Confronting the Women Question in French History
A General Introduction

The very eruption of a "woman question," as the controversy over the relations of the sexes in society was long called in France, can be read as evidence of a serious sociopolitical problem, of contestation over what I am calling the "sexual balance of power." Studies of the balance of power, as posed by earlier generations of historians, envisaged only international or intranational struggles by male elites for political dominance; even as these studies expanded to consider class conflict, they took for granted (and said nothing about) the sexual imbalance of power within the societies they were discussing.

Women's history has changed all this, not only by excavating and highlighting women's lived experiences but also by confronting historians with the centrality of the politics of gender as a subject worthy of historical scrutiny. Once one has begun to consider the past by examining its gender politics, it is impossible to revert to more conventional ways of viewing it.

The significance of studying public debates as a means of interpreting different understandings of a situation in the past cannot be overestimated. This was rarely possible before the advent of print culture. As the eminent historian Natalie Zemon Davis has acknowledged: "To me an important entry into a period is through its arguments and debates, the unresolved questions that keep being tossed about, the issues on which a consensus seems impossible. Central conflicts or axial debates are great markers or signposts for a period. . . . Central disagreements are a good way to characterize a society or a time period."[1] No disagreement was more central to French society over time than that over the "proper" relations of the sexes. Studying the debates on the "woman question" in its depth and breadth confirms the truth of the statement by historian Melissa Feinberg, who proposed in 2012 (concerning debates over sexuality and morality),

[1] As quoted in Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2010), p. 84.

that they "lead us to wonder whether it is not the existence of the debate itself that is central to the modern condition."[2]

Debates on the woman question throw into relief the instability and shifting character of the balance of power between the sexes; it reveals a series of legal and institutional efforts by men as a group (or at least elite, literate men as a group purporting to represent the rest) to control, dominate, and subordinate women as a group, but it also allows us to uncover women's efforts (accompanied by the efforts of their male advocates) to contest such hegemonic claims. Precisely because the continuing efforts to reconfigure the situation of women inevitably imply reconfiguring the situation of men, these very efforts to redress the balance on women's behalf challenged a broad spectrum of received and imposed ideas, both religious and secular, about the "proper" (God or nature ordained) relationship of males and females to one another, to their children and their elders, to property and economic life, to organized religion, and to the state. The woman question, in short, was sociopolitical dynamite.

For six centuries the woman question has occupied a central position in the political debates of the French state and its educated elite. Yet, until the emergence of women's history as a child of the contemporary women's movement, professional historians of France, female or male, scarcely acknowledged the existence of this issue, much less its political significance. If anything, scholars considered it a "mere" literary debate – "*une querelle des femmes*." In France, as elsewhere, inquiry into the history of the woman question reveals both a parable of progress and a chronicle of frustration. Understanding the form this controversy took and the range of issues it encompassed is of crucial significance for understanding the development of contemporary French society. Indeed, the controversy lays bare the centrality of sexual politics, the significance of gender issues in forging a conscious national identity and in constructing a secular state, a state in which men initially claimed all positions of authority and shaped new laws governing even the most personal aspects of human existence in dialogue with – and in opposition to – the imperial claims of Roman Catholicism. This secular thrust, which was particularly pronounced in the French case, makes Western European state formation distinctive, a sharp contrast to developments in other states where organized religious authorities, Islamic and Confucian in particular, continued to monopolize the regulation of personal relations well into the twentieth century.

[2] Melissa Feinberg, "Sexuality, Morality, and Single Women in Fin-de-Siècle Central Europe," *Journal of Women's History*, 24:3 (Fall 2012), 181.

The relative success of secular resistance to organized theocracies in the West (notably the shattering of Christian unity and, in particular, the fragmentation of faith brought on by the Protestant reformers) early on created a space in which such issues could be openly debated.

The richness of the French historical record – its printed record – allows us to examine the woman question controversy over these six centuries. Indeed, few nations, east or west, can boast of such long-term visibility of women and disputes about gender.[3] It bears underscoring that many of the earliest, most eloquent, and influential defenders of women's cause in early modern Europe – both men and women – wrote in a French cultural context: Christine de Pizan, the Italian-born humanist writing at the court of Charles VI; Marie le Jars de Gournay, the *fille adoptive* of Michel de Montaigne; François Poullain de la Barre, Cartesian philosopher and Protestant convert; Marie-Jean-Nicolas Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, celebrated philosopher and mathematician.

