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Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine: A Contribution to a Political Sociology of Gender*. Trans. Kathleen A. Johnson. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001. 325 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$21.95 US (pb.). ISBN 0-8223-2774-0.

Review by Sarah Fishman, University of Houston.

As Francine Muel-Dreyfus's title suggests, *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine* explores the National Revolution's political construction of gender around the notion of an "eternal feminine"—by which she means essentialist ideas about women as naturally enshrined in motherhood and domesticity. Muel-Dreyfus examines the rhetoric and discourse produced in abundance during Vichy as well as the texts of critical laws and policy Vichy implemented. In other words, this book is about ideas, not about real people or real women's lives, except insofar as they produced the ideas. The voices in this book share a series of assumptions about the natural order of gender relations and a belief that French women had strayed from their proper path, resulting in the social and demographic problems to which Pétain and others attributed France's defeat in June 1940. Muel-Dreyfus emphasizes the centrality of gender to Vichy's project of renewal. Returning and confining women to their homes represented an essential element linked to every aspect of Vichy's reactionary domestic agenda, the so-called National Revolution.