich und die Lust an der Geschichte,” in *Spurensicherungen: Über verborgene Geschichte, Kunst und soziales Gedächtnis*, ed. Carlo Ginzburg and Karl F. Hauber (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1983), 22–23. Cited from Medick, “Missionare im Ruderboot?,” 58. The approach of microhistory resembles that of ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ in many ways.

<sup>79</sup> Hans-Ulrich Wehler, “Alltagsgeschichte: Königsweg Zu Neuen Ufern Oder Irrgarten Der Illusionen?,” in *Die Bielefelder Sozialgeschichte: Klassische Texte Zu Einem Geschichtswissenschaftlichen Programm Und Seinen Kontroversen*, ed. Bettina Hitzer and Thomas Welskopp, *Histoire 18* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2010), 347; Jürgen Kocka, “Geschichte als Aufklärung?,” in *Die Zukunft der Aufklärung*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, Edition Suhrkamp 1479 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 97–98.

<sup>80</sup> Niethammer, “Anmerkungen zur Alltagsgeschichte,” 232.

<sup>81</sup> Niethammer, “Anmerkungen zur Alltagsgeschichte,” 233.

<sup>82</sup> Lüdtke, “Einleitung,” 13.

## 1.4 Sources

‘Alltagsgeschichte’ mainly deals with people who, due to their social position, often left few or no ‘traditional’ sources, such as letters or other written evidence. However, based on the interpretive approach of ‘Alltagsgeschichte’, it is possible to draw general conclusions even on the basis of limited sources, to be able to still investigate people’s practices and experiences.<sup>83</sup>

As a comprehensive ego-document, the diary of the aforementioned Hedwig Rahmer, which she wrote from 1927 to 1934, is of central importance for this thesis.<sup>84</sup> Rahmer exhibited several ‘typical’ characteristics of female white-collar workers. She was 20 years old at the beginning of her diary entries, and thus corresponded to the typical age structure of female employees.<sup>85</sup> Like most female white-collar employees, Rahmer, moreover, still lived in her parental household, which had great impact on her experience of modernity.<sup>86</sup> Her detailed descriptions of her everyday life experiences and practices thus allow an insight into the “lived realities” of a ‘typical’ female employee.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, autobiographies written by women who worked as employees in the Weimar Republic will be drawn upon.<sup>88</sup> It must be noted, however, that self-testimonies, especially when written down in retrospect, always follow a narrative that is supposed to give meaning to one’s own life. Thus, mainly memories that correspond to this narrative find their way into the records, while ‘unimportant’ things are left out.<sup>89</sup>

In addition, essays written by apprentices are used. For these essays, young employees were asked by Weimar pedagogue and youth researcher Else Schilfarth to write responses to

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<sup>83</sup> Alf Lüdtkke, “Einleitung,” in *Alltagsgeschichte*, 19–20.

<sup>84</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*.

<sup>85</sup> 69% of the female employees in one of the social studies were under the age of 26. See Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> According to different surveys, up to 84% lived with parents or relatives. See Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 38 This topic will be explored in chapter 2.2.

<sup>87</sup> Scott, “The evidence of experience,” 784.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Grete Rücker, *Mutter stand immer hinter mir: Meine Jugend zwischen den Kriegen*, Erzähltes Leben 3 (Berlin: Nishen, 1984).

<sup>89</sup> Klaus Bergmann, *Lebensgeschichte als Appell: Autobiographische Schriften der 'kleinen Leute' und Außenseiter* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1991).

questions, such as 'How I imagine a good life' or 'My profession'.<sup>90</sup> Two things can be gleaned from these essays: on the one hand, due to statements about everyday life, they can be interpreted in terms of concrete social practices. On the other hand, they allow an insight into the perceptions and imaginary worlds of female employees. However, the experiences described in the essays cannot be uncritically understood as a direct reaction to the conditions of their environment; rather, they must be read as "interpretations made on the basis of culturally imparted offers of possible interpretations."<sup>91</sup> With regard to the informative value of these essays, several underlying problems, moreover, must be considered: first, the respondents did not write these essays completely voluntarily, but were asked to do so. Second, the apprentices wrote them, knowing that an authority figure would read them.<sup>92</sup> Third, Schilfarth did not print every response, rather the selection reflects her own emphases and underlying assumptions. All of these aspects limit the informational value of the essays, which must be taken into account when interpreting them.

Contemporary journals and magazines in which female employees were both the addressees and the authors are also central to this research. One of them is, for instance, *Die Handels- und Büroangestellte*, a publication of the Association of Female Commercial and Office Employees (VWA).<sup>93</sup> Since this newspaper was the organ of a union for female white-collar workers, the demands can be interpreted as the voice of part of the female employees. Articles and columns in such journals can provide information not only about social practices, but also about issues these women were concerned with. Within the magazines, advertisements will also be interpreted with respect to, for example, beauty practices.

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<sup>90</sup> Else Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, Die psychologischen Grundlagen der heutigen Mädchenbildung 1 (Leipzig, 1926); Else Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, Die psychologischen Grundlagen der heutigen Mädchenbildung 2 (Leipzig, 1927).

<sup>91</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 10. Italics added.

<sup>92</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 32–33.

<sup>93</sup> Verband der Weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten, *Die Handels- Und Büroangestellte* (Berlin, 1919–1935). From here on, the abbreviation VWA will be used.

Apart from focusing on sources related to the subjectivity of the employees, further material will be used for statistical classification and the investigation of working and living conditions. Among it is archival material, such as the rental contract of Lucie Brisch. Working as a saleswoman in her twenties and living with her mother, she showed similar characteristics as Rahmer.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, contemporary studies that have dealt with the sociological recording of female employees are drawn upon, one of which will be presented here exemplarily. It is a survey on female white-collar workers from 1930, conducted by the Central Association of White-Collar Workers (ZdA) and edited by Susanne Suhr.<sup>95</sup> It should be noted that the picture emerging here only represents women who were organised in the socialist ZdA.<sup>96</sup> Their membership thus indicates a socialist political orientation, on the one hand, and raises the question of a workers' background on the other. Both would suggest that their experiences as well as their way of living were shaped in this way, and cannot necessarily be regarded as exemplary for 'the' female employee. In addition, even among the members of the ZdA, only a fraction of about 5% of the women was represented in the study.<sup>97</sup> Taking these preconditions into consideration, some general statements can be made about the work and life of the employees, despite the limited representativity of the survey.

Finally, contemporary social studies like Kracauer's, that dealt with the 'nature' of employees, will be drawn upon. In addition to Kracauer, the work of Marxist sociologist Carl Dreyfuss is of particular importance. His survey of how white-collar employees tried to "cloak class antagonisms" through "professional ideologies" is equally to be understood as a quite judgmental

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<sup>94</sup> Hertie Department Store Berlin, Reference for Lucie Brisch, 1920, B Rep. 500 Acc. 150 - 1, FFBIZ; Rental Contract for Lucie Brisch and Else Wohlfeil, July 1, 1926, B Rep. 500 Acc. 150 -1, FFBIZ.

<sup>95</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*. Further studies used are A. Kasten et al., *Die Wirtschaftliche Und Soziale Lage Der Angestellten* (Berlin: Sieben-Stäbe-Verlag, 1931); Frieda Glaß and Dorothea Kische, *Die Wirtschaftlichen Und Sozialen Verhältnisse Der Berufstätigen Frauen: Erhebung 1928-29 Durchgeführt Von Der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutscher Frauenberufsverbände* (Berlin: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1930).

<sup>96</sup> Frevert, "Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933," 519.

<sup>97</sup> In 1930, the ZdA counted a total of 105.370 female members. According to its own data, the study is based on 5.741 questionnaires. Frevert, "Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933," 521 and Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 7.

study but he repeatedly cited, for example, proceedings at the labour court.<sup>98</sup> These prove useful insofar, as one way of approaching the everyday life of historical subjects is to ‘re-read’ and interpret conventional sources. For instance, sources related to disciplining, such as these court proceedings, always also contain information about the social practices of the subjects.<sup>99</sup>

I have discussed the existing historiography and the relevance of the research question. I have further outlined the understanding of ‘modernity’ and given an introduction to the approach of ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ as well as a selection of sources that will be used for the thesis. In order to investigate the everyday lives of female white-collar employees in the Weimar Republic under the aspect of ‘modernity’ – in what ways they practiced and experienced ‘modernity’ – the thesis is structured as follows: the main body of the thesis consists of three chapters, each of which is in turn divided into a part that focuses on the work environment of female employees and one that looks at life outside of work. The chapters will not illuminate every possible aspect, but rather show certain constellations. In chapter Two, I examine the everyday life of female employees under the aspect of rationalisation. Within the work context, I look at their practices and experiences of mechanisation and schematisation; outside of work, I focus on the rationalisation of the household. Chapter Three addresses practices and experiences of female employees regarding bureaucratisation. First, I examine their everyday work for the bureaucratic features of career and hierarchies, and subsequently I explore their leisure time in terms of living a ‘life of status’. Chapter Four deals with female employees’ experiences of modern disciplining, placing a separate emphasis on the body. With regards to modern workplace requirements, clothing and beauty practices are considered. Outside of work, practices and experiences of disciplining, concerning relationships, sexuality, and family, are investigated.

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<sup>98</sup> Carl Dreyfuss, *Beruf Und Ideologie Der Angestellten* (Munich/Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1933), 7, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Lüdtke, “Einleitung,” 19–20. Of course, it must be considered that such reports do not represent reality, as it were, but that the motives of the authors also play a role in the portrayal.



## 2 RATIONALISATION

### 2.1 Of “Clatter” and “Cogs”: Rationalisation in the Workplace

The very fact that women increasingly worked in white-collar jobs in the Weimar Republic was closely related to rationalisation. During the First World War, they had filled the positions of men who had left for the war, especially in the rationalised war administration. The fact that work processes were increasingly simplified through scientific management principles, and could also be carried out by semi-skilled and unskilled workers, as well as the fact that women could be paid smaller wages, contributed to their increased recruitment.<sup>100</sup> Despite the demobilisation campaign at the end of the war, the trend of female employment in trade and offices continued. While in 1907 12.4% of all employees were female, by 1922 the figure had risen to 38.9%.<sup>101</sup> This meant significant structural changes on the macro level, but the changes were also reflected concretely in the everyday working lives of female employees.

In 1931, the newspaper *Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung* published an essay by a female typist in which she reported on her experiences and practices in the modern, rationalised workplace: “At first it went quite well [...] But when a few years had passed, the monotonous work became a burden. It was so soulless, this eternal clatter on the machine.”<sup>102</sup> The woman’s words shed light on a rationalisation experience that characterised the everyday life of many female office employees: working on machines as part of mechanisation. Along with the Taylorist separation of mental and manual labour, women were preferentially selected for mechanical work in the

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<sup>100</sup> Lorentz, *Aufbruch oder Rückschritt?*, 80–81. Usually, a six to eight week typing course sufficed for employment. Lorentz, *Aufbruch oder Rückschritt?*, 80.

<sup>101</sup> Lorentz, *Aufbruch oder Rückschritt?*, 179, 182, 185, 345. The numbers from 1907 included civil servants. On the dismissal of women in favour of men as a result of the demobilisation campaign, also see Susanne Rouette, “‘Gleichberechtigung’ ohne ‘Recht auf Arbeit’: Demobilisierung der Frauenarbeit nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Unter allen Umständen: Frauengeschichte(n) in Berlin*, ed. Christiane Eifert and Susanne Rouette (Berlin: Rotation-Verl., 1986); Koch, “Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik,” 163.

<sup>102</sup> *Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung*, “Die Tippmamsell,” 142. Cited from Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 104.

rationalised offices of the Weimar Republic.<sup>103</sup> This is strikingly illustrated by the fact that 90% of the recorded employees working on typewriter were female.<sup>104</sup> Various parties justified this division with the argument that for “female workers [...] these special fields of work have been distilled out, so to speak, [...] because they generally have greater natural skill for them than their male competitors.”<sup>105</sup> This construction of a special ‘suitability’ of women for mechanical work served primarily to disguise the idea that machine work was subordinate to ‘intellectual’ work, and therefore considered not appropriate for male employees. Mechanical work related to the rationalisation of offices thus became a central part of female employees’ everyday experience of modernity in the Weimar Republic.

For many female employees, the daily work with office machines and in the typing rooms meant intense physical strain.<sup>106</sup> According to contemporary workplace studies, apart from purely physical symptoms, such as tendinitis, “the most prominent illness of the office personnel [...] [was] nervousity.”<sup>107</sup> This utterance is to be understood as a reflection of contemporary medical discourse which categorised many different conditions as ‘nervous sufferings’, ‘nervous diseases’ etc., thereby supposedly diagnosing ‘objective’ illnesses and thus establishing scientific authority.<sup>108</sup> At

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<sup>103</sup> On the separation of mental and manual labour, see Taylor, *The principles of scientific management*, 21–23.

<sup>104</sup> Kasten et al., *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Angestellten*, 81.

<sup>105</sup> Kasten et al., *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Angestellten*, 81. Further justifications of this kind can be found, for example, in Ernst Holstein, “Hygiene Im Büro Und Im Kaufmännischen Betriebe Vom Ärztlich-Physiologischen Standpunkt,” in Deutsche Gesellschaft für Gewerbehygiene, *Hygiene Im Büro Und Im Kaufmännischen Betriebe*, 12. However, women, too, had internalised the view that the “introduction of the various types of office machines [...] [could] only be successful with female staff.” Else Fisch, in: “Diskussion Über Das Thema 'Hygiene Im Büro Und Im Kaufmännischen Betriebe Aus Der VII. Jahreshauptversammlung Der Deutschen Gesellschaft Für Gewerbehygiene Am 24. September 1930,” in Deutsche Gesellschaft für Gewerbehygiene, *Hygiene Im Büro Und Im Kaufmännischen Betriebe*, 59.

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, Holstein, “Hygiene im Büro und im kaufmännischen Betriebe vom ärztlich-physiologischen Standpunkt,” 12–13; “Schlaglichter Auf Die Gesundheitlichen Gefahren Im Bürobetrieb,” *Büropraxis, Beilage zur Handels- und Büroangestellten* 35, no. 1 (1929): 1.

<sup>107</sup> Holstein, “Hygiene im Büro und im kaufmännischen Betriebe vom ärztlich-physiologischen Standpunkt,” 13.