France also provides a consistent and unusually rich record of women playing highly visible roles in public life, both at court and beyond. As Voltaire pointedly observed in his second dedicatory letter to *Zaïre*, addressed in the 1730s to the newly appointed British ambassador to the Sublime Porte, "Society depends on women. All the peoples that have the misfortune to keep them locked up are unsociable."[4] His remarks serve to underscore the fact that French women of the upper classes were never successfully sequestered, as was the case in so many other cultures, both Christian and Muslim, bordering the Mediterranean. France was exceptional among the European monarchies in deliberately excluding women from succession to the throne, but at court, one can point to a series of women who as regents or royal mistresses were extremely influential, though technically illegitimate, political players in the monarchies of early

[3] My colleague Gisela Bock insists that the debates on the woman question were pan-European from the outset, a claim that I do not dispute; I would only point out the salient fact that in France these debates began decades earlier than in England, Spain, the Italian city-states, or the German states, and that the debates in the French language had an arguably significant influence beyond the kingdom's borders. See *Die europaiesche Querelle des Femmes: Geschlechter-debatten seit dem 15. Jahrhundert*, ed. Gisela Bock & Margarete Zimmermann. Special issue of *Querelles:Jahrbuch für Frauenforschung 1997* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1997), and Gisela Bock, *Women in European History*, transl. Allison Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), esp. chapter 1. In my book *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), I provide examples of how the texts from the French debates traveled throughout Europe from the eighteenth century on, influencing the woman question debates from Scandinavia to Spain, and from Russia to the Ottoman Empire and beyond.

[4] Voltaire, "A M. le Chevalier Falkener (Séconde épitre dédicatoire)," in *Zaïre: Tragédie en cinq actes* (1736), *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 1: Théatre (Paris, 1877), p. 551.

modern France: Diane de Poitiers, Catherine de Médicis, Madame de Montespan, Madame de Pompadour are among the most famous, though by no means the only ones.

Women's visibility and significance in French society was not restricted to the court nobility, where their patronage was essential to advancement; it was considerably more widespread. As the English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft observed in her *History of the French Revolution* (1794), "From the enjoyment of more freedom than the women of other parts of the world, those of France have acquired more independence of spirit than any other."[5] Among the wealthier classes, some dowried urban women from propertied families found relative personal freedom in marriage after severely constrained girlhoods. Other women, single or widowed, founded important religious orders. Women played a major role, one long acknowledged by scholars, in the development of French literary culture and manners. They were poets and writers and artists; they pioneered the French novel. A few established influential salons. They began to appear in theatrical productions in the seventeenth century. Urban women of the artisan class took part in an astonishing number of commercially and culturally important activities; in the course of these activities, they articulated a remarkably explicit consciousness of their societal prerogatives and dignity as women. And they had no compunctions about defending both. As Madame de Beaumur, editor of the *Journal des Dames*, retorted to a male critic of her publication in 1762: "I love this sex, I am jealous to uphold its honor and its rights."[6] Based on evidence of this sort, it is possible to argue that this very visibility of women and the cultural significance attributed to them stimulated and heightened consciousness about and concern over the relationship of the sexes and underscored its fundamental importance for sociopolitical organization, not only in France but far beyond its borders.[7]

Indeed, the historical study of women in France – and of French ideas about the woman question – offers a thought-provoking counterpoint to that of English-speaking societies, where women's subordination was constructed according to different designs. Today's postmodern industrialized France is the product of reshaping an old monarchical, Roman Catholic Christian, military–agrarian society, which in its turn overlaid

[5] Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe* (1794; 2nd ed., 1795), intro. by Janet M. Todd (New York: Scholar's Facsimiles & Reprints, 1974), pp. 425–426.
[6] Madame de Beaumur, "Avant-Propos," *Journal des Dames* (March 1762), 224.
[7] See Offen, *European Feminisms.*

and attempted to displace earlier pagan cultures in which the cult of the maternal, fertility rites, and magical practices abounded. Since the twelfth century, debate about the sexes has been hammered out in the dominant culture from an amalgam of Christian and neo-Platonic ideas, embedded in the chivalric tradition. It has been tempered by the ideological reformulations that, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, accompanied the challenges of civic humanism and the reappropriation and adaptation of Roman law, the Protestant reformation, the Catholic counterreformation and, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by aggressive monarchical centralization and state-building efforts, the articulation of resistance to these efforts, the rise of market capitalism, colonial expansion, the European Enlightenment, and, not least, the upheaval of the French Revolution. All this, before industrialization (both the mechanization and centralization of manufacturing) and rampant commodification began to have much impact.

