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Sarah Fishman, *From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xxvi + 263 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-1902-4862-8.

Review by Judith G. Coffin, University of Texas at Austin.

The cover photograph for Sarah Fishman's new book distills wonderfully one of her central issues: the bewildering contrast between the affluent sexiness of postwar consumer culture and the ordinary lives of many people. A poignantly frowsy-looking woman and her two children (or perhaps grandchildren) are looking at a sidewalk advertisement for Jessos lingerie. All three have their cloth coats buttoned to the neck. The advertisement is a larger-than-life-sized maquette of a model in her bra, underpants, and stockings, blonde curls falling over her shoulders and towel draped by her side. She is leaning forward and stepping into her dress. The little girl is captivated, looking straight at the model's thighs. Her brother, wide-eyed, tries to look ahead but lets a glance stray in the model's direction. The mother (or grandmother) hesitates; she may be on the verge of pulling her daughter away, but she is interested herself. No one is scandalized. But no one is quite sure, either, how the sexy, well-undressed blonde should fit into her or his world.

Fishman brilliantly shows how women, men, and children contended with the disconcerting challenges of the postwar period, especially the changing expectations, moral codes, responsibilities, and permissions around gender and family life. Those changes were prompted by the economic transformations that were global as well as national, a political determination to modernize and rebuild after the war, rising affluence, a baby boom, and the popularization of certain currents of thought. (Freud, Beauvoir, and Kinsey is Fishman's shorthand for those currents—more on that in a moment.) The sweeping economic and cultural dimensions of the *Trente Glorieuses* have attracted attention for decades, and even a very long list of books would miss significant contributions, for the issues are theoretical as well as empirical. Fishman's originality lies in her focus on households of lower middle-class shopkeepers and employees, the urban or rural working classes, or, simply, the poor. The book is not abstractly demographic or sociological, however; it aims instead to capture voices, questions, dilemmas, and details of daily life.

Fishman draws on an enormous number of articles, letters from readers, and comments from experts in the women's press. The so-called *presse du cœur* looms large: especially *Confidences* and *Nous Deux*, both of which were launched in the interwar period, closed down by Vichy, and took off again in the war's aftermath. *Confidences: le journal des histoires vraies* like its American counterpart trafficked in "true stories" and reached at least a million readers. *Nous Deux* specialized in romance, titillation, and lots of visuals—it was published by the Italian Cino del Duca, who also published *Tarzan*. Both spectacularized everyday life, and both made letters from and advice to readers a central feature. Such back-and-forth created the constant contact, chattiness, and complicity that Edgar Morin deemed constitutive of capitalist consumer culture.[1] Fishman also looks at *Constellation*, which offered "a French look at the world" and aimed to rival *Reader's Digest* in reporting on general interest stories, from politics and

culture to science, including the burgeoning research on sexuality in the late 1950s and 1960s. Fishman includes the interesting *Antoinette*, the Confédération Générale du Travail's 1955 update of its journal for working women, which dispensed comment and advice on wages and workplace discrimination as well as the value of virginity. The very upmarket *ELLE* figures in here as well, using breathlessly touted "polls" to "penetrate the secret world of the young adolescent girl" (p. 152). Reading broadly in these magazines, Fishman reaches into different publics and social classes. These sources are carefully scripted and obviously prescriptive. But Fishman extracts their testimony on changing norms and expectations, finds in them clues about how people handled tensions arising from new kinds of sociability, and wryly highlights their preoccupations: teenaged girls, adolescent crises, and a separate generational world of dances and "surprise parties."

I especially appreciated the striking portraits of the intelligent, compassionate, and pragmatic advice givers: the "agony aunts," or "Dear Abbys." Marcelle Auclair, who answered readers' letters at *Marie Claire*, co-founded the magazine with Jean Prévost whom she married and then left when he became abusive. Auclair had range: she wrote treacly advice books about finding *bonheur* as well as biographies of two Catholic saints and of Jean Jaurès, and, since she was fluent in Spanish, she translated the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca. Auclair's counterpart at *ELLE* was Marcelle Ségol. Ségol was born in 1896 and earned a diploma in math before—characteristically—starting a nine-year stint as stenographer at a bank. She was Jewish, and a member of the Resistance. After the war, she joined the editorial board at *ELLE*. She, too, was married and divorced. Ségol refused to condescend to her women readers, but she was frank about their conservatism. "Nous voilà loin de Mme de Beauvoir," she wrote of their views in 1952.[2] Perhaps not so far, as Fishman suggests. Ten years later Marcelle Auclair compiled a *dossier interdit* of her *Marie Claire* readers' letters on their illegal abortions, testimony that exposed the hypocrisy and human cost of France's laws. Auclair was scathing on the gap between romantic nonsense peddled to the public (by *Marie Claire* among other outlets, presumably) and absence of sexual education: "Les mystères du cœur humain n'aident guère à éclairer le mécanisme du corps humain..."[3] The careers of Ségol, Auclair, and other French women journalists like Françoise Giroud at *L'Express*, and Menie Grégoire on the radio at RTL are in themselves fascinating case studies in the history of the media, mass culture, campaigns for the modernization of France, and sexual and social self-knowledge (or ignorance). In Fishman's book, they play the role of linking the world of psychological research to that of a larger public, like the "bridge figures" in Camille Robcis's *Law of Kinship*, on the intellectual and political history of familial thought.[4]