<sup>108</sup> Joachim Radkau, *Das Zeitalter Der Nervosität: Deutschland Zwischen Bismarck Und Hitler* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998), 30–32. Based on a social constructionist approach, diseases are not entities which exist in an ‘objective stage’, but are culturally constructed by society. See, for example, Charles E. Rosenberg, “Introduction: Framing Disease. Illness, Society, and History,” in *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg and Janet Golden, 2. paperback print, Health and medicine in American society (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1997), xiii.

closer scrutiny, nervousity encompassed a wide range of ailments, including fatigue, dizziness, and fainting, as well as difficulties with memory.<sup>109</sup> One employee summarised the consequences of working on an electric calculating machine as follows: “[T]he constant work on this machine [...] [brings] an unpleasant sensation in the head that is difficult to explain; it is as if the brain continued to turn to the beat of the machine for a long time, which prevents sleep and makes one very nervous.”<sup>110</sup> The daily full-time work at the modern office machine thus was the decisive factor for the employee’s nervous ailment, that left her sleepless at night. In addition to the strenuous constant use of the machine, nervous complaints were often caused by the high noise level, especially when there were many devices together in one room, as for example in the typewriters’ rooms. One female clerk told of her work environment of “eighty people [...] sitting in one room [...] [with] machines, thus working at the machine is nerve-wracking.”<sup>111</sup> It has been argued, based on the age range of female employees, that for them, their profession remained “a mere interlude until marriage.”<sup>112</sup> Close examination of the daily work routine of female employees reveals a further reason for the early departure of many employees before the age of 30: repeatedly, female employees reported that they had to give up their jobs due to physical discomfort caused by machine work.<sup>113</sup> Rahmer, too, wrote about her work: “Instead of walking, I am sitting here in this room that I detest so much, typing almost to the point of unconsciousness. What a terrible thing if I had to endure this for years to come.”<sup>114</sup> Drawing on the work of Thompson, who considers

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<sup>109</sup> See the statements from female employees in “Büromaschinen,” *Büropraxis, Beilage zur Handels- und Büroangestellten* 35, no. 2 (1929): 7–8.

<sup>110</sup> “Büromaschinen,” 7. For further answers with reference to nervous symptoms, see “Büromaschinen,” 7–8; Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*; Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 22.10.1933, diary No. 3, 64-65.

<sup>111</sup> Response of a clerk, in: Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Cornelia Osborne, “The New Woman and Generation Conflict: Perceptions of Young Women's Sexual Mores in the Weimar Republic,” in *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany 1770 - 1968*, ed. Mark Roseman (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 154. Also see Frevert, “Kunstseidener Glanz,” 27.

<sup>113</sup> E. A. Klockenberg, *Rationalisierung der Schreibmaschine und ihrer Bedienung: Psychotechnische Arbeitsstudien*, Bücher der industriellen Psychotechnik (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 1926), 195. 80% of the female employees were under the age of 30. Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 8–9. On mechanical work as burdening factor, also see Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 154.

<sup>114</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 28.07.1927, diary No. 1, 17.

experiences in people's everyday lives to be causative for human action, such statements indicate that the strenuous continuous work at the machines, and the resulting physical and nervous strain, for some employees constituted reason or even necessity to regard office work as a mere temporary option.<sup>115</sup>

While working with machines was physically exhausting for many employees, it was at the same time often also a source of self-confidence. The use of cutting-edge technology could bring certain difficulties for female employees especially at the beginning, however, the conquering thereof could become a victory. A 15-year old bank apprentice, for example, wrote that she "could not get used to the telephone and its operation [...] until now" and the technical innovations also posed challenges for more senior employees, as is evidenced by instructions in the employees' magazines, such as 'Self-operated Telephoning'.<sup>116</sup> 'Alltagsgeschichte' urges us to distance ourselves as far as possible from our own assumptions, it demands the "ability to see familiar things as incomprehensible."<sup>117</sup> New activities and technology, which one might be tempted to dismiss as self-evident because of their supposed ordinariness and sometimes severe simplification, hence must be understood as a complete novelty to female employees at the time and, as in the case of telephoning, represented highly complex processes, compared to today. Once these women had mastered modern technology, it therefore could fill them with pride, and younger employees in particular drew a certain self-confidence from their newly acquired technical skills. The same clerk who had struggled with operating the telephone, for example, proudly emphasised that she could "already type pretty fast" now and hoped to "happily manage to use the telephone [as well]."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*, 9.

<sup>116</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 107; "Selbsttätiges Fernsprechen," *Büropraxis, Beilage zur Handels- und Büroangestellten* 33, no. 4 (1927): 13–14.

<sup>117</sup> Ginzburg, "Geschichte und Geschichten," 22–23. Cited from Medick, "Missionare im Ruderboot?," 58.

<sup>118</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 107.

Another office apprentice had only “achieved what [she] [...] wanted to achieve” when she was transferred to the typewriters’ room.<sup>119</sup>

Viewed from the outside, mechanisation in the course of modern rationalisation was thus often accompanied by less qualified work for female employees. However, the change of perspective sought by the history of the everyday also shows that some female employees embraced their work on the machines as an elementary part of modernity. They enjoyed “very pleasant work, such as typing“, as a 15-year old office clerk put it, and it provided them with a sense of achievement when they succeeded in mastering the technological challenges that modernity held for them.<sup>120</sup> Contrary to what the research literature suggests, “the monotonous, alienated activity“ did not necessarily “stabilise the consciousness of one’s own inferiority“ of all female employees in modernity.<sup>121</sup>

In addition to mechanisation, rationalisation in the sense of work organisation played an increasingly important role in the working environment of female employees. Both in office work and sales, it manifested itself in the division of work into separate steps, as well as in their schematisation with the aim of saving time and maximising profit. The saleswoman Emma Starck reported on such changes, thus giving an insight into the experiences of rationalisation in the everyday lives of female retail employees: “The work used to be more diverse. Today, because of the big department stores – I also worked in a department store later on – everything is different, each department works separately. Today, a shop assistant can rarely say that she has old, loyal, steady customers; these times are over.”<sup>122</sup> In department stores, the Taylorist division into separate work steps and the standardisation of duties were thus reflected in the introduction of

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<sup>119</sup> Maria Hörbrand, *Die Weibliche Handels- Und Bureau-Angestellte* (Neu-Finkenkrug: Hermann Partel, 1926), 49.

<sup>120</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 90.

<sup>121</sup> Frevert, “Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933,” 517.

<sup>122</sup> Emma Starck, “Was Eine Alte Verkäuferin Aus Der Putzwarenbranche Erzählt,” *Die Verkäuferin, Beilage zur Handels- und Büroangestellten* 35, no. 1 (1929): 3.

specialised departments. In combination with the enlargement of the stores, sales assistants were only responsible for individual sections. From Starck's perspective, this division led to a less varied working day and was, moreover, accompanied by alienation from the clientele, which Starck perceived as a loss. Starck thus experienced modernity as a concrete detriment to her everyday working life. Looking back on her earlier sales employment, which she perceived as "more diverse", Starck continued that "serving the customers from beginning to end" had been "of great importance" at that time.<sup>123</sup> If, for example, a female customer needed mourning clothes, she would be advised from head to toe by one saleswoman. In order to retroactively legitimise this pre-rationalised – yet by her preferred, because more personal – approach Starck finally added: "This served the customer very well; time was saved and higher sales were achieved."<sup>124</sup> In applying these explicit rationalisation codes, Starck's formulation here reveals that female white-collar workers had indeed internalised the rationalisation idea of saving time and maximising cost-benefit, or at least that they were well aware of its importance for the modern present, despite perceiving the effects of rationalisation personally as worsening their work experience and thus their everyday lives.

As part of schematisation, a maximum exploitation of working time was sought, for example by deducting pay for any lateness.<sup>125</sup> Female employees, however, did not accept all modern rationalisation measures without resistance. In order to trace such 'unruly' behaviour, 'Alltagsgeschichte' encourages a re-reading of 'traditional' sources. Disciplinary sources, such as workplace orders and complaints about certain behaviours, can shed light on the practices of female employees, as the following example shows: after the breakfast break for apprentices in some larger department stores had initially been abolished to save time, it eventually had to be reintroduced because "despite the prohibition, the girls ate their breakfast in an inappropriate

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<sup>123</sup> Starck, "Was eine alte Verkäuferin aus der Putzwarenbranche erzählt," 3.

<sup>124</sup> Starck, "Was eine alte Verkäuferin aus der Putzwarenbranche erzählt," 3.

<sup>125</sup> Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 133.

place.”<sup>126</sup> This practice of the apprentices ‘having breakfast anyway’ shows that the female employees did have agency in the rationalisation process of modernity. By simply not complying with the new regulations, they effectively caused the regulation to be revoked and thus improved their own modern working conditions.<sup>127</sup> These female employees thus knew how to resist rationalisation measures if they interfered too much with their personal freedoms and no longer seemed comprehensible to them.

Even though not every rationalisation measure could be met with resistance, many female employees found ways and means to reconcile the demands of the modern workplace, nevertheless. They developed certain coping mechanisms with which they gave meaning to their own work, and two strategies stood out in particular: first, the classification of their own rationalised partial work as an important part of the overall process, and second, the filling of work with their own ideals of femininity. Both strategies are reflected in the essay of the typist complaining about the “eternal clatter” of her workplace, as quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The employee defined her own position as that of a “little cog” that was not granted much attention due to its small size, that is, its small function in the company as a whole.<sup>128</sup> Initially, she therefore did not find much pleasure in her modern, rationalised work, and in addition, probably experienced rejection or ignorance from colleagues and superiors in her everyday work life. The typist then constructed the esteem that was not sufficiently offered to her by others: by transforming her modern, rationalised activity of being a “little cog” into an “important part of the machine”, she gave it greater significance and thus brought meaning to her own actions.<sup>129</sup> In doing

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<sup>126</sup> Emilie Düntzer, *Die Gesundheitliche Und Soziale Lage Der Erwerbstätigen Weiblichen Jugend: Erfahrungen Aus Der Praxis Der Berufsschulärztin*, Veröffentlichungen aus dem Gebiete der Medizinalverwaltung 40 (Berlin: Richard Schoetz, 1933), 49. On the selection of sources in ‘Alltagsgeschichte’, see Lüdtkke, “Einleitung,” 19-20, 27.

<sup>127</sup> Other instances of such behaviour by female employees included, for example, ‘cheating’ on piecework to be paid more. See Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 101.

<sup>128</sup> *Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung*, “Die Tippmamsell”. Cited from Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 104.

<sup>129</sup> *Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung*, “Die Tippmamsell”. Cited from Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 104.

so, she embraced the trend of human-machine comparisons that Weimar society adopted to process the many technological innovations of modernity and the ever-deepening changes they brought to everyday life.<sup>130</sup> The typist continued:

“An impeccably written offer [...] may be the cause that an entrepreneur in a distant overseas country places a first trial order after all, [without which] so many workers would have been laid off again, fathers of families. This way, however, mothers can cradle their children without a second thought. Perhaps if that typist had given in to her tiredness, that offer would have come too late, the job would already have been taken. And from this point of view, every work gains inner value. It becomes a labour of love for the community[.]”<sup>131</sup>

These sentences are particularly revealing, as the typist ‘neutralised’ her rationalised mechanical activity through a recourse to notions of women’s work as “labour of love”, thus carrying ideals of social motherliness into machine work.<sup>132</sup> The formerly “soulless clatter” at the typewriter became work on the family, it became “labour of love for the community”. A similar approach can frequently be found in the sources of employees, especially with a middle-class background, since many of them, having internalised these ideas of femininity, wanted to take up social professions, such as school or kindergarten teacher, but were unable to do so for economic reasons.<sup>133</sup> With the implementation of conceptions of femininity into their modern work environment, the women thus took up contemporary discourses on ‘valuable’ women’s work and juxtaposed them to their rationalised activities, thereby turning these into work of “inner value”.<sup>134</sup> Female employees were encouraged in this kind of ‘processing’ of their own activities from various sides. For example, the Yearbook of Women’s Work stated: “[A]lso in the occupation of a typist, women’s work [...] that

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<sup>130</sup> For the association between 'new woman' and machine, see Lungstrum, “Metropolis and the Technosexual Woman of German Modernity”; Barbara Hales, “Taming the Technological Shrew: Woman as Machine in Weimar Culture,” *Neophilologus* 94, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>131</sup> *Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung*, “Die Tippmamsell”. Cited from Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 104.

<sup>132</sup> The concept of social motherliness originated in the bourgeois women's movement, which sought to achieve greater participation of women in society through social work and demanded the recognition of specific 'feminine qualities'. See Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 97–98; Canning, “Women and the Politics of Gender,” 148.

<sup>133</sup> See, e.g., Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 68, 137-138.

<sup>134</sup> For further examples, see Hörbrand, *Die weibliche Handels- und Bureau-Angestellte*, 31.



meets the caring, organising, nurturing sense of women can unfold.”<sup>135</sup> Vocational counselling centres, too, took up these discourses and simultaneously reinforced them. Saleswomen who had difficulties with their “female nature“ because they could not sufficiently live out their character traits, such as “adaptability and empathy, patience, and a sense of responsibility“ in their work, were recommended to “do voluntary work in the social or charitable field, to enable the special qualities of female nature to be developed alongside their professional work.”<sup>136</sup> As this was mostly not possible due to financial and time reasons, the need to find the “female nature” in their own work seemed all the more important for female employees in Weimar modernity. This way, they were able to establish a certain degree of self-determination in their rationalised everyday working life. In the ‘peak of modernity’, they created some agency for themselves.

One characteristic of Weimar modernity is that rationalisation was seen not only as a “panacea for the ills besetting the German economy - [...] [but] perhaps for those plaguing society and politics as well.”<sup>137</sup> One of the many areas of private life targeted by rationalisation efforts was household management. In the following section, it will be considered as exemplary of rationalisation outside the workplace.

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<sup>135</sup> Oberregierungsrat Bode, “Der Beruf Der Stenotypistin,” in *Jahrbuch Der Frauenarbeit* (Berlin, 1930), 6:74. Cited from Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 103.

<sup>136</sup> Maria Böckling, “Die Verkäuferin in Ihrer Lehrzeit,” *Jugend und Beruf* 3 (1928): 484–85.

<sup>137</sup> Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 6.

## 2.2 Handling the Double Burden: Rationalisation at Home

In her article on the 'new woman', Grossmann shows that working-class women adopted rational thinking as well as the Taylorist terminology of efficiency and time-motion studies for their own households. By rationalising their housework, she argues, they reacted to the double burden of simultaneous wage-earning and reproductive labour.<sup>138</sup> Unlike many blue-collar workers, most female employees still lived with their parents or relatives, hence not running their own household.<sup>139</sup> The explanation regularly given was: "If I didn't live with my parents, I wouldn't be able to get by on my salary."<sup>140</sup> The reason for remaining in the parental household was thus mostly due to the financial situation of the female employees, because with an average gross wage of 146 mark, and often high rental expenses in the cities, moving out was hardly affordable.<sup>141</sup> However, even living with their parents, the female employees had to help with the housework. The majority in Suhr's survey did at least two, often four to six hours of domestic work daily.<sup>142</sup> Although these women by definition did not run their own households, their everyday lives were, nevertheless, marked by the double burden of the 'modern' working woman.

Exemplary for this part of female employees is Rahmer. In her diary entries, she occasionally mentioned that she had to perform various tasks: "This evening I went to Paula's once again. [...] I had rested so well [there], especially as I hurried off in the afternoon. I had washed and ironed my clothes."<sup>143</sup> Despite the mentioned haste, Rahmer did not adopt any rationalised techniques and

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<sup>138</sup> Grossmann, "Eine 'neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?," 153–58. Also see Lüttke, "Mein Arbeitstag - mein Wochenende" and Nolan, "'Housework Made Easy'," 572–73.