It bears insisting that this was no silent process. The debate on the woman question surfaced in recorded form in virtually every century of French history since late medieval times. Both manuscript sources and the abundant fruits of the development of printing attest to its presence.[8] With near-predictable regularity, in moments of political, economic, and social stress, the woman question, like a figure from a resplendent mechanical clock, strutted forth to disrupt the discourse of men who presumed to reshape or restructure society, to speak in terms of "universal man" without taking women into account or by deliberately denigrating or marginalizing them. The sources attest to the raising of the woman question wherever there have been petitioners for justice, seeking relief from what they considered to be ill treatment based on dissenting religious convictions, lack of rank, race, or (more recently) socioeconomic class. Since the seventeenth century, claims to emancipate women have been embedded in the repeated challenges to the authority of priests, kings, and fathers, and to slavery, to which they compared women's situation in institutionalized marriage.[9] They have accompanied virtually all efforts to offset the development of a "heartless" capitalist economic system and the

[8] The debates on the woman question take place in what Jürgen Habermas has famously called *Offentlichkeit* – best translated as "public space." Indeed, they would hardly be possible without; "public space" is the "battleground."

[9] See Karen Offen, "How (and Why) the Analogy of Marriage with Slavery Provided the Springboard for Women's Rights Demands in France, 1640–1848," in *Women's Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar & James Brewer Stewart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 57–81.

effects of a "soulless" materialism, and more recently, to seek "liberation" from all "oppressions," whether economic, political, sexual, or psychic.

During the French Revolution of 1789–1795, however, the institutional formalities governing the sociopolitical relationship of the sexes were subjected to abrupt and detailed attempts at reconstruction in a secular context. This was a significant turning point (if not exactly a "beginning"). After an initial spurt of liberalizing legislation, which among other things invested single adult women with full property rights, including equal inheritance, men of all social classes were quickly reauthorized by the authors of Napoléon's Civil Code to wield a quasi-absolute legal authority – as husbands and fathers – over their wives and children. In the law, "public" and "private" spheres were explicitly delineated in terms of male/female dualism. Indeed (as was also the case elsewhere), insistence on such distinctions and on "social roles" seemed to offer men a concrete way of contending with the apparent chaos and disorder of the revolutionary period. By the mid-nineteenth century, the principle of democratic rule had triumphed (at least temporarily): by granting the vote to all adult men, the leaders of the Second Republic extended to each male a share of political authority in the nation, a right continued under the Third Republic. Maria Deraismes was not alone in arguing pointedly that "in France, male supremacy is the last aristocracy."[10] Even though French women were deliberately excluded from formal political life by this decision, they would be continually credited with wielding enormous "influence" over male decision-making. Symbolically, this all-male republic – and women's ostensible influence over it – would be represented by an allegorical woman, the goddess of liberty, who acquired the popular nickname of "Marianne."[11]

Throughout the nineteenth century French moralists and reformers would insist – as was also the case in other countries of Europe and in the United States – that in a properly ordered society, a complete and complementary sexual division of labor should prevail, even when they

[10] From a speech by Maria Deraismes, 14 January 1882, in her *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1895), p. 283. In fact, the expression "*aristocratie masculine*" appears in 1789, following the Declaration of the Rights of Man, in the *Requête des dames à l'Assemblée nationale*. This latter tract, first republished by Amédée Lefaure, *Le Socialisme pendant la Révolution française, 1789–1798* (Paris, 2nd ed., 1867), can now be consulted in a reprint edition of women's revolutionary texts, *Les Femmes dans la Révolution française*, présentés par Albert Soboul, 2 vols. (Paris: EDHIS, 1982), 1, doc. 19, and in partial English translation in Offen, *European Feminisms*, pp. 54–55.

[11] See Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789–1880*, tr. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, UK, & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981; orig. publ. in French as *Marianne au combat* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979).

objected to women's thoroughgoing subordination to men through the institution of marriage. Authors of prescriptive literature encouraged marriage for all, with men in charge of political (and increasingly) of economic affairs and women in the home, keeping house and tending children. Some refer to this as the doctrine of "separate spheres," but I think it is more accurate to talk about this sexual division of labor in terms of public and domestic spaces, and, further, to acknowledge that controversies arose concerning the "political" and "economic" value of domesticity and its associated tasks.