The other principal source are records from the juvenile courts in departmental archives and archives of the Prefecture of Police, archives that Fishman knows and handles particularly well. Social workers' views loom large in these cases, offering their diagnoses of the sources of family's difficulties. As Fishman says, social workers' interventions were "judgmental by design" (p. xxii). But again, changing judgments about how, for instance, a father should wield his authority, how much independence a teenager might enjoy, how much a family could afford to spend on housing and so on are central to Fishman's interest. She does, though, bring out richly detailed descriptions of families and their lives. She has to be selective, and has chosen Paris, the industrial Nord, the Bouches-du-Rhône around Marseilles, and the Drôme, the largely rural region that reaches from Valence to the western edge of the Alps.

What of the periodization? Vichy is an eye-catching but perhaps slightly artificial marker. Fishman starts with a longstanding and cross-political consensus that France's population slowdown was dangerous. The 1939 Family Code that aimed to reverse that slowdown was Republican. It encouraged child bearing with a national system of allowances for families with two or more children. Having a child within two years of getting married earned a couple a one-off bonus. Once a second child arrived, the government added a monthly allowance (a percentage of the average salary in the department) to the father's earnings on a per-child basis. A single salary allowance also supplemented the family's earnings if the mother did not bring in wages. As Fishman, an expert in Vichy, points out, Vichy's

contribution was largely a barrage of propaganda about work, family, and country; the regime deplored the baneful effects of feminism, exhorted the French to work hard and engage in self-denial and sacrifice, and tried to set the clock back to an imagined moment before Republican decadence had set in. As she says, Vichy's policies—deportations, executions, forced labor, and political and racial discrimination—hardly reinforced the family ideal.

On the one hand, then, well-worn conservative ideas were not born with Vichy and did not disappear with the Liberation. On the other hand, as Fishman underscores, “The post-liberation years were not the time to celebrate authoritarian rule in either politics or the family” (p. 27). “Family” was no less important to postwar reconstruction, though now it suggested commitments, solidarities, and renaissance more than simply restoring hierarchy and order. Slowly, and after a chaotic five-year period that is covered in the book's first chapter, a more complex conception of family took hold, one that was not an ideal type, but rather comprised multiple relationships between women and men, mothers or fathers (alone or together) and children (or stepchildren), or siblings (pp. 26, 28).

Fishman emphasizes the French state's significant role in redistributing the rising affluence of the 1950s, or at least funneling resources toward families. Family allowances may or may not have caused the population growth that allayed natalist fears of earlier times. But the “importance of these [family] policies in rising levels of affluence across income groups cannot be overstated” (p. 38). They “played a major role in redistributing wealth from childless families to families with children and raised the standard of living for families at the low end of the social scale” (p. 38). Family allowances, with baby bonuses, single-salary supplements, and pre- and post-natal care gave households the cash and access to credit that helped families buy the domestic appliances so central to the new object world of the *Trente Glorieuses*. Government campaigns to construct public low and moderate-income housing alleviated the crowding that shaped most families' lives. This building was more successful in the industrial north than in the rural southeast, and much of the housing would be dilapidated after a decade. Still, it was new and a welcome relief in the aftermath of the war. In 1952, only an estimated 0.4 percent—not four percent—of households had indoor plumbing, gas, and electricity (p. 38). Without utilities, it made little sense to invest in household equipment. Fishman has found wonderful material on housing, budgets, and spending in the social workers' reports. Those same workers sometimes monitored budgets and spending. As Fishman puts it well, government policies “played a huge role in sharing France's affluence with working-class families, while also giving the government a lever to exert influence” (p. 125).