<sup>139</sup> According to Glaß/Kische, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the female employees lived with parents or relatives. Glaß and Kische, *Die wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Verhältnisse der berufstätigen Frauen*, 33. In Suhr's survey, 84% said they lived with parents or relatives. Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 38.

<sup>141</sup> Frevert, "Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933," 515–16. On wages, see Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 34–37.

<sup>142</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 42. Also see Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 46 and Koch, "Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik," 170.

<sup>143</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 14.07.1934, diary No. 3, 93. Also see Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 01.09.1928, diary No. 1, 28 and Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 17.08.1929, diary No. 3, 58.

codes, nor did other female employees who lived in their parents' or relatives' households. 'Alltagsgeschichte', however, asks not only to look at the practices themselves, but also to consider "the intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions their meanings."<sup>144</sup> Why then did rational household management not seem to play a major role in Rahmer's case?

One reason is that the actual and 'full-time' household management was done by Rahmer's mother.<sup>145</sup> For Rahmer, the need to deal with the organisation of a modern household according to possibly rationalised principles therefore simply did not exist. However, if we take a closer look at the circumstances, Rahmer's role in the household appears very 'modern' from a different perspective: Rahmer came from a petty bourgeois family, her father had owned a stonemasonry and artificial stone business. In accordance with the bourgeois family ideal of the second half of the 19th century, her mother was a housewife.<sup>146</sup> As a daughter, Rahmer still had to help with everyday household tasks, following the traditional gender-specific division of labour that also existed in the Weimar Republic. At the same time though, as a modern working woman of the 1920s, she was no longer brought up to be a 'full-time' housewife. This change became clear, seeing that Rahmer could hardly cook. After cooking a wine soup with friends one evening, Rahmer noted: "But I had little cooking skills. Fritz was teasing me. He had laughed at me."<sup>147</sup> Lack of cooking skills was certainly not the case for all female employees, but Suhr also pointed out that the household assistance demanded from female employees living in their parental households, had mostly consisted of tidying up and doing the groceries, and rarely of cooking, a picture that is consistent

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<sup>144</sup> Greenblatt, "The Touch of the Real," 16.

<sup>145</sup> Beatrix Piezonka, *Hedwig Rahmer (1907-1990): Monographie Zum Tagebuch*, Sozialisation in Frauentagebüchern 5 (Frankfurt/Main, Siegen: Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität; Universität-Gesamthochschule Siegen, 1993), 50.

<sup>146</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 28.04.1927, diary No. 1, 2. Also see Piezonka, *Hedwig Rahmer (1907-1990)*, 50. On the history of domestic work in the 19th century, see Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden, "Arbeit aus Liebe – Liebe als Arbeit: Zur Entstehung der Hausarbeit im Kapitalismus," in *Frauen und Wissenschaft: Beiträge zur Berliner Sommeruniversität für Frauen, Juli 1976* (Berlin: Courage-Verl., 1977); Sibylle Meyer, *Das Theater mit der Hausarbeit: Bürgerliche Repräsentation in der Familie der wilhelminischen Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verl., 1982).

<sup>147</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 17.08.1930, diary No. 2, 22.

with Rahmer's description.<sup>148</sup> With modification, we thus see an adaptation to a pattern that had previously existed only for male family members. Although Rahmer, unlike the aforementioned men, had to support her mother in the household, she no longer learned traditionally female housewife skills, such as cooking, due to the distribution of household tasks that made it possible for Rahmer to simultaneously practice an occupation. If Rahmer had set up her own household, she would either have to acquire these skills later, have someone else do the work, or rely, at least partly, on outside meals, as well as on modern technology and consumer products that made cooking easier.<sup>149</sup> The role of employees as consumers has been interpreted in various ways. It is seen as a superficial compensation for monotonous, boring work, or as an attempt to delude oneself into a class affiliation that no longer existed.<sup>150</sup> The analysis of Rahmer's household routines adds an aspect to the development of modern consumerism: when Rahmer was solely responsible for a meal, she could only be expected to "arrange [herself] something to eat."<sup>151</sup> The loss of traditional domestic skills, in connection with modern wage labour and a mix of simultaneously traditional and modern division of housework in the parental household, may have reinforced the need of female employees to resort to auxiliary and ready-made products in one's own household or to eat out, thus acting as the often invoked 'agents of consumer modernity' in the Weimar Republic.<sup>152</sup>

For most female employees, it was not financially possible to rent their own flat to run their own household, but the longing for independence from their parents and for something to call their own, was nevertheless widespread. Rahmer, for example, expressed the desire to leave the parental home, or at least to have a room of her own of which she could say, "This one belongs to

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<sup>148</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 42.

<sup>149</sup> Grossmann, "Eine 'neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?," 140.

<sup>150</sup> Frevert, "Kunstseidener Glanz," 28; Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 81, 89.

<sup>151</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 22.10.1933, diary No. 3, 22.

<sup>152</sup> On white-collar employees as agents of consumer modernity, see Sandra J. Coyner, "Class Consciousness and Consumption: The New Middle Class During the Weimar Republic," *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 3 (1977).

me, this is mine”, several times.<sup>153</sup> Suhr even stated that for female employees, the wish for a home of their own was often the only “‘luxury need’, as a counterbalance to their monotonous and nerve-racking occupation”, and for this reason, a popular incentive to marry quickly.<sup>154</sup> Accordingly, a home of one’s own meant a place of longing, a space of freedom and individuality, and an escape from the modern, rationalised working day. Yet this desire also raised the question of “who would take care of the maintenance and the kitchen“, if one’s own mother, for example, no longer did so.<sup>155</sup>

To fulfil their dream of an individual life in one’s own household, a central demand of white-collar unions was to set up singles’ homes. The ideas associated with these homes are shown in an article from *Die Handels- und Büroangestellte*.<sup>156</sup> In the introduction the author wrote: “It seems to be an urgent task of our time to create homes for the countless single people to provide them with the necessary amount of care, peace, and beauty to become a source of strength for them in order to pursue their profession with joy.”<sup>157</sup> With its emphasis on “profession with joy”, this formulation contains, on the one hand, a justification for the creation of single women’s homes, since it implies that the demand for individual homes for female employees was only legitimate if it served the performance of work in the broader sense. On the other hand, it can also be deduced that the female employees were looking for something ‘own’ and ‘beautiful’, which, as Suhr postulated, offered them a balance to the working conditions discussed earlier in this chapter. A home of one’s own with a “personal touch“ was thus one possible way to deal with the rationalised work of modernity.<sup>158</sup> The unions were aware of the challenge of having a household of one’s own, in addition to being employed, which is why they had precise ideas about how such a single person’s

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<sup>153</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 16.08.1929, diary No. 1, 58.

<sup>154</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 40–41. In Schilfarth’s study, twenty out of eighty-five girls answered the question as to what they would do if given the free choice that they wanted to furnish a room of their own. Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 375.

<sup>155</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 40.

<sup>156</sup> Johanna Waescher, “Das Wohnheim Der Ledigen Berufstätigen,” *Die Handels- und Büroangestellte* 30, no. 12 (1924).

<sup>157</sup> Waescher, “Das Wohnheim der ledigen Berufstätigen,” 113.

<sup>158</sup> Waescher, “Das Wohnheim der ledigen Berufstätigen,” 113.

home should be functioning. Modern household appliances, such as gas stoves, were to be available to make housework easier, and each flat was to have adjoining rooms for the purpose of storing things, in order to prevent the flat from becoming “full of clutter”.<sup>159</sup> Parts of the housework, such as the laundry, should be outsourced communally, distributing the costs among all residents, thus reducing them for the individual.<sup>160</sup> In addition to collectivist elements in this conception of the single person’s home, these plans for coping with everyday life also reflect principles of rational household management. For example, the prevention of ‘cluttering up’ the flats mirrors the contemporary discourse on a hygienic household, and the outsourcing of certain household tasks and their economic apportionment to the overall inhabitants reflects the idea of division of labour, efficiency, and cost-benefit maximisation.<sup>161</sup> Individuality and independence, as well as a counterbalance to modern, often rationalised working conditions sought in one’s own home were thus to be achieved through single people’s homes, operating with rationalisation principles. It is evident from this example that the notion of rationalisation identified by historian Mary Nolan as being the “panacea” for the challenges of modernity, was also considered legitimate by female employees for their everyday lives.<sup>162</sup> Modern means were needed to make modernity more bearable.

A separate group included female employees who were already faced with the challenges of running their own households, including married women. The account of a department store saleswoman interviewed by journalist Marie Leitner provides information on how female employees experienced the everyday coexistence of work and household management, how they organised their households, and to what extent rationalisation played a role therein. The female

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<sup>159</sup> Waescher, “Das Wohnheim der ledigen Berufstätigen,” 113.

<sup>160</sup> Waescher, “Das Wohnheim der ledigen Berufstätigen,” 114.

<sup>161</sup> On household hygiene, see Michelle Corrodi, “Von Küchen und unfeinen Gerüchen,” in *Die Küche: Lebenswelt, Nutzung, Perspektiven*, ed. Klaus Spechtenhauser, Edition Wohnen 1 (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), 24, 26, 37. For contemporary discourse also see, e.g., Bruno Taut, *Die Neue Wohnung: Die Frau Als Schöpferin* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1924), 10. On rational household organisation, also see Meyer, *Der neue Haushalt*.

<sup>162</sup> Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 6.

employee's everyday life showed the following characteristics: She lived with her husband, who also happened to work as a clerk, as a subtenant in a furnished room. Every morning she prepared sandwiches for lunch for the two of them, before going to work. Because she had a two-hour break, and he had only one hour, she always went to her husband's workplace at lunchtime. Together they ate the sandwiches, and bought a glass of beer or a cup of coffee with it. When they returned from work in the evening, the saleswoman cooked dinner for both of them, feeling "nervously exhausted[.]"<sup>163</sup> Afterwards she did the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen.<sup>164</sup> Thus, before starting work, the female employee had to perform housework, which she then repeated in the evening. She most likely did not have modern appliances at her disposal, because only in very rare cases did female employees live in houses that could offer such equipment. As in the case of the saleswoman Brisch, who shared a two-room flat with her mother in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, the flats in the 1920s often did not have their own bathroom, let alone a Frankfurt kitchen.<sup>165</sup> The form of housing itself, therefore did not present a modern, rationalised solution to the challenges of housework. In order to, nevertheless, cope with the double burden of earning a living and housekeeping, the saleswoman interviewed by Leitner adopted time-saving rationalisation principles in a modest form, but without naming them such herself. For example, she emphasised that when she came home in the evening, she always cooked something "that goes fast."<sup>166</sup> Complicated, time-consuming meals would have hardly been possible for her to prepare. Working at least an 8-hour day, having a two-hour break, commuting home from work, and sometimes making a grocery stop, made it unlikely for her to reach home before 7 pm.<sup>167</sup> After doing the dishes and other housework, the employee was therefore sometimes "so tired in the evening that [...] [she

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<sup>163</sup> Marie Leitner, "Das Warenhausfräulein," *Tempo. Berliner Abendzeitung*, December 22, 1928, 4.

<sup>164</sup> Leitner, "Das Warenhausfräulein," 3–4.

<sup>165</sup> Rental Contract for Lucie Brisch and Else Wohlfeil.

<sup>166</sup> Leitner, "Das Warenhausfräulein," 4.

<sup>167</sup> Suhr's survey shows that 56% of female employees in the retail sector worked more than the statutory 48 hours a week. Adding up women's commuting and extra hours, the average time spent in connection with work was 10 hours. Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 24–25.

could not] fall asleep at all."<sup>168</sup> For female employees with their own households, modern time-saving housekeeping was thus of utmost importance, especially since they received little support from their husbands, who were "too happy to act like helpless children".<sup>169</sup>

In addition to the daily tasks, on some evenings the saleswoman had to carry out time-consuming chores, such as washing and ironing.<sup>170</sup> These could not be outsourced, as "that would cost too much money."<sup>171</sup> Besides saving time, the employees' household practices thus show a second rational motive: saving money. It cannot be inferred from her formulations that she was aware that her household management had rational characteristics. However, the challenges of modernity, in the form of low pay and the double burden on female employees, simply made such management inevitable. At the end of the article, the saleswoman revealed the objective of her economising, and the reason why she did not give up her job, despite the exhausting double burden. She dreamed of "having her own flat, or even a child".<sup>172</sup> The purpose of 'Alltagsgeschichte' is to explore the 'webs of significance' of historical subjects by means of a thick description of practices and their contextualisation.<sup>173</sup> In this employee's case, a central node in this web was the rather conventional desire to one day be able to finance her own home and a child. The clear articulation of this intention gains even more importance in its positioning at the end of the article. The accompanying economic-based explanation for its, hitherto, non-fulfilment allows a circumstance frequently lamented in Weimar discourse to be seen in a different light: the fact that white-collar families often remained childless was widely regarded by contemporaries as a problem of women being too 'modern'.<sup>174</sup> Focusing on the saleswoman's motives, however, it becomes clear

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<sup>168</sup> Leitner, "Das Warenhausfräulein," 4.

<sup>169</sup> Leitner, "Das Warenhausfräulein," 4.

<sup>170</sup> For most women in the Weimar Republic, both were still very laborious activities. See Karin Hausen, "Große Wäsche. Technischer Fortschritt Und Sozialer Wandel in Deutschland Vom 18. Bis Ins 20. Jahrhundert," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 13, no. 3 (1987): 289, 294-296.

<sup>171</sup> Leitner, "Das Warenhausfräulein," 4.

<sup>172</sup> Leitner, "Das Warenhausfräulein," 4.

<sup>173</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

<sup>174</sup> Osborne, "The New Woman and Generation Conflict," 137. This topic will be explored in more detail in chapter 4.2.



that the desire for a traditional family was certainly present among 'modern' female white-collar employees, but for financial reasons, which were directly related to modern white-collar work, it was not necessarily always achievable. The modern working conditions that were so strikingly reflected in the everyday lives of female employees sometimes made it difficult to pursue traditional life goals. By running her household according to rational principles – albeit possibly subconsciously – the saleswoman interviewed by Leitner thus brought herself a little closer to her own self-fulfilment.

To conclude, experiences and practices of rationalisation were reflected to different degrees in the everyday lives of female employees in the Weimar Republic. While their workplaces were often strongly characterised by mechanisation and schematisation, rationalisation was somewhat less evident in their living situation. In both areas, however, the women either made use of, or dealt with rationalisation according to their own needs. For some, rational housekeeping served as a path to self-realisation, others neutralised rationalised work, filling it with their own ideals. It is difficult to draw a line between only modern, or only traditional approaches here, often both extremes were present in female employees' behaviour.

As in the case of rationalisation, bureaucratisation played an essential role in the expansion of the white-collar profession and the recruitment of female employees in general during the Weimar Republic. Changes resulting from the modernisation of the private sector and the administration created numerous jobs in commerce and offices, many of which were taken up by women.<sup>175</sup> In the following chapter, I will explore female employees' experiences and practices under the aspects of bureaucracy.