Such prescriptions did not mesh with the extant reality, which was a good deal more fluid. Many French men and women remained single. Not only did women continue to be a visible yet extralegal force, but they were far from successfully contained in male-headed households. Some 30 percent of all adult Frenchwomen, including a surprising proportion of married women, were employed in the workforce, adding their hard-earned *sous* to the overall family economy. Rural peasant women and urban working-class women drudged away at labor that could be judged harsh even by comparison to the field labor of black slaves in the ante-bellum American South. Religious orders, reestablished following the Revolution, attracted hundreds of thousands of women. In the course of the century, the French birth rate fell more dramatically, earlier, further, than that of any other Western nation while infant mortality rates remained scandalously high as thousands of urban-born infants were sent away by their mothers into the countryside to be raised – or buried – by rural wet nurses. In the cities and large towns, abortion and child abandonment, or infanticide by indigent mothers, came to be viewed as major social problems; venereal diseases rampaged through the population and government-licensed prostitution flourished, even as the rate of sex crimes committed by men against women rose.

But this was not all. By the 1890s French women's rights activists would introduce the terms "féminisme" and "féministe" to the European political vocabulary and by 1900 these terms would become common currency throughout the Western world. Feminists in France proposed a far different vision of society and the sociopolitical relations of the sexes, one in which women were free and equal, one in which women had rights *as women*, as embodied *female* individuals, as sexed human beings, at once different and equal, and one in which women could be present and well-represented in every sector of society, thereby restoring equilibrium in the sexual balance of power. These French women and their allies insisted on a renegotiation of what political theorist Carole Pateman has astutely

baptized the "sexual contract," a contract made by men for men, a contract women had had no role in negotiating.[12] But in the period this volume addresses, these terms had not yet come into use.

Scope and Approach

When I began research for this book over forty years ago, the study of women's history by academically trained historians was in its infancy even in the United States and in France it seemed to be virtually uncharted terrain.[13] Retrieval of the most basic information was required, and I intended simply to discover whether there had ever been a movement for women's emancipation in France during the later nineteenth century. At that point I had been studying French history intensively for ten years without having run across any scholarly discussion of it! Having discovered during my investigations of the Third Republic press that there was indeed such a movement, I was intrigued initially by questions of national character and psychology: I hoped to determine whether there was any specifically French "cultural configuration" (to use the anthropologist Ruth Benedict's term)[14] that would distinguish agitation on behalf of women's rights there from contemporaneous agitation in the United States or England.

As I proceeded, I became increasingly certain that even as the debate on the woman question developed in an international context there were indeed elements that seemed specific to French culture, elements that

[12] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

[13] A popular genre of women's history, generally of the sensationalist type (e.g., secrets of the boudoir), has long existed in France, but the investigation of French women's history by scholars also dates further than is usually recognized, though it had to be rediscovered by academic historians in the 1970s (see Chapter 6 in this volume). Today important scholarship on French women's history is being produced not only in France but in the English-speaking world. To date the results remain underutilized (when not actively resisted) by other historians, including those who profess interest in *mentalités*, demography, and family history, not to mention practitioners of political and economic history. Much remains to be done to bring women – and gender-sensitive analysis – into the mainstream of historical writing about France. For recent assessments, see Françoise Thébaud, *Écrire l'histoire des femmes* (Fontenay/St.Cloud: ENS-Sèvres, 1998); Thébaud, "Écrire l'histoire des femmes: Parcours historiographique, débats méthodologiques et rapports avec les institutions," in *Écrire l'Histoire des Femmes en Europe du Sud: XIXe-XXe Siècles/ Writing Women's History in Southern Europe, 19th-20th Centuries*, ed. Gisela Bock & Anne Cova (Lisbon: Celta Editora, 2003), pp. 97–115; and Françoise Thébaud, *Écrire l'histoire des femmes et du genre* (Fontenay/St. Cloud: ENS-Sèvres, 2007). For overviews, see the review essays by Karen Offen, "French Women's History: Retrospect (1789–1940) and Prospect," *French Historical Studies* 26:4 (Fall 2003), 727–767, and Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, "French Feminisms, 1848–1949," *French Historical Studies* 37:4 (Fall 2014), 663–687.

[14] Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959; orig. publ. by Houghton Mifflin, 1934), p. 60.

profoundly shaped the ways in which the controversy on the woman question was framed and argued, along with the sociopolitical context within which any deliberate actions to enhance women's civil and political status in that nation could be taken.[15] The presentation and analysis of these elements constitute the content of this volume.