One of the important changes in this period, Fishman argues, was rethinking how authority should operate in a family. Social workers' case files “began paying a new kind of attention to fathers” (p. 15), casting them as co-parents, involved with their children and cooperating with their children's mothers rather than as distant figures enforcing the law and wielding their power of “correction” over their families. She attributes new expectations about understanding, engagement, and flexibility to the “penetration of a more psychological approach” (p. 77), which certainly sounds right, as does her argument that even conservative thinkers were “gingerly working...toward a less patriarchal view” (p. 18). Still, I found it thought provoking to read Fishman this summer alongside Ivan Jablonka's *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes*, which is so searing on the abuses of patriarchal authority in various forms (state, judicial, fatherly and foster-fatherly, intimate) and the haplessness of the juvenile custody system in 2011.[5] Fishman does not want to be misunderstood on this subject: whatever the inroads made by a more critical stance on paternal authority in the 1950s and 1960s and despite more concern with the protection of minors, “There is no evidence of anyone ever advocating action against an abusive husband or father, nor was there any evidence of anyone doing anything to protect wives who were victims of domestic violence” (p. 77, emphasis mine). She cites readers' letters to *Confidences* on domestic violence as well as workplace harassment (pp. 97-98, 179-182). She notes that advice givers only very slowly backed off what she nicely calls the “Beauty and the Beast” model of conjugal relations, in which the wife was to protect herself by “taming” her husband. We could add that the “psychological approach” to male authority and prerogatives was and remains all over the map.

Fishman argues that women's roles were also rethought. Her time frame opens with women's suffrage, which she rightly underscores was hardly revolutionary; the arguments for it blended "old and new visions of gender" (p. 8). She highlights widespread support for new political equality and a new appreciation for women's capacities--their abilities in the workplace, the enormous role they played in a consumer economy (p. 127), the skills and psychological authority they wielded as parents, the extent and importance of their unwaged work in the home. As Rebecca Pulju notes, the "home absorbed more labor power than any other 'industry' in France."<sup>[6]</sup> Marriage no longer seemed compulsory, though marriage rates continued to rise until 1972, when they dropped precipitously. Girls should be educated and trained for careers, if only to keep them out of trouble. Women's sexual desires were acknowledged as "normal." Sexual education was important, even if few wanted to take charge of it. Adultery was a regular topic of calm discussion in the women's press. (Indeed, if we were to judge by the pages of *ELLE*, adultery was a common fantasy of women, but Fishman's book has made us wary of *ELLE*.)

Fishman is not telling a rosy story of expanding permissions, particularly for women. She highlights the new dilemmas and anxieties these developments produced: a "new stigma of being old-fashioned" (p. 177), or worries about female "frigidity" when the supposedly frank talk about desire did not necessarily produce pleasure. Old dilemmas remained. Chief among them, how to avoid pregnancy and what to do if you didn't. Condoms were sold over the counter, but as Fishman points out, they were "disreputable": associated with prostitution and venereal disease, not with avoiding pregnancy in non-transactional sex. By the late 1950s, rates of abortion were a very public "scandal," but one that made little dent on either French law or the public's capacity for denial. As Judith Surkis trenchantly observes, citing Beauvoir, the problem with scandal is that you get used to it.<sup>[7]</sup> (Contraception figured in the presidential election of 1965, and was haltingly legalized after 1967, abortion was legalized in 1975.) Letters to magazines asked if a pregnant woman needed to marry the baby's father, and advice-giving on that score was strategic and pragmatic. In short, the "frank acknowledgement" that women as well as men had sexual desires (p.165) meant new protocols for dating and courtship, but those had to be worked out against the backdrop of women's wildly asymmetrical vulnerability in sexual relations.