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<sup>175</sup> Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 161; Frevert, "Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933," 511.

### 3 BUREAUCRATISATION

#### 3.1 Life “at the Bottom”? On Bureaucratic Careers and Hierarchies

When asked by Schilfarth how she envisaged her professional future, a 16-year old shop assistant wrote about the career she wanted to pursue: “When I become a competent saleswoman one day, and my director [...] perhaps wants to train me to be a warehouse manager, then I think life will be wonderful. [...] [And] then, after about 2-3 years, depending on whether I have achieved everything that I want, I would like to get married.”<sup>176</sup> When writing this essay, the young employee thus had clear career ambitions for her professional future. In doing so, she was following one of the central features of bureaucracy, because within modern bureaucratically organised authorities and companies, employees should be given the opportunity to complete a career path, “from the lower, less important and less well-paid positions to the higher ones”.<sup>177</sup>

Looking at the figures, however, it cannot be denied that in reality most female employees were rarely at the top of the bureaucratic ladder compared to their male colleagues; this part of modernity was rarely present in their everyday lives.<sup>178</sup> One female employee summed up the poor prospects for her by pointing out that the opportunities for promotion were very limited, “closer perhaps are the opportunities for career descent.”<sup>179</sup> Part of the reason for this lay in the fact that most female employees were pushed into the lower positions for the reasons mentioned in chapter 2.1.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, most female employees left their jobs to get married before reaching the age

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<sup>176</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 225–26.

<sup>177</sup> Weber, “Bürokratismus,” 169.

<sup>178</sup> In Glaß/Kische, only 2.3% of female employees were in senior positions. Glaß and Kische, *Die wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Verhältnisse der berufstätigen Frauen*, 9. In 1925, less than 1% of female employees held management positions, compared to 6% of male employees. Bridenthal, “Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work,” 162.

<sup>179</sup> Hörbrand, *Die weibliche Handels- und Bureau-Angestellte*, 36.

<sup>180</sup> For example, the GdA found that about 72% of female employees surveyed were employed in the lowest two groups of “schematic” and “more skilled” jobs, the latter including typists. In comparison, only around 32% of men were employed in these groups. Kasten et al., *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Angestellten*, 12, 132.

of 30, which was reflected, among other things, in the age structure of the female white-collar workforce.<sup>181</sup> It has been argued that the combination of poor career prospects and societal pressure to marry led many female employees to see their jobs as only temporary and that their attitudes towards professional work therefore did not undergo a fundamental change in Weimar modernity.<sup>182</sup> At first glance, the saleswoman quoted above appears to match this image, because she, too, aspired to marriage, which for most female employees entailed leaving their profession.<sup>183</sup> However, a closer reading of her statements shows that not only marriage, but also her own occupation and the desired ascent of the bureaucratic career ladder were a central part of her self-image. She would have a “wonderful life” not only when she got married, but already in her professional life, an attitude that can also be found among other employees.<sup>184</sup>

The length of time indicated by the shop assistant to definitely spend in the job market, may have provided the opportunity for some female employees to pursue career goals. More than half of the female employees surveyed by the ZdA entered their positions between 14 and 15 years of age, and 32% at 16-17 years.<sup>185</sup> With a median age of marriage of around 25 years, this left over 4/5 of the female employees with around ten years to spend in their occupation.<sup>186</sup> This is a considerable period of time, during which it was quite possible to grow professionally, and to realise a career within the framework of one’s own benchmarks and the environmental conditions. The fact that, from an outsider’s perspective, the saleswoman quoted above would probably not climb the highest rung of the career ladder, should not be taken as a criterion here. From her point of view, her work as a warehouse manager represented the realisation of her own aspirations and

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<sup>181</sup> See the average age of marriage for women of 25.31 years in Atina Grossman, *The New Woman, the New Family and the Rationalization of Sexuality: The Sex Reform Movement in Germany 1928 to 1933* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1984), 60; and the age structure of female employees in Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 8–9.

<sup>182</sup> Bridenthal, “Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work,” 162; Frevert, “Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933,” 516–17.

<sup>183</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 8–9.

<sup>184</sup> See, for example, Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 26, 182.

<sup>185</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 16.

<sup>186</sup> Grossman, *The New Woman, the New Family and the Rationalization of Sexuality*, 60.

thus an indisputable success, with which she had “achieved everything“. Frevert’s assumption that the “occupation of these women in the Weimar Republic [...] did not cause any great changes in their self-image“ is thus being subjected to scrutiny here.<sup>187</sup> For some women, it can certainly be concluded that they identified with their professions and had a more modern attitude towards employment in general. By developing career ambitions, however limited they may have been, female employees confidently embraced the bureaucratic career as a part of modernity. The desire for a career within realistically attainable promotion prospects thus becomes a characteristic of ‘modern’ female white-collar employees.

Regardless of which rung of the career ladder they stood on, workplace relationships were a recurring theme in the sources of female employees. Being a central feature of the bureaucratic organisation of a modern company or authority, the “hierarchy of office [...], i.e. a firmly ordered system of superordination and subordination of the authorities with supervision of the lower by the higher“ caused problems for many of them in their everyday work.<sup>188</sup> An office employee reflected on her apprenticeship: “Even though I was familiar with the saying: Life’s not easy at the bottom, I hadn’t imagined it to be that bad. [...] In short, it was terribly difficult to be told something by everyone, and in a way that I had never known before.”<sup>189</sup> Many women shared these negative experiences of modern hierarchy. Across divisions, they reported, for instance, bad treatment by senior staff and superiors, a harsh tone towards new or younger female employees as well as uncooperative behaviour. Criticism was not only levelled at senior employees for barking orders at new staff, but also for withholding relevant information from them out of fear of being replaced

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<sup>187</sup> Frevert, “Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933,” 516.

<sup>188</sup> Weber, “Bürokratismus,” 157.

<sup>189</sup> Hörbrand, *Die weibliche Handels- und Bureau-Angestellte*, 29. The author of this text recorded her apprenticeship experiences in retrospect. Due to missing dates, it cannot be entirely excluded that these occurred in the German Empire. However, since bureaucratisation and the accompanying hierarchical organisation had already found their way into the German administration at the turn of the century, her experiences can, nevertheless, be used as examples. Frevert, “Traditionale Weiblichkeit und moderne Interessenorganisation: Frauen im Angestelltenberuf 1918-1933,” 511.

themselves.<sup>190</sup> In their everyday working lives, female employees thus often experienced modernity in strict hierarchies in which they, as in most cases subordinate workers, found themselves at the bottom.

However, these women were not just passive recipients of orders. In some cases, for instance, the female employees defied their direct supervisors. For example, a 16-year old shop assistant reported that she and the other apprentice girl, Elly, “didn’t let the warehouse manager tell [them] anything after all.”<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, the bad treatment that female employees had experienced themselves could lead to a change in their own behaviour, as the statement of a female office assistant reveals: “Only one thing has become my guideline for life: to gladly and kindly give information and advice to all young colleagues who are just starting out in commercial work. I have experienced first-hand how difficult such beginnings can be.”<sup>192</sup> This employee thus had experienced strict hierarchical relationships during her apprenticeship as so unpleasant – again, Thompson’s concept of experience can be drawn on here – that she later decided for herself to deal with her subordinates in a completely different way; she wanted to give them advice “gladly and kindly”. ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ locates historical change in a rupture or transformation of practices. Such altered behaviour, of course, did not completely overturn modern bureaucratic hierarchies.<sup>193</sup> It did, however, mean that female employees countered the rigid and hierarchical structures within their own scope of action. Enabling future employees to achieve a modest improvement of their working conditions within the modern impersonal bureaucratic apparatus of the Weimar Republic, they were granted a considerable degree of agency. By drawing on their own experiences and

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<sup>190</sup> Hörbrand, *Die weibliche Handels- und Bureau-Angestellte*, 29-30, 49, 52.

<sup>191</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 58.

<sup>192</sup> Hörbrand, *Die weibliche Handels- und Bureau-Angestellte*, 52.

<sup>193</sup> Reckwitz, “Toward a Theory of Social Practices,” 255. Even though ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ places a strong focus on the agency of historical subjects, these are always placed in the context of existing structures and the resulting possibilities for action. See Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?,” 151; Niethammer, “Anmerkungen zur Alltagsgeschichte,” 232.

adopting new habits, female employees made modernity a little more bearable for themselves and others.

A hierarchical working relationship that should be considered separately from the relationships with colleagues and direct superiors is that of female employees to the 'boss'. Especially in the sources of the younger female employees, this relationship often occupied considerable space. In their essays for Schilfarth's study, they wrote, for instance: "My duty is [...] to please my boss by showing great attentiveness" or "I am very grateful to my boss for all the scolding and all the injustice[.]"<sup>194</sup> While these utterances clearly show the willingness to submit to the hierarchy demanded by bureaucracy, they display a distinct level of submissiveness. Even if social desirability must be taken into account as a factor here, the degree of submissiveness is, nevertheless, striking. Statements, such as "After completing my apprenticeship, I will do my utmost to stand by my master", are more reminiscent of an extended servant's role than of an impersonal bureaucratic relationship.<sup>195</sup> These attitudes can be read as evidence of the "conservative-authoritarian character" of female employees.<sup>196</sup> Benninghaus, by contrast, points out that they are at the same time proof of the success of female socialisation, which demanded docility and obedience from the girls.<sup>197</sup> Similar to what I have already described in the chapter on rationalisation, these attitudes can also be interpreted as the independent attempt of female employees to introduce their own ideals into their bureaucratized working environment, resorting to existing offers of interpretation. By incorporating 'typical female' behaviour, such as caring, submissiveness, and loyalty, into their hierarchical relationships, female employees brought the modern working world into line with their own values, thereby giving meaning to their own actions.

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<sup>194</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 49, 59.

<sup>195</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 50. On impersonal relations required in bureaucratic institutions, see Weber, "Bürokratismus," 160. On this special relationship to the 'boss', also see Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 277.

<sup>196</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), Edited and with an Introduction by Wolfgang Bonss. Cited from Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 277.

<sup>197</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 277.

When traditional girls' socialisation met a modern bureaucratised work environment, female employees tried to strike a balance between modernity's demands and their self-image.

Both in research literature and in contemporary sociological literature, as well as in films and novels, the unbureaucratic, emotional relationship of female white-collar workers to their boss received a great deal of attention in different respects. They were often assumed to have a sexual attachment to him or at least the dream of such. According to Dreyfuss, female white-collar workers, "obsessed with notions of the life of the elegant world", often entered into sexual relationships with their boss for social advancement.<sup>198</sup> Such attributions should be read with caution, however, because, first, they are to be understood as an expression of the contemporary discourse around the supposed promiscuity of 'modern' German women as well as widespread misogynistic general attitudes: Dreyfuss himself cited a "need for social recognition and the narcissistic desire peculiar to the real woman" as the reason for assumed relationships with superiors.<sup>199</sup> Second, in case of much of the relevant secondary literature, they partly reflect the sometimes generalising view of 1970s women's and social history, which drew on those very same sources to note that female employees "[f]illed with Cinderella fantasies aged by the media, [...] dreamed of marrying the boss rather than uniting against his exploitation of their labour and sex."<sup>200</sup> Therefore, it becomes all the more important to rely on the experiences of female employees themselves, rather than on representations and the frequent 'male gaze' of sociological studies.

While Dreyfuss cited sources that found sexual relations between female employees and their bosses to be more common than the public knew, the sources available to me do not confirm such claims.<sup>201</sup> Even though it must be considered that due to the nature of the sources, namely

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<sup>198</sup> Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 77. For similar positions in scholarly literature, see, for example, Frevert, "Kunstseidener Glanz," 28–29.

<sup>199</sup> Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 77–78. On the fear of supposedly 'promiscuous' German women in the interwar period also see, for example, Osborne, "The New Woman and Generation Conflict."

<sup>200</sup> Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 162.

<sup>201</sup> Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 79–80.

enquêtes or school essays, it may hardly have been possible to depict the boss as the “object of material or erotic fantasies“, the narrative of promiscuity should not be carelessly adopted without actual evidence from the sources.<sup>202</sup> Only Rahmer’s diary suggests at one point that she entered into a relationship with a colleague or superior; she noted in 1931: “I believe my fate is about to turn. [...] My boss often glances at me so curiously. Does he love me?”<sup>203</sup> Three months later, she began writing about a man called ‘R.’ with whom she had started a relationship.<sup>204</sup> Whether he was the aforementioned boss cannot be conclusively ascertained. If this was the case, however, the following description of their relationship showed that Rahmer had no financial or marital intentions towards this relationship; it was characterised by genuine affection and, at the same time, inner conflict about its continuation: “[M]y dear R. Today I can’t stop thinking of you. My soul is seeking you. But we can never be together. The gulf that separates us can never be bridged. You shouldn’t have met me after all. It would have been better for me.”<sup>205</sup> Repeatedly, Rahmer noted in her diary that the relationship had no future.<sup>206</sup> It thus shows that the “possibility of ascending to the longed-for sphere of bourgeois luxury“ was most certainly not the driving force behind this relationship.<sup>207</sup> The aim of this thesis is to give the women themselves a voice in the larger processes and, if possible, to re-examine some of the existing perceptions. Rahmer’s experiences and practices show that the assumption that ‘modern women’, aiming for social advancement, constantly and recklessly entered into ‘unprofessional’ erotic relationships with their bosses, that bit with the impersonal nature of modern bureaucracy, should be reassessed critically.

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<sup>202</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 275.

<sup>203</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 25.07.1931, diary no. 2, 55.

<sup>204</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 03.11.1931, diary no. 2, 64.

<sup>205</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 26.02.1932, diary no. 3, 6-7.

<sup>206</sup> Also see Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 06.11.1931, diary no. 2, 64; 10.04.1932, diary no. 3, 12. Chapter 4.2 treats the relationship more in detail.

<sup>207</sup> Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 77.



### 3.2 Living a 'Life of Status': Bureaucracy and Leisure Time

Bureaucratisation is generally strongly linked to changes in the world of work and administration, but the salary regulations in Weber's model also had relevance for the leisure time of female employees. One July evening in 1929, Rahmer excitedly wrote in her diary that the following week, the holiday she had been longing for was finally to begin: "I am incredibly looking forward to it because this year it is going to Munich, Upper Bavaria, and Tyrol. I've had that in mind for a long time, but always had to change my plan and settle for close by because of stupid money."<sup>208</sup> As an avid traveller, it was particularly hard for Rahmer that she had to postpone her holidays several times. While she was able to take this trip in 1929, the following year she was deprived of this opportunity for financial reasons. For weeks, she racked her brains over how she could raise money for a holiday, and despite saving, "the result [was] always the same. It is not enough. That's tough."<sup>209</sup> Rahmer's experiences point to a much-criticised circumstance among white-collar unions: the low pay of female employees in the Weimar Republic.<sup>210</sup> It has been shown above that most of the female employees therefore stayed with their parents until they married. As illustrated by Rahmer, low pay could also bring restrictions in their leisure time routine. Upon her return to the office after the Tyrol trip, Rahmer therefore noted: "Here you are locked up 8 ½ hours a day [...], [for] silly money, which on top of it all is not even enough to lead a decent life."<sup>211</sup> This statement is of considerable importance for the experience of modernity of female employees. According to Weber, the salaries of modern employees as representatives of the 'new middle class', should allow them to achieve just that, they should be able to live a decent life 'befitting their social

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<sup>208</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 22.07.1929, diary no. 1, 47.