These elements, I found, included (first and foremost) the extraordinary sociopolitical significance, or "influence," overtly attributed to women by men and by other women – and which provoked their formal and repeated exclusion by men from political authority since the end of the sixteenth century. This latter phenonemon in particular is one that bridges the transition from the old regime to the republics, from an agrarian society to an industrial one. But although this attribution of power and influence to women (and women's acknowledgement and celebration of it) had regularly been remarked upon, and the concomitant exclusion of women from authority, neither had ever been properly problematized as an historical issue, nor had the two been adequately linked. These two elements will be discussed in the first two chapters.

The third distinctive element, to be discussed in Chapter 3, is the strategic political importance accorded to biomedical thinking in French society as Catholic theological justifications for gender arrangements were challenged and reconceptualized by secular, even anticlerical thinkers, many of whom were physicians, and the close relationship of such thinking to French notions of hierarchy, authority, and order. A fourth element, related closely to the third and first, is the political and ideological emphasis on educated motherhood that paradoxically accompanied a precipitous nineteenth-century drop in the French birth rate and emerged from the intersection of the debate on population with that on woman question. This element will be presented in Chapter 4.

A fifth and final element of this cultural configuration concerns some of the peculiar traits of French republican national identity during its formative period, especially in its legal, educational, and economic aspects. These traits flow from its political heritage, drawing initially on a predominantly Roman tradition of masculine identification with the republic, yet permeated by the ostensibly gender-free liberal and ostensibly "universal" ideals of the Revolution, tinged by a ferocious anticlericalism that opposed the

[15] My inquiry proceeds from the same premises as those of Pierre Bourdieu – though as a historian I prefer the term *context* to Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. The objective seems the same, however – to make visible those things that in France are taken entirely for granted and thereby to situate published discussion of the woman question and its discussants. A fish swimming in a fish bowl, or in the sea, does not notice that its medium is water.

universal imperialism of the Roman Catholic Church. During the years of the Third Republic, France would find itself in an international political context in which it was bordered to the east by a newly unified, highly authoritarian, militaristic, and "masculinist" monarchical state, which in 1870 had defeated the French imperial armies and subsequently would make much of France's "femininity." This context promoted the development of standing citizen armies and great navies, in a competitively masculinized international political environment shaped increasingly by resurgent imperial expansion abroad and labor unrest at home.

These five elements both contributed to and would set limits on the extent to which the sexual balance of power could be tilted a bit more in women's favor, especially during the first five decades of the Third Republic (1870–1920), which will be addressed in a subsequent volume, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870–1920*. The national distinctiveness of these factors and the ways in which they shaped the debates on the woman question only became apparent as I engaged in a project that continually threatened to (and finally did) mushroom into a full-fledged comparative and gendered analysis of Western thought.[16]

The argument that follows is framed with reference to my dissatisfaction with the gender blindness that characterized most earlier historical writing about France, which culminated in Simone de Beauvoir's claim, in her now-classic work *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) that women had no history of their own.[17] I address this problem in Chapter 6, on the politics of women's history in France. In some sense this entire project on unearthing and analyzing the debates on the woman question in France can be considered a "prequel" and a rebuttal of Beauvoir's claim. My argument is also framed in response to my discomfort with attempts by my own generation of Anglophone feminist scholars, particularly in some related disciplines, to theorize generally about women's situation solely on the basis of Anglo-American evidence – or to view it through the distorting lens of their contemporary preconceptions and preoccupations.

[16] A framework for such a study undergirds the interpretative documentary collection, *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, 1750–1950*, ed. Susan Groag Bell & Karen Offen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 2 vols. Henceforth, *WFF*, vol. 1. Offen's *European Feminisms* lays out a comparative analysis of feminisms.

[17] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), vol. 1, pp. 173–174. Feminist historians in Europe have since critiqued Beauvoir's presentation of history: see in particular the essays by Claudia Opitz and Karin Hausen in *Simone de Beauvoir: Le Deuxième Sexe. Le livre fondateur du feminisme moderne en situation*, ed. Ingrid Galster (Paris: Honoré Champion Editeur, 2004). Additionally, I have critiqued Beauvoir's presentation of her French feminist predecessors in "History, Memory, and Simone de Beauvoir," unpublished address at Vassar College, April 2009.