Economic transformation and state policies were motors of change. So were new ideas. Fishman shows that a defining feature of the 1950s was a markedly new attention to sexuality across many domains. "Sex was seen as a motivating force in behaviors beyond sex itself and as a defining feature of personality" (pp. 98-9). As she acknowledges, it is hard to trace how any given text or concept changes an individual's way of thinking. But the discursive parameters of public discussion are a different matter, and she argues that "the writings about men, women, and children in this era were steeped in the language of Freud, Beauvoir, and Kinsey" (p. 32). Intellectual historians may raise their eyebrows at this trio of very different thinkers. Freud's rethinking of sex and sexual identity as unstable went in many directions, as Dagmar Herzog shows in *Cold War Freud*.<sup>[8]</sup> Kinsey's gleefully empirical assault on norms was aimed specifically at Freud and psychoanalysis as well as sexology. Beauvoir's analysis of sexuality as embedded in and warped by inequalities of power and women's contradictory subjectivity could hardly be more different from Kinsey's survey of the varieties of behavior prompted by a drive-seeking outlet.<sup>[10]</sup> As far as sexual self-knowledge or managing the dilemmas of a changing world of gender relations went, Annie Ernaux wryly remarks that "[a]voir lu Simone de Beauvoir ne servait à rien qu'à vérifier le malheur d'avoir un uterus."<sup>[9]</sup> But Fishman is right that all these names were very often lumped together, despite the fact that the "sex" they considered so significant had utterly different meanings and ramifications. Fishman's nice formulations, like "Freud theorized sex as a fundamental human drive; Kinsey went out and found it" (p. 53), capture very well the interesting popular understandings of the issue, however odd those may seem.

Finally, how do we understand the relationship between these two decades of halting evolution and the explosions we associate with 1968? If 1968 means sexual revolution, Fishman wants to change the timetable. "By 1959, nearly a decade before the sexual revolution, contemporaries were sure they were

in the midst of one” (p. 112). The 1950s were less conservative than we thought. By the same token, the 1960s were more conventional than many of its protagonists claimed.[11] Our image of the “sexual revolution” keeps fracturing. We have become wary of “sexual liberation” as a cause.[12] The Women’s Liberation Movement took aim at the sexual revolution, announcing that “Your sexual revolution is not ours.” Radical feminism, like gay liberation, was both 1968 and anti-1968. Radical feminism also took aim at the liberal individualist advice givers in the women’s press, making their formerly refreshing pragmatism look timid. *ELLE*, with its Kinsey-esque surveys of “modern” femininity, proved an excellent target. So, whether 1968 was the cresting of a wave created by the trends Fishman has traced or something more like a riptide of that wave remains an open question worth thinking about as we head towards its fiftieth anniversary. Fishman’s lively and unusual material, her keen eye for telling details about working-class life, and sharp formulations testify to the interest and significance of the decades that came before.

## NOTES

[1] Edgar Morin, *L’Esprit du Temps. Essai sur la culture de masse* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1962), p. 136. Lauren Berlant calls this commercial cultural sphere the “intimate public” and likewise emphasizes the feeling of belonging and shared experience that subtend it, although she says more about its paradoxical anti-politics. See Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

[2] Marcelle Ségol, *Mon métier: Le Courrier du Cœur* (Paris: P. Horay, 1952), 203. See the appreciative obituary by Douglas Johnson in *The Independent*, January 7, 1999: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-marcelle-segal-1045459.html>, accessed August 3, 2017.

[3] Marcelle Auclair, *Le livre noir de l’avortement* (Paris: Fayard, 1962), 11, 15.

[4] Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[5] Ivan Jablonka, *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes* (Paris: Seuil, 2016). Liana Vardi has expressed her skepticism about some of Jablonka’s interpretations in a smart and much welcome review in (see <http://h-france.net/fffh/the-buzz/laetitia-ou-la-fin-des-hommes/>, accessed August 3, 2017). She disagrees more with Jablonka’s portrait of Laëtitia than his indictment of the state. I cannot do justice to the arguments at stake, but I see room for important research on state and domestic and sexual violence, fathering, and authorities in and around the family. See Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l’Armée pendant la guerre d’Algérie, 1954-1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001); Dagmar Herzog, ed., *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[6] Rebecca J. Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 13.

[7] Judith Surkis, “Ethics and Violence: Simone de Beauvoir, Djamila Boupacha, and the Algerian War,” *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 28.2 (2010): 38-55.

[8] Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[9] Annie Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 82.

[10] Judith Coffin, "Beauvoir, Kinsey, and Mid-Century Sex," *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 28.2 (2010): 18-37.

[11] See, among others, Sylvie Chaperon, *Les années Beauvoir: 1945-1970* (Paris: Fayard, 2000) and *Les origines de la sexologie* (Paris: Audibert, 2007); Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Anne-Claire Rebreyend, *Intimités amoureuses: France, 1920-1975* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2008); Anne-Marie Sohn, *Âge tendre et tête de bois: Histoire des jeunes des années 1960* (Paris: Hachette, 2001).

[12] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. (New York: Pantheon, 1976). The conflicted response to Foucault's claims on this score has been spelled out nicely in Annamarie Jagose, "Orgasm and Queer Studies: The Madness in Method," *Feminist Formations* 28.2 (2016): 186-196.

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