<sup>209</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 29.06.1930, diary no. 2, 15.

<sup>210</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 45; "Diskussion über das thema 'Hygiene im Büro und im kaufmännischen Betriebe aus der VII. Jahreshauptversammlung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Gewerbehygiene am 24. September 1930," 58.

<sup>211</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 16.08.1929, diary no. 1, 57-58.

status'.<sup>212</sup> Rahmer's low pay thus meant that, in her opinion, she was increasingly denied one of the features of modern bureaucracy in everyday life.

For most other female employees, the pay was not high either. They earned considerably less than their male colleagues for the same work, usually about 10%.<sup>213</sup> In the big cities as the 'site of modernity', the gross wages of female employees were mostly between 120 and 180 marks, Suhr calculated an average salary of 146 marks. Taxes and insurance contributions had to be deducted from the wages. According to this calculation, female employees had an average of 129 marks to live on, which meant that the salaries did not even reach the subsistence minimum of 140 marks calculated by the ZdA.<sup>214</sup> This socio-historical perspective, the sheer numbers, make a bureaucratic 'status-appropriate' lifestyle for female employees seem almost impossible. Examining the everyday lives of female employees, it shows, however, that many were able to nevertheless claim this aspect of modernity for themselves. Despite their strained financial situation, female employees could spend at least part of their free time according to their preferences.

Asked about what they would do if they could freely decide, 33 out of 85 girls in Schilfarth's study indicated they would like to go dancing, 21 wished to visit a theatre.<sup>215</sup> Historian Annette Koch holds that such activities, along with going to the cinema, became "rare pleasures" for female employees in Weimar modernity, yet the sources do not entirely support this assumption.<sup>216</sup> The majority of female employees who lived in the parental household due to their financial situation, had to hand over some of the money they earned. In very few cases, however, this contribution comprised the entire salary, which left the women a certain leeway to prioritise in their spending

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<sup>212</sup> Weber, "Bürokratismus," 168. In the German original, Rahmer writes "anständiges Leben", which is etymologically linked to Weber's wording of "standesgemäß". Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 16.08.1929, diary no. 1, 58.

<sup>213</sup> Kasten et al., *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Angestellten*, 104, 108; Hörbrand, *Die weibliche Handels- und Bureau-Angestellte*, 58.

<sup>214</sup> Glaß and Kische, *Die wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Verhältnisse der berufstätigen Frauen*, 16; Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 32-33, 35.

<sup>215</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 375. There were, however, also tailors among the respondents.

<sup>216</sup> Koch, "Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik," 170.

on leisure activities.<sup>217</sup> They told of boat trips and visits to the movies, while others used their money to buy cigarettes, chocolate, and liquor.<sup>218</sup> Rahmer, too, frequented dance halls and loved to watch films. To pay for her visits, she sometimes sacrificed other things. After a trip to Heidelberg, for example, she would walk back home because she “bought a film for the fare back to Mannheim.”<sup>219</sup> In spite of her financial shortages, Rahmer thus maintained a certain degree of agency that allowed her to enjoy leisure pursuits. Together with the existence of places like the entertainment complex Haus Vaterland in Berlin, and the fact that “Germans danced as never before”, these statements about everyday life reveal that despite financial scarcity, many female employees were quite able to make use of the new possibilities of the modern leisure culture of the Weimar Republic, thereby living the bureaucratic characteristic of a certain social standing.<sup>220</sup>

Budgetary calculations by the Statistical Office of the German Empire showed that spending on these so-called “cultural need[s]” was higher among white-collar employees than among blue-collar workers.<sup>221</sup> Kracauer interpreted this ‘Angestelltenkultur’ as self-deception; he and other observers diagnosed modern white-collar employees with a “professional ideology [...] [that] stands in a relationship of tension with the actual facts”: as representatives of the ‘new middle class’, the employees constituted a separate ‘estate’, but their wages no longer differed substantially from those of workers.<sup>222</sup> According to Kracauer, they tried to conceal this fact by living a lifestyle supposedly in line with their status. Spending relatively large amounts of money on visits to dance halls, cafés, and cinemas, they sought confirmation of their allegedly higher status to

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<sup>217</sup> Glaß and Kische, *Die wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Verhältnisse der berufstätigen Frauen*, 48–51.

<sup>218</sup> Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 114, 215.

<sup>219</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 16.08.1934, diary no. 1, 102.

<sup>220</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 312. Haus Vaterland on Potsdamer Platz in Berlin was home to various restaurants and entertainment places. Here, it is symbolic of the new leisure and consumer culture of the Weimar Republic. For a vivid description see Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 91–93. On leisure culture in the Weimar Republic see, for example, Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 255–66; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 41–46..

<sup>221</sup> Josef Silbermann, “Die Lebenshaltung Der Weiblichen Handels- Und Büroangestellten,” *Jahrbuch der Frauenarbeit* 5 (1929): 104. Also see Kasten et al., *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Angestellten*, 105.

<sup>222</sup> Quote by Richard Woldt. Cited from Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 81.

which they were entitled to, according to the bureaucratic model, but which was no longer justified financially.<sup>223</sup> For Kracauer, the employees thereby “nurture[d] a false consciousness.”<sup>224</sup>

From the perspective of Marxist-oriented men like Kracauer, this may seem plausible, but as announced in the introduction, this thesis is about giving women a voice in the larger processes. While some of the ego-sources of female employees did reveal a sense of occupational class distinction and a need to distinguish themselves ‘downwards’, their leisure practices should not be reduced exclusively to this need.<sup>225</sup> Rahmer’s visits to cafés and dance halls often simply served the pleasure of dancing and being with friends. There was always a lot of laughter and “the hours flew by in no time at all”.<sup>226</sup> In addition, she not only visited the ‘distraction palaces’ described by Kracauer, but also listened to various lectures on a wide range of subjects, saw art exhibitions and classical concerts, which she described as a “marvellous delight.”<sup>227</sup> Furthermore, she pursued personal studies in her spare time. Several times she mentioned, for example, English lessons, and also attended a course on ‘The Technique of Graphic Arts’: “I already know well how to distinguish copperplate engraving from woodcut and lithography and vice versa. Once I am also able to distinguish the other (e.g. aquatint from mezzotint, etc.), I will truly have made great progress.”<sup>228</sup> This course corresponded to Rahmer’s personal interests. It served her own development, and not merely the pretense of a supposed class affiliation. Another time she attended a lecture on the art of the Ice Age, from which she “[took] a lot [...], especially when it touched on the question of all

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<sup>223</sup> Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 81, 89. On salary differences between white-collar and blue-collar workers, see, for example, Sandra Coyner, “Class patterns of family income and expenditure during the Weimar Republic: German white-collar employees as harbingers of modern society” (Ph. D., Rutgers University, 1975), 172–73.

<sup>224</sup> Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 81. On ‘Angestelltenkultur’ in the Weimar Republic, also see Dirk Stegmann, “Angestelltenkultur in Der Weimarer Republik,” in *Die Kultur Der Zwanziger Jahre*, ed. Werner Faulstich (Munich: Fink, 2008); Canning, “Women and the Politics of Gender,” 160–61.

<sup>225</sup> Some female clerks chose their profession because it sounded much more distinguished than stating that one was, for example, a servant. See Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 38.

<sup>226</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 02.01.1930, diary no. 2, 1.

<sup>227</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 27.09.1932, diary no. 3, 29.

<sup>228</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 20.10.1930, diary no. 2, 28. On the English lessons, see Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 30.07.1932, diary no. 3, 22; 06.07.1934, diary no. 3, 92.

questions, namely birth and death.<sup>229</sup> Rahmer, hence, used the rich artistic and cultural landscape of the Weimar Republic for her own purposes, and not only in the belief that “a life of distraction is at the same time a higher one.”<sup>230</sup> By following her own passions and self-determinedly embracing the greater freedoms for women and the new leisure culture of the Weimar Republic, she emerged as a self-confident agent of cultural modernity.<sup>231</sup> For Rahmer, leading a modern ‘life of status’ was not self-deception, but self-realisation.

A variety of sources indicates that the most important ‘cultural need’ of female employees was not attending the theatre or a café, but the opportunity to travel. For those not wanting to travel alone, the unions offered various options that appealed to different salary levels. Employees with a more flexible financial budget could, for example, spend ten days “in private lodgings” in Oberstdorf for 100 marks, but there were also cheaper options.<sup>232</sup> A full week in a youth hostel in Lüneburg, for instance, cost eleven marks. Relatively inexpensive, these trips enjoyed “very strong popularity among younger employees, [...] it was [therefore recommended] to sign up very early.”<sup>233</sup> The secretary general of the VWA, Josef Silbermann, wrote that it was precisely this vacation that was regarded as a matter of status, and indeed, excursions and holidays took up much more of the female employees’ budget than other expenses did.<sup>234</sup> As indicated above, and in line with Silbermann’s findings, holiday travel also took on a special significance for Rahmer. In 1927 she noted: “Preferably, I would like to change jobs and become a travel companion [...]. Then I could arrange my life according to my liking and wouldn’t have to worry so much about the moods of my

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<sup>229</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 20.10.1930, diary no. 2, 28.

<sup>230</sup> Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 89.

<sup>231</sup> On cultural modernity, see Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 255–66 and Detlev Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne*, Edition Suhrkamp Neue historische Bibliothek 1282 = N.F., 282 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 166–90.

<sup>232</sup> “Fahrt Nach Oberstdorf Im Allgäu,” *Ferienwanderungen und Ferienfreizeiten der Jugend im Verband der weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten e.v. im Sommer 1932*, 15.

<sup>233</sup> “Jugendferienwochen Im Jugendheim in Stemmen, Lüneburger Heide,” *Ferienwanderungen und Ferienfreizeiten der Jugend im Verband der weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten e.v. im Sommer 1932*, 1932, 8.

<sup>234</sup> Silbermann, “Die Lebenshaltung der weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten,” 104.

superiors. And I could see distant lands and seas [...]. I would like to leave straight away for the Black Forest or somewhere else.”<sup>235</sup>

It becomes clear from Rahmer’s account that her desire to travel was by no means just a question of status; rather, two other motives become apparent: on the one hand, travelling simply corresponded to her personal passions. It was not only “distant lands and seas“ that appealed to Rahmer, she also found great happiness in the Black Forest, closer to home. Referring back to contemporary discourses of the youth movement, which valued spending time in nature as the “epitome of personal liberation“, she stated elsewhere: “I love the forest more than anything. The longer I walked, the more I felt its beauty.”<sup>236</sup> As in the case of her leisure activities, travel thus possessed great meaning for Rahmer; it not so much served to confirm her social status as it offered her the opportunity for self-realisation. On the other hand, for Rahmer, travelling represented an escape from her everyday working life that would allow her to evade the “moods of her superiors“. This motive regularly appears in Rahmer’s entries about upcoming or already undertaken holiday trips. She experienced holidays as compensation; after having “worked day in, day out all year [...] [, in the] occupation [she] hated so much [...] [she] really needed a rest.”<sup>237</sup> Again, travelling was not just an attempt to deceive herself about a certain status, but represented a real need to compensate for everyday life in the modern working world, and at the same time reflected Rahmer’s desire for a self-determined life that could be “to her liking“.

In order to afford holidays despite their often-strained financial situation, not only Rahmer but also many other employees saved throughout the year and restricted themselves in other needs instead.<sup>238</sup> Kracauer assessed such behaviour by employees as devoting “themselves to an

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<sup>235</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 28.04.1927, diary no. 1, 2-3.

<sup>236</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 262; Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 18.07.1927, diary no. 1, 15. Rahmer wrote these words after hiking alone.

<sup>237</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 08.07.1927, diary no. 1, 11. Silbermann also pointed out that the leave was needed as compensation for work. Silbermann, “Die Lebenshaltung der weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten,” 104.

<sup>238</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 46; Silbermann, “Die Lebenshaltung der weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten,” 104; Koch, “Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik,” 170.

individualism that could be justified only if they could still shape their fate as individuals.<sup>239</sup> From the women's point of view, however, a different picture emerges. With the practice of this very holiday, they fulfilled their individual needs, whether it was in fact status-related, or rather self-realisation and a balance to the modern work environment. Indeed, changes in economic structures meant that female employees in the Weimar Republic were less well remunerated than Weber's bureaucratic model had envisaged. As self-determined women, however, they found ways and means to counter these tensions of modernity. By consciously allocating their budget and limiting their needs in other areas of everyday life, the female employees were able to reconcile the reality of their low salary with their own demands for both a bureaucratic 'life according to their status', as well as for their self-fulfilment, and as a balance to their everyday working life. It was precisely through these actions and decisions that they indeed *did* shape their individual fate in Weimar modernity.

The examination of female employees' experiences and practices thus shows that bureaucratic characteristics appeared in varying degrees in their daily lives. Their career opportunities were rather limited, yet at the same time they were integrated into strict bureaucratic hierarchies. Nevertheless, these women succeeded in realising themselves within the limited opportunities for promotion, and also in shaping hierarchical relationships according to their own needs. While they demonstrated very modern attitudes towards professional work regarding careers, their workplace relationships were sometimes characterised by rather traditional tendencies. In spite of financial scarcity, making it difficult for female employees to lead a bureaucratic life of status, they still asserted their own claims to leisure time. Their activities did not merely serve distraction from work or to delude themselves about their social status, but reflected their self-realisation. The everyday life of female employees under the bureaucratic

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<sup>239</sup> Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 81.

aspect of modernity thus displays a complexity that urges us not to merely categorise these women into a single pigeonhole.

While workplace hierarchies often were characterised by strict top-down control and discipline, Foucault identified another type of disciplining for modern society. Based on observation and the imposing of norms, people's bodies were increasingly subjected to disciplining in modernity. The following chapter examines how female employees experienced these tendencies in their everyday lives.



## 4 SOCIAL DISCIPLINING

### 4.1 “A Smooth, Pretty Face”: Disciplining and the Workplace

As twelve-year-old Frieda entered the consulting room of physician Else Kienle in the early 1930s, her face was swollen and bloody. The diagnosis read ‘open tuberculosis’, her chances of survival were slim. Frieda, however, was mainly worried about her appearance: “Will my skin get better? Will I get a smooth, pretty face?”<sup>240</sup> When the doctor, knowing about the inevitable future scars, joked about Frieda’s vanity, she revealed the source of her worries: “It’s not about that, doctor! If I keep a scarred face, I can never get a good position! My sister always says: Frieda, I don’t think they’ll take you into any office like that.”<sup>241</sup> One year after seeing the doctor, Frieda died of tuberculosis.<sup>242</sup> In the face of the fatal illness, Frieda’s concern about her appearance almost seems grotesque. Yet her worries shed light on the way female employees experienced modernity in the Weimar Republic: it was not vanity, as Kienle suspected, that caused Frieda to worry about her appearance, but a fear, dominating everyday life and disease, that her sister’s statement would come true, and that she would never find a position in an office without “a smooth, pretty face”.

During the Weimar Republic, many contemporaries complained about the supposedly strong emphasis that female employees placed on appearance and clothing. While these omnipresent objections to female employees’ ‘grooming addiction’ testify to the fact that in Weimar modernity “the attempts at disciplining left no part of the female body untouched”, Frieda’s experiences cast a spotlight on another widely criticised aspect of modernity: in the Weimar Republic, the external appearance of female employees gained considerable importance

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<sup>240</sup> Else Kienle, *Frauen: Aus Dem Tagebuch Einer Ärztin* (Berlin: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1932), 75. Kienle was a physician in the Weimar Republic and one of the central figures in the struggle for the abolition of §218, which prohibited abortions. On her activism and for a biographical overview, see Katja Patzel-Mattern, “Das ‘Gesetz der Frauenwürde’: Else Kienle und der Kampf um den Paragraphen 218 in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Bad Girls: Unangepasste Frauen von der Antike bis heute*, ed. Anke Väth (Konstanz: UVK Verl.-Ges, 2003).

<sup>241</sup> Kienle, *Frauen*, 76.

<sup>242</sup> Kienle, *Frauen*, 76.

in their everyday working life.<sup>243</sup> The main reasons were, on the one hand, the fact that as a result of rationalisation, economic necessity, and changes in attitudes towards working, significantly more women were available to work in white-collar occupations which is why the expectations and demands related to women's appearance increased.<sup>244</sup> Kracauer, for example, noted that an increased rush to beauty salons corresponded to women's genuine existential concerns.<sup>245</sup> On the other hand, shop owners relied to a growing extent on the appearance of their female employees, in order to boost sales, and were therefore happy to hire 'attractive' women.<sup>246</sup> In extreme cases, refusal to comply with prescriptions related to appearance, could even result in termination. The Labour Court heard the case of a dismissed female shoe saleswoman who had refused to wear "flattering lingerie" in order to present the "most pleasant" view possible to male customers when climbing the ladder in the shop, a practice confirmed by other women.<sup>247</sup> Modernisation thus placed increased pressure on female employees to look attractive while operating in the labour market, and thereby subjected their bodies to multiple forms of disciplinary power in everyday life.<sup>248</sup>

Female employees' very experiences regarding body and appearance, as well as their reactions to bodily disciplining, are reflected, among other things, in the meticulous, medical examinations of apprentices. Carried out several times during their apprenticeships, these examinations recorded every physical detail, from "flat feet" to an "unstable posture" to

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<sup>243</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 252. Complaints from contemporaries can be found in various places. See, for example, Elise Deutsch, *Jugendlichen-Pädagogik: Aus Der Erfahrung Dargestellt* (Berlin, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1921), 28; "Soll Sich Ein Junges Mädchen Der Modernen Schönheitsmittel Bedienen?," *Junge Kräfte. Jugendzeitschrift des Verbandes der weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten E.V.* 22 (1931): 103–4.

<sup>244</sup> Koch, "Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik," 172; Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 21–22.

<sup>245</sup> Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 39.

<sup>246</sup> Frevert, "Kunstseidener Glanz," 28; Ingrid Sharp, "Riding the Tiger: Ambivalent Images of the New Woman in the Popular Press of the Weimar Republic," in *New Woman Hybridities: Femininity, Feminism and International Consumer Culture, 1880-1930*, ed. Ann Heilmann and Margaret Beetham (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 132. On 'sexual role play' in women's white-collar work, also see Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 161–62.

<sup>247</sup> Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 126. Dreyfuss quoted the employer's words here.

<sup>248</sup> Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 161–62.

“gynaecological diseases“.<sup>249</sup> The condition of eyes, skin, and teeth was also observed; and it shows that looks indeed played a greater role for female employees than for other groups of apprentices. Compared to the other occupational groups, female commercial apprentices paid the most attention on dental and skin care; and some girls were persuaded only with difficulty to wear glasses.<sup>250</sup> Similar to Kienle, the investigating vocational school doctor Emilie Düntzer concluded that these apprentices refused glasses “for vanity reasons“.<sup>251</sup> Yet, attitudes and behaviour of these female employees should not be casually dismissed as mere ‘vanity’, but must be seen in the context of the experiences of women in the Weimar Republic. Düntzer, for example, already noted in the following sentence that glasses were not appreciated by employers, especially in grocery shops. In various other sources, too, it becomes apparent that Frieda’s and the other female clerks’ worries about their appearance were quite justified.<sup>252</sup> Girls with an ‘unattractive’ figure were reluctantly taken on as apprentices and career counsellors officially demanded that shop assistants should be “of medium height, if possible, [and] without disfiguring or off-putting skin rashes or scars.“<sup>253</sup> The medical examinations that apprentices, but also applicants who wanted to change jobs, had to undergo for this purpose, are all the more an expression of modern disciplining.<sup>254</sup> In accordance with the Foucauldian knowledge-power-complex, they had a reinforcing effect: with the meticulous recording of physical details, including whether someone had acne, supposedly objective, ‘true knowledge’ about female employees was produced.<sup>255</sup> The examinations defined “a ‘new micro-physics’ of power”, which made it possible to weed out, as one contemporary guide

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<sup>249</sup> Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 18-19, 24-29.

<sup>250</sup> Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 20–21.

<sup>251</sup> Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 20.

<sup>252</sup> Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 20.

<sup>253</sup> Böckling, “Die Verkäuferin in ihrer Lehrzeit,” 482. Also see Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 249.

<sup>254</sup> On the focus on appearances of female employees and the “confidential medical examinations” carried out in this context, see Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 177–78. Also see Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*.

<sup>255</sup> On the production of ‘truth’, see Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality; with Two Lectures and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, ed. Graham Burchell and Michel Foucault (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 79. On the recording of acne, see Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 32.

put it, “non-suitable new blood[.]”<sup>256</sup> The construction of binary categories, such as ‘suitable’ and ‘non-suitable’, put additional pressure on women, as they had to fear not meeting the norms and consequently not being considered for the white-collar profession due to their physical appearance. Modernity, therefore, did indeed bring an ever-increasing exertion of disciplinary power on female employees’ bodies.

Bodily disciplining and the pressure on female employees to look their best were amplified by the rise of mass advertising and consumerism in the 1920s.<sup>257</sup> Thought to be easy to manipulate, women were discovered as modern consumers and advertising targeted their fears in an attempt to persuade them to buy consumer products. Addressing the modern working woman, advertising promoted fashion and beauty products, promising better chances on the job market. They touted that “[t]he pretty girl sells more, [and] the boss prefers to dictate his letters to a pretty girl” or presented the reason for another job rejection: “Despite great skill, your outer appearance just wasn’t appealing enough!”<sup>258</sup> They stoked the fears of girls and women like Frieda of not looking good enough for a white-collar job, and, by promoting their products like soap for a “youthful complexion”, simultaneously provided the solution to the problem.<sup>259</sup> Thus, skepticism about glasses or an increased focus on beauty and skin care, can be interpreted as an expression of a particular vanity or a ‘grooming addiction’. Against the background of the experiences of female employees and the omnipresent disciplining of their bodies in the Weimar Republic, however, they can also be read as an understandable reaction of women to the increased demands on appearance and attractiveness that modernity had set for them. Their everyday bodily practices of beauty and

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<sup>256</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, 139; Böckling, “Die Verkäuferin in ihrer Lehrzeit,” 482.

<sup>257</sup> Gisela von Wysocki, “Der Aufbruch der Frauen: verordnete Träume, Bubikopf und ‘sachliches Leben’: Ein aktueller Streifzug durch SCHERL’s Magazin, Jahrgang 1925, Berlin,” in *Massenkommunikationsforschung 3: Produktanalysen*, ed. Dieter Prokop, Orig.-Ausg, Fischer-Taschenbücher Bücher des Wissens 6343 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verl., 1977), 298; Sharp, “Riding the Tiger,” 120, 127, 129.

<sup>258</sup> Gabriele Tergit, “Anspruchsvolle Mädchen,” in *Atem Einer Anderen Welt: Berliner Reportagen*, ed. Jens Brüning (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 46; “Und Wieder Nichts...,” *UHU* 8, no. 4 (1931/1932): 108. Also see Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 266–67.

<sup>259</sup> “Advertisement for Palmoliven Soap,” *UHU*, 1932. Cited from Koch, “Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik,” 173.

skin care, using objects like soap or rejecting objects like glasses, must be seen as a consequence of the mental activity of understanding that they were to look their best for modernity. Taught as consumers that “nowadays, pretty isn’t something you are, it’s something you can become” and exposed to the constant address and disciplining of their bodies in the modern work environment, it is therefore not surprising that female employees, and young girls like Frieda, paid increased attention to their appearance.<sup>260</sup> In carrying out new beauty practices, female employees paradoxically became agents of this part of modernity themselves, for through their enforced participation, such logic perpetuated itself and the demands on appearance continued to increase.

Further insight into the experiences and practices of female employees is provided by analyses of their monetary expenditures. The examination of 142 household accounts of female employees showed that many of them spent above-average amounts of money on clothing, some spending more than ¼ of their total expenses.<sup>261</sup> The increased spending by female employees on fashion items, has partly been interpreted as a compensation for the “humiliating and depressing experiences of their everyday working life”.<sup>262</sup> The experiences and practices of female clerks paint a more complex picture. On the one hand, being a white-collar employee required careful dress and a well-groomed appearance, “[i]n noble shops and finer banks [...] [clerks] wear their best clothes to the office.”<sup>263</sup> The importance attached to a neat appearance and the higher expenses that often came with it are simply to be understood as a response to the demands made towards female employees. Although women were undeniably subjected to increasing bodily disciplining in modernity, they should, on the other hand, not be regarded merely as victims that were turned into docile bodies, as the memories of hosiery saleswoman Grete Rücker show:

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<sup>260</sup> Tergit, “Anspruchsvolle Mädchen,” 46. Also see Annelie Ramsbrock and David Burnett, *The Science of Beauty: Culture and Cosmetics in Modern Germany, 1750-1930*, Worlds of Consumption (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 119.

<sup>261</sup> Silbermann, “Die Lebenshaltung der weiblichen Handels- und Büroangestellten,” 65, 104.

<sup>262</sup> Frevert, “Kunstseidener Glanz,” 28.

<sup>263</sup> Otto Andreas, *Gesellschaftlicher Wegweiser Für Alle Lebenslagen*, 5th ed. (Weidlingen, 1931), 221. Cited from Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 177. Also see Kracauer, *The salaried masses*, 39; Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 250.

“I wore my hair in snails and reform dresses with wooden wreaths and sandals, and I also went to the shop like that. And the boss [...] says to me: What are you doing? You can’t stand behind the counter like that!’ – ‘Yes, I don’t allow that, no way.’ I left, went to another branch. [...] It was a beautiful black dress with a silver-grey drawn stripe at the top of the neck, very pretty.”<sup>264</sup>

Unimpressed by her employer’s attempted disciplining of her body and style of dress, Rücker followed her own ideas of “beautiful” clothing and, in the end, even changed branches to be able to continue wearing them. This way, she fought for the freedom to live her everyday life in modernity according to her own ideas, in reform clothes instead of the clothes preferred by her boss. The way she stood up for her own style did not reflect a superficial distraction by “narcissistic fashion fetishism”, but is an expression of her self-realisation.<sup>265</sup> Moreover, her dressing practice demonstrates that the representations of the ‘new woman’ in advertisements and magazines cannot be uncritically adopted as a mirror of reality. Within the disciplinary structures of modernity, girls and women thus certainly possessed agency. Despite increased pressure, they knew how to find self-fulfilment in matters of body and appearance, without merely seeking to compensate for their everyday working lives or necessarily having to follow every attempt of bodily disciplining them.

Another example of individual self-realisation and the defiance of bodily disciplining is provided by Rahmer, who in 1929 had her hair cut in the bobbed ‘Bubikopf’ style so characteristic of the ‘modern woman’. In one perspective, Rahmer thus followed the advertised ‘modern’ fashion trends.<sup>266</sup> However, her diary entries show that the new haircut was accompanied by a conscious rebellion against attempted disciplining and at the same time marked her self-confident departure into modernity:

“Today, everyone was delighted with my Bubikopf, with the exception of one colleague [...]. I gave him the appropriate response, of course. [...] [M]y boss [...] was, contrary to my assumption, very complimentary about it. But that hardly touched me. The main

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<sup>264</sup> Rücker, *Mutter stand immer hinter mir*, 22.

<sup>265</sup> Frevert, “Vom Klavier zur Schreibmaschine,” 100.

<sup>266</sup> Sabine Hake, “In the Mirror of Fashion,” in Ankum, *Women in the Metropolis*, 186–87; Boak, *Women in the Weimar Republic*, 269.

thing remains that I consider it right to do my hair as I want.“ “Why should one not break with tradition? For the sake of the people? I don’t see that at all. We are living in a new age after all!”<sup>267</sup>

Most employees thus reacted positively to Rahmer’s new hairstyle, but two of the reactions particularly stood out and found their way into Rahmer’s diary. One male colleague expressed his dislike of the haircut, after which Rahmer clearly put him in his place, thus demonstrating considerable resistance to this attempt of disciplining. From her boss, Rahmer expected a similar negative reaction. When the latter, by contrast, spoke in praise of the short hair, Rahmer made clear that even this positive feedback had little meaning to her. It was not a matter of impressing anyone else, or of meeting anyone else’s preferences.<sup>268</sup> The central point about this haircut, the “main thing“, was that Rahmer did her hair the way *she* wanted, which also makes it irrelevant that the bob was in vogue at that time. From Rahmer’s perspective, the short hair only corresponded to her self-realisation. Here, the emancipating element of the new hairstyle becomes evident. At the same time, Rahmer’s words show that she was well aware of belonging to a “new age“ and that she experienced the bob as the equivalent of this departure, as “breaking“ with an outdated time. Wearing short hair has been interpreted, among other things, as a practice of rationalisation and as an emancipatory act.<sup>269</sup> Rahmer’s practices and experiences enrich this image by a further nuance: her decision to bob her hair is to be understood as a self-realising moment in a modern world that increasingly subjected women to the disciplining of their bodies. By cutting her hair, Rahmer turned herself into a ‘modern woman’, while resisting the disciplining tendencies of the Weimar Republic that Peukert, Weber, and Foucault identified in modern society.

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<sup>267</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 11.04.1929, diary no. 1, 39; 15.04.1929, diary no. 1, 39.

<sup>268</sup> A survey among employees showed that 78% approved of short hair on women. Fromm, *The working class in Weimar Germany*, 154.

<sup>269</sup> Grossman, *The New Woman, the New Family and the Rationalization of Sexuality*, 42–44; Fromm, *The working class in Weimar Germany*, 150, 152, 158.

Cultural historian Mila Ganeva notes that fashion was central to women's experience of modernity in Weimar Germany.<sup>270</sup> For female employees, I would like to expand this statement. It was not only fashion itself, but the bodily disciplining which came with economic modernisation and the emerging consumer society that was a central part of their experience of modernity in the Weimar Republic. Anxieties like Frieda's, and female employees' increased attention to appearance and attractiveness, can thus be interpreted as reactions to the demands of modernity. However, the fact that these women experienced the disciplining of their appearance did not mean that they had nothing to set against it. Within the scope of action given to them, they held a certain degree of agency to style their bodies according to their own preferences, as was demonstrated by Rahmer and Rücker. The claim that women experienced a "new, repressive uniformisation" thus proves to be only partially true, for they certainly knew how to fight for a bit of self-determination within their field-of-force in modernity.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Mila Ganeva, *Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918-1933*, Screen Cultures: German Film and the Visual (New York: Boydell & Brewer Group Ltd, 2014), 1.

<sup>271</sup> Koch, "Die weiblichen Angestellten in der Weimarer Republik," 173.



## 4.2 Relationships, Sexuality, and Family: Disciplining in the Leisure Sphere

In the second volume of her survey, Schilfarth asked the girls about their attitudes towards relationships, marriage, and children. A 15-year-old female clerk candidly stated in response: "I am heavily into flirting [...]; one must, [sic!] use the opportunity to romp around in one's youth."<sup>272</sup> For this young office employee, confident flirting was thus a natural part of living it up in adolescence, yet at the same time her awareness of a temporal limitation to this phase becomes apparent. While her statement implied the intention of a future marriage, a 16-year-old saleswoman, by contrast, firmly rejected this traditional future planning: "I'd rather not get married, at least I wouldn't have to worry about having to bear children then, no, that would be the worst for me."<sup>273</sup>

Both employees' answers must have made the pulse of many contemporary observers beat faster, as they seemed to confirm widespread social fears: the 'modern woman' was reportedly sexually licentious and concerned only with her own pleasure. She was no longer interested in marriage, and, worst of all, did not want to bear any more children for the German people, who had been decimated by the First World War.<sup>274</sup> It was for these reasons that the issues of sex and family became the focus of social interest in the Weimar Republic, and the 'new woman' was given a central role. Her body and sexuality were subjected to ever stronger disciplining in Weimar modernity, a reality to which female employees, as the most important representatives of the 'modern woman', also found themselves exposed.<sup>275</sup> Various parties, including the state, the

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<sup>272</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 114.

<sup>273</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 154.

<sup>274</sup> For a more elaborate discussion on these fears see Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 101–2; Sharp, "Riding the Tiger," 121; Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 150; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 305; Moritz Föllmer, "Auf der Suche nach dem eigenen Leben: Junge Frauen und Individualität in der Weimarer Republik," in *Die "Krise" der Weimarer Republik: Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters*, ed. Moritz Föllmer and Rüdiger Graf (Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl., 2005), 288; Osborne, "The New Woman and Generation Conflict," 137; Grossman, *The New Woman, the New Family and the Rationalization of Sexuality*, 55–60.

<sup>275</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 298–299, 308, 327–329; Atina Grossman, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann B. Snitow, Stansell Christine and Thompson Sharon, New feminist library (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 154–58.

church, and social groups exerted disciplinary power; in addition to population policy motives, rationalisation aspects, such as striving for health, hygiene, and 'more natural' sex, also played a role.<sup>276</sup> Depending on the objectives, the means of choice took on diverse guises, from education in 'correct' technique, to §218 of the penal code, which banned abortions, to eugenic measures.<sup>277</sup> However, all parties and objectives had one thing in common: women's sex and bodies became a matter of public interest.<sup>278</sup> How then did female employees experience this modern disciplining of their sexuality and bodies, and were they indeed the kind of 'modern woman' that so many contemporaries feared?

Seemingly confirming concerns about the 'modern woman', a significant number of female employees interviewed by Schilfarth had a premarital relationship or at least wished for one.<sup>279</sup> Statements, such as "So far I still possess a great deal of aversion to a young gentleman", were in the minority in Schilfarth's survey.<sup>280</sup> Düntzer, however, held that the "mass suggestion that almost all girls [...] have relationships [...] [was] greatly exaggerated."<sup>281</sup> It follows that, first of all, the social fears that all 'new women' were rushing headlong into premarital relationships were overblown.

Among the employees who wrote about their relationships and relationship desires, it becomes apparent that from their perspective it was quite normal to flirt and go out with men even before marriage. They told of visits to the cinema and boat trips with their "grooms" and a 15-year-old clerk wrote in all candour that she would like to find herself a "handsome, dashing man [...] as a lover. There's a popular song that goes: 'Every woman needs a little lover'."<sup>282</sup> Like the employee

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<sup>276</sup> Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 101–2; Grossman, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," 154–56.

<sup>277</sup> Grossman, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," 158–62; Atina Grossman, "Abortion and Economic Crisis: The 1931 Campaign Against § 218 in Germany," *New German Critique*, 1978.

<sup>278</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 328–29; Grossman, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," 154–56.

<sup>279</sup> See, for example, Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 223; Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 111–114, 120; Deutsch, *Jugendlichen-Pädagogik*, 27–29.

<sup>280</sup> This statement was made by a 16-year-old female office clerk. Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 134.

<sup>281</sup> Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 29.

<sup>282</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 114, 111.

quoted at the beginning of this subchapter, other young women also often felt that flirting and going out was a phase of life to which they were rightfully entitled to, and in which they could “really have a good romp”.<sup>283</sup> A look at the social background of the female employees proves to be particularly interesting. The majority of shop assistants came from working-class and artisan households; among office workers there were significantly more girls and women who came from middle-class households.<sup>284</sup> While it was not uncommon for working-class girls to have premarital relationships with men even around 1900, for daughters from middle-class households this had been scandalous.<sup>285</sup> In this respect, the attitudes of the females as quoted here indicate a shift. We also see a greater liberation from the disciplining of their bodies and relationships for daughters from bourgeois households in the ‘peak of modernity’, as well as the asserting of their individual needs.

Female employees confidently defended this freedom against potential attempts of disciplining that would have preferred to see them in a more traditional role, and thus knew how to stand up for their own needs. This is illustrated, for example, by the aforementioned “flirting” clerk, who went on to note that her mother was “sometimes after her [because of the flirting], but that doesn’t ruin things, when it has stopped for a while, you start all over again.”<sup>286</sup> The statements of the female employees are particularly telling, in that they were made despite the disciplining character of Schilfarth’s survey, which directed a certain amount of social desirability at the girls and their traditional female role. In this respect, the increase in observation and the accompanying disciplining identified by Foucault for modernity becomes clear.<sup>287</sup> Knowing that an authority figure

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<sup>283</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 132.

<sup>284</sup> Benninghaus, *Die anderen Jugendlichen*, 246-247, 258-259.

<sup>285</sup> Shop assistants often came from a working-class background, where it had already been customary to have premarital relations before the First World War. Around 1900, a similar social background was found among female servants, for example, for whom premarital relations were common. See Dorothee Wierling, *Mädchen Für Alles: Arbeitsalltag Und Lebensgeschichte Städtischer Dienstmädchen Um Die Jahrhundertwende* (Berlin: Dietz, 1987), 173–74; Ute Frevert, *Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann: Geschlechter-Differenzen in der Moderne*, Beck’sche Reihe 1100 (Munich: Beck, 1995), 187–88.

<sup>286</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 114.

<sup>287</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 63; Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, 136–38.

would read the essays, that they would be 'observed' by Schilfarth, the apprentices were encouraged to demonstrate the 'correct' behaviour. The openness, with which they, nevertheless, wrote about these topics, indicates that a considerable proportion of female employees certainly possessed a very modern attitude towards premarital relationships and dared to articulate and live it out publicly. Despite still widespread traditional demands on young women in the Weimar Republic, they consciously led the everyday lives of modern, young women, resisting the expectations of their elders, the 'old women'.<sup>288</sup> Historian Cornelia Osborne argues that after the First World War a new generation of women emerged who differed in their values and ideas from the pre-war generations.<sup>289</sup> For female employees, this can be confirmed. Despite disciplinary attempts, it had indeed become much more normal for them to have premarital relationships; as 'modern women' they confidently pursued their individual interests.

In the context of premarital relations, the alleged 'promiscuity' of 'modern women' was a much-discussed topic. Despite her concession to young women engaging in premarital relations less often than the public invoked, Düntzer, for example, nevertheless saw "signs of a worrying moral decay" and Schilfarth also held that "the 'intercourse' – as sexual union is referred to in the girls' jargon – is [...] only a matter of time given their erotic attitude."<sup>290</sup> The diary of Rahmer offers an insight into the extent to which the female employees did in fact have extramarital sexual relations, respectively into their attitudes towards such.

The conclusions drawn from the Schilfarth essays are, first of all, confirmed by Rahmer's notes. The young office worker often met men in her free time, sometimes she got to know "two charming gentlemen from the Reichswehr", another time she went on several walks with a young doctor.<sup>291</sup> She always confidently followed her own preferences and, for example, cancelled dates

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<sup>288</sup> On the conflict between 'old woman' and 'new woman', see Grossmann, "Eine 'neue Frau' im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?," 141.

<sup>289</sup> Osborne, "The New Woman and Generation Conflict," 138.

<sup>290</sup> Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 29; Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 112.

<sup>291</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 12.07.1931, diary no. 2, 54; 18.10.1932, diary no. 3, 33.

if they did not suit her.<sup>292</sup> In every respect, Rahmer thus supported the image of the modern, young woman who defied traditional role models by having premarital relationships with men, thereby pursuing her personal needs. Contrary to Düntzer's and Schilfarth's fears, however, Rahmer explicitly rejected any sexual activity, both in her trysts and in a later, more serious commitment. In 1927 she had taken a vow: "I now take a vow to myself that I will never become involved with a man before the time, that I will keep my youth pure either until the marriage altar or until the bier of death. I would rather become a dried-up old maid than a woman deprived of her honour."<sup>293</sup> Despite her modern attitude towards premarital relations, Rahmer thus held on to the traditional idea that a woman would be bereft of her "honour" if she had premarital sex.<sup>294</sup> She did not change this attitude when, in the summer of 1931, she fell in love with a man she called 'R.', and with whom she had a long-term relationship.<sup>295</sup> Although she repeatedly noted when she and 'R.' had "kissed intimately", Rahmer otherwise did not allow herself or him any further sexual activity and rejected other men every time they came too close and wanted "something".<sup>296</sup> For this reason, Rahmer was several times accused by her friend Karin of not having "the courage to live".<sup>297</sup> Rahmer's recurring reference to Karin's comments reveals that she felt exposed to a certain pressure and thus sheds light on an interesting aspect of sexual disciplining in modernity: the social changes in sexual relations, especially in more emancipated circles, could equally subject 'modern women' to pressure to be particularly sexually progressive, otherwise accusing them of not having the "courage to live" or citing a number of alleged psychological reasons for refusing to do so.<sup>298</sup> Social

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<sup>292</sup> After going out with a man called Fritz for a while and getting annoyed with him, she noted, for example, that she did not yet know whether she would keep the next date. Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 13.10.1932, diary no. 3, 32. Also see Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 10.04.1932, diary no. 3, 12.

<sup>293</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 19.05.1927, diary no. 1, 6.

<sup>294</sup> On the concept of honour and gender-specific differences, see Frevert, *Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann*, 187–88.

<sup>295</sup> As discussed above, it is possible that 'R.' was Rahmer's boss.

<sup>296</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 23.12.1933, diary no. 3, 71; 27.11.1932, diary no. 3, 37. Also see Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 12.02.1932, diary no. 3, 3-4.

<sup>297</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 13.10.1932, diary no. 3, 32. Also see Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 03.04.1932, diary no. 3, 12.

<sup>298</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 322.

disciplining in terms of sexual relationships in modernity was thus not to be understood in only one direction but could also occur as a push for supposed progressivity. In her refusal to give in to this pressure, Rahmer stood her ground against this kind of modern disciplining and lived according to her own principles.

Focusing on Rahmer's experiences is not to negate the fact that other female employees did indeed engage in premarital sexual relationships.<sup>299</sup> However, Rahmer's entries allow a more realistic approach to the perspective of a 'typical' female employee, often only explored ex negativo or based on representations in contemporary novels.<sup>300</sup> A complex picture emerges: Rahmer adapted her relationships and sexuality to her own needs of a 'mix' of traditional and modern. On the one hand, she confidently went out with men, even exchanged "intimate kisses" and led a very modern, self-determined life in this respect. On the other hand, she rejected premarital sex for traditional reasons, such as female "honour". It therefore becomes evident that female employees, despite being subjected to modern disciplinary tendencies, pursued their own agenda and cannot be easily pigeonholed as either 'modern' or 'traditional'.

Large sections of Weimar's society were very concerned about women's more self-confident approach to relationships and sexuality and linked it to the decline in birth rates. The fact that white-collar employees were marrying at ever later ages, and having an average of only 1.3 children, increased Malthusian population policy fears "that this natural procreation is no longer sufficient to maintain the national population and the family."<sup>301</sup> Rejections of husband and

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<sup>299</sup> The fact that Karin repeatedly criticised Rahmer for her sexual abstinence suggests that she had already engaged in sexual relations herself, but the records do not indicate whether Karin was also an employee. Also, Düntzer recorded 11 pregnancies and 3 abortions, however without specifying the profession. See Düntzer, *Die gesundheitliche und soziale Lage der erwerbstätigen weiblichen Jugend*, 35. On the 'sexual revolution' in the Weimar Republic, also see Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 305; Atina Grossman, *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>300</sup> See, for example, the sexual relations of protagonist Doris in Keun, *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*.

<sup>301</sup> Kasten et al., *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Angestellten*, 42 The birth rate in the Weimar Republic was half of what it had been around 1900, in 1933 more than 35% of married couples in Berlin were childless. For statistics see Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 305; Grossman, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," 157.

children, such as from the saleswoman quoted at the beginning of this subchapter, led contemporaries to suspect that the reasons for this decline lied in the fact that the modern woman, “selfish and predatory”, was no longer interested in her traditional marital and maternal duties.<sup>302</sup>

A closer look at Schilfarth’s study shows, however, that a complete rejection of marriage and motherhood on the part of female employees was the absolute exception. Only about one percent of the surveyed clerks were specifically against marriage, and only far less than one percent rejected having children altogether.<sup>303</sup> It thus becomes all the more clear at this point that the choice of answers printed in the book corresponds to Schilfarth’s own selection bias. It is also to be understood as a reflection of the prejudices of an older generation of women towards the ‘new woman’, and must therefore by no means be regarded as representative.<sup>304</sup> Even if, as argued above, temporary employment was an integral part of many female white-collar employees’ identity, and they did “properly enjoy the pleasures of youth”, the overwhelming majority at some point wanted to live the everyday life of a “real German housewife and mother”.<sup>305</sup>

The attitudes of female employees towards marriage and motherhood must be seen in the context of contemporary disciplinary efforts. From various sides, women in the Weimar Republic were ‘educated’ that marriage and motherhood were ultimately the true destinies of every woman. Not only was §218, the article of the German criminal code that harshly abolished abortion, an expression of the prioritisation of women’s ‘maternity duties’ in Weimar modernity.<sup>306</sup> The churches, too, stressed that “marriage is not for indulging in passion, it is rather for serving your children”, and the VWA prepared young female employees for a post-professional career as wife

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<sup>302</sup> Sharp, “Riding the Tiger,” 121 On the accusations directed at the ‘new woman’, also see Osborne, “The New Woman and Generation Conflict,” 137.

<sup>303</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 376.

<sup>304</sup> The reports on the ‘new woman’ were often compiled by the ‘old woman’. On the generation conflict, see Grossmann, “Eine ‘neue Frau’ im Deutschland der Weimarer Republik?,” 141.

<sup>305</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 132; Schilfarth, *Berufsgestaltung*, 224.

<sup>306</sup> See Grossman, “Abortion and economic crisis: The 1931 campaign against § 218 in Germany”; Grossman, *Reforming Sex*.

and mother.<sup>307</sup> The sources of female employees show that many of them had internalised the importance of being a mother. This is, for instance, evidenced by statements in Schilfarth's survey, such as that "wife and mother [...] is also a woman's most proper profession", as well as by Rahmer's explicit praise of the introduction of Mother's Day. She considered it right "to commemorate the mothers who have given children to the German people once a year."<sup>308</sup> Female employees' traditional attitudes towards motherhood and family were thus hardly affected by their very modern attitudes towards premarital relations. Consequently, the fears of contemporaries have proven to be largely unfounded. In the Weimar Republic, one could very well be a modern woman and yet be far from renouncing motherhood.

The aim of many female employees, to marry and become mothers after a limited period of employment, may seem very traditional and almost backward from today's perspective.<sup>309</sup> I suggest a slightly different interpretation. Undoubtedly, actions and desires can never be considered detached from their context of origin and prevailing structures. For female employees, this meant that female middle-class socialisation, which prepared most women early on to be housewives and mothers at some point, undeniably played a role in shaping their aspirations. However, we need to avoid measuring historical subjects by one's own standards. The life purposes of female employees should be taken seriously and considered legitimate, despite their origins. The pursuit of one's own aspirations and desires as well as the conscious planning of one's own life, even if it appears traditional from today's perspective, undoubtedly contained emancipatory elements that made female employees modern agents of their own lives.

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<sup>307</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 19.06.1927, diary no. 1, 10. Sermon by a Catholic priest, quoted and approved by Rahmer. On the role of the churches, also see Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 324–27. On the VWA, see Lorentz, *Aufbruch oder Rückschritt?*, 26.

<sup>308</sup> Schilfarth, *Lebensgestaltung*, 138; Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 08.05.1927, diary no. 1, 6. On Mother's Day, also see Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik*, 110.

<sup>309</sup> On women's attitude towards home and children, also see Bridenthal's conclusion. Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 164–65.



In conclusion, it shows that female employees in Weimar modernity were indeed exposed to increasing bodily disciplining. In the workplace, they faced heightened demands on their appearance, which were intensified by the rise of consumerism. Adapting to new norms, women in turn reinforced this aspect of modernity. However, they should not be seen merely as victims. There was always self-realisation in their choices of appearance and dress and they demonstrated not only considerable resilience to attempted bodily disciplining, but also a range of modern and traditional fashion preferences. Regarding the leisure sphere, it appears that among female employees, a 'modern' phase of working and 'trying things out' was often followed by the 'traditional' role of wife and mother. However, instead of interpreting the latter as purely reactionary, this life plan should be taken seriously: they interpreted their own position within the range of possible interpretations offered to them in modernity. The attitudes of female employees towards marriage and children must thus also be understood as a reaction to the disciplinary tendencies that modernity posed to them. Within these structures, they were able to create for themselves a certain leeway to act in accordance to their own aspirations.

## 5 CONCLUSION

On an August evening in 1929, Rahmer noted in her diary: “[A]t six o’clock in the evening [...] I covered my typewriter and quickly left the building.”<sup>310</sup> Hurrying through the city after office hours, Rahmer was thus part of the “army of young girls and women”, who in the Weimar Republic became one of the most powerful symbols of the peak of modernity later identified by Peukert.<sup>311</sup> She embodied the type of the working, ‘modern woman’.

Depending on motivation and agenda, contemporaries described women like Rahmer either as highly emancipated, as glitter-seeking glamour girls, or as sexually predatory women who turned their backs on home and family. While they perceived them as the quintessential ‘modern women’, 1970s socio-historical research literature portrayed female employees as rather traditional; historians found women whose “modernity was kept within narrow limits.”<sup>312</sup> In many cases, the at times quite harsh judgements about female employees were based on statistics or representations; very rarely we find the perspective of the women themselves. Therefore, the aim of this thesis was to investigate the everyday lives of female employees in terms of their experiences and practices of modernity, thus giving them a voice of their own in the larger process. To what extent, then, was modernity reflected in the everyday practices of female employees, how did they experience modernity and how did they ultimately cope with it? Three interdependent conclusions can be drawn:

First, in some areas of female employees’ everyday lives, the characteristics of modernity as defined above were very present, while in others they were less evident. Their workplaces, for example, were often strongly characterised by rationalisation; working on machines and the subdivision of work into individual areas of responsibility made up a considerable part of female

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<sup>310</sup> Rahmer, *Tagebuch Hedwig Rahmer, 1927-1934*, 16.08.1929, diary no. 1, 57.

<sup>311</sup> Suhr, *Die weiblichen Angestellten*, 3.

<sup>312</sup> Frevert, “Kunstseidener Glanz,” 29.

employees' experience of modernity. In contrast, modernity was less clearly articulated in their domestic lives. Rationalised housing facilities remained mostly out of reach for financial reasons and most female employees continued to live in their parents' household. At work, most female employees, moreover, experienced modernity in strict bureaucratic hierarchies. However, only very few of them had the opportunity to climb to the top of the bureaucratic career ladder and remuneration remained low in many cases. Furthermore, female employees experienced modernity in the form of increasing bodily disciplining. On the one hand, the demands on their appearance for the labour market increased, thereby enforcing a stronger involvement of female employees in consumer modernity. On the other hand, their attitudes towards sex and family were subjected to increasing scrutiny during the Weimar Republic, thus attempting to push them into more traditional positions. Hence, in some places, modernity was indeed reflected in the everyday lives of female employees to a quite extreme degree, while in other places, it was hardly reflected at all. Overall, it can be observed that modernity was more present in the work context than in the leisure time of female employees. Therefore, the first conclusion to be drawn, is that the everyday lives of female employees in modernity were characterised by strong tensions.

In this perspective, a rather negative picture unfolds. It makes the women appear as victims of these tensions and suggests that female employees' experience of modernity was only a burden. The interpretation that "modernisation meant they had come a long way – in the wrong direction", may appear plausible.<sup>313</sup> This grand narrative of what Peukert has termed "problematic [...] [and] antinomian" modernity, easily obscures the issue of female employees' possibilities for agency and self-interpretation.<sup>314</sup> However, the insight into the everyday lives of female employees reveals a much more multi-layered reality than a life burdened by modern structures.

Mechanisation, for example, did not only result in poor work experiences. Some female employees were able to draw a certain self-confidence from their work with machines, and indeed

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<sup>313</sup> Bridenthal, "Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work," 166.

<sup>314</sup> Peukert, *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne*, 66.

embraced this part of modernity. When measures interfered too much with their personal freedoms, female employees successfully resisted. Those for whom modern work was a burden, dreamed of setting up a home to compensate. At the same time, female employees did feel that modern approaches could provide solutions. For instance, they demanded the establishment of single people's homes according to rational principles or applied rationalisation practices in their own households, in order to be able to realise their dreams one day. Female employees thus took their lives into their own hands, thereby becoming agents of modernity themselves.

Even though their bureaucratic career opportunities were, in some respects, limited, some female employees were, nevertheless, able to realise themselves within these limits. They considered their professions as part of the life they aspired to, and thus exhibited a more modern attitude towards work than they were attributed to by earlier scholarship. Although their wages were often low and in theory did not correspond to the required bureaucratic remuneration, female employees often managed to spend their leisure time as they pleased. They created spaces of freedom for themselves, making use of the modern leisure opportunities that the Weimar Republic offered them. Their leisure activities were not only about leading a life befitting their status or pretending to do so, but, above all, about realising themselves in tension-laden modernity.

The pressure that modernity placed on female employees in terms of appearance and body should, furthermore, not only be understood as constraining. Women were not simply transformed into docile bodies, but also expressed their own passions through their clothing and appearance. As in the case of Rahmer's bobbed hair, they indeed felt that they were embodying modernity. Regarding personal relationships, female employees also often lived according to their own purposes. Despite disciplinary attempts from all sides, it had, for instance, become normal for many female employees to engage in premarital relationships. They self-confidently claimed for themselves this phase of 'letting loose', without giving in to the disciplining efforts of modernity, whether in a sexually 'progressive' or restrictive direction.

From the experiences and practices of female employees, a second conclusion can thus be drawn: they had the power to shape their own lives. They knew how to deal with the demands of modernity, how to balance the tensions it brought into their everyday lives, and how to reconcile them with their own needs and expectations. Female employees should therefore not be seen as victims who were overrun by the “grand coherences“ of modernity.<sup>315</sup> Within the tensions described above, they always knew how to reconcile their own agenda with the requirements and challenges of modernity, thus exhibiting agency.

From these two observations, the third and final conclusion follows: female employees cannot easily be categorised as super-modern *or* very traditional. In most cases, they showed characteristics of both extremes. For example, female employees often brought ideas of traditional femininity into their workplaces, making use of existing interpretations. This enabled them to reconcile the modern world of work with their own ideals and, as explained above, to confront the tensions that modernity brought into in their everyday lives. Dreyfuss therefore diagnosed them as backward women with a “psychological disposition for patriarchal influence“, but it is undeniable that a stenographer typing at breakneck speed, who internalised the human-machine comparison so characteristic of modernity, simultaneously embodied an absolutely ‘modern woman’.<sup>316</sup> Being traditional and being modern were not mutually exclusive.

Most female employees cherished the desire for a traditional family life. Today, ‘traditional’ is often seen as negative, conservative, backward, or reactionary. For many female employees, by contrast, life plans that are considered traditional from today’s perspective, such as a child or a home of their own, implied self-realisation and a degree of freedom. It was precisely for this reason that they are to be seen as modern, as they stood up for their own objectives. While female employees were striving for rather traditional goals, the path towards them was, moreover, often very modern. For many, a phase of premarital dating had become quite normal and was not at odds

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<sup>315</sup> Lüdtke, “Einleitung,” 13.

<sup>316</sup> Dreyfuss, *Beruf und Ideologie der Angestellten*, 107.

with the desire for a traditional family life later in their lives. The rather traditional dream of owning a home and having a child was sought by female employees, for example, by adopting modern rational household management. They used modern means to achieve traditional goals. It can thus be inferred that the 'typical' female employee of the Weimar Republic was an ambivalent figure. She was modern and traditional at the same time.

Summarising all three conclusions, it shows that the experience of modernity of female employees in the Weimar Republic was often marked by tensions and contrasts. In some areas of their everyday lives, modernity had a full impact, in others less so. Yet they always had the power to shape their own lives. They knew how to balance these tensions in their everyday lives and bring them in line with their own aspirations. Sometimes they embraced modernity, consciously turning themselves into 'modern women'; at other times they had to adopt practices to make modernity more bearable. They were neither the quintessential 'modern woman' invoked by their contemporaries, nor the backward-looking, naïve women they appeared to be in some scholarly literature. The experiences and practices of modernity in the everyday lives of Weimar's female employees thus prove that they were not to be labelled either as 'modern' or as 'traditional', that no sharp dividing line could be drawn. It is precisely this dialectic complexity that characterised female white-collar employees in the Weimar Republic.

As stated in the introduction, a universal definition of modernity across disciplines is an almost impossible endeavour. With its orientation towards Weber's diagnosis of modernity and the use of Foucault's theory on the increasing disciplining of modern Western society, this thesis is based on a rather constraining conception of modernity, which tends towards the "iron cage" of rationality and control postulated by Weber.<sup>317</sup> Other categories of modernity are side-lined in this interpretation, yet appear to be just as important for the experience of modernity of female employees. 'Cultural modernity' seems to be a rewarding additional category, as new forms of art

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<sup>317</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.: Translated by Talcott Parsons, with a Foreword by RH Tawney (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1930), 181.

and culture shape our understanding of the Weimar Republic and of course also affected the everyday life of female employees.<sup>318</sup> The above chapters have taken up aspects of Weimar's art and cultural landscape in some parts. For example, Rahmer's visits of concerts and her participation in art courses appeared to be part of her self-realisation in modernity. A deeper insight into the use and reception of the cultural landscape would therefore deepen our understanding of female employees' experiences and practices of modernity. What did jazz music mean to them and how did they experience new art forms; did they approve of the cultural current of 'Neue Sachlichkeit'? When they were finally allowed to furnish their own room or even had their own flat, would they have liked to put Bauhaus furniture in there? To what extent did they use these cultural symbols of modernity and were they themselves agents of cultural modernity? An expanded conception of modernity would therefore prove valuable as a further avenue of research in this field.

Also, with novels, such as *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*, representations of female white-collar workers themselves in film and literature were an elementary part of the Weimar cultural landscape. Much research has been done on how white-collar employees were portrayed in these pieces and what statements can thus be made about Weimar modernity.<sup>319</sup> This thesis has attempted in several places to correct this image of female white-collar employees to some extent and to add their own perspective. The representations, however, also seem particularly interesting from the point of view of these women themselves. Frevert touches on the fact that many female employees, as well as the employee associations, were not always positively inclined towards these representations. For instance, women wrote to newspapers, as they felt misrepresented.<sup>320</sup> Future studies could thus focus on the reaction of 'modern women' themselves to their portrayal in

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<sup>318</sup> On cultural modernity, see Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik*, 166–90.

<sup>319</sup> Keun, *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*. The interpretive literature is extensive. See, for example, Katharina von Ankum, "Material Girls: Consumer Culture and the 'New Woman' in Anita Loos' 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes' and Irmgard Keun's 'Das Kunstseidene Mädchen'," *Colloquia Germanica* 27, no. 2 (1994); Ariane Martin, "Kultur Der Oberfläche, Glanz Der Moderne: Irmgard Keuns Roman *Das Kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932)," in *Deutschsprachige Romane Der Klassischen Moderne*, ed. Matthias Luserke-Jaqui (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2008).

<sup>320</sup> Frevert, "Kunstseidener Glanz," 28–29.

Weimar's cultural and media landscape. How did they experience their representation and exploitation as 'modern women' as a popular subject for film and literature? Did the representations coincide with their self-image or did they even influence them, as assumed for career choices in the cinema?<sup>321</sup> Further research could address these questions and thus add an elementary aspect to the insight into the experiences and practices of modernity in the everyday lives of female employees.

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<sup>321</sup> Frevert, "Kunstseidener Glanz," 29.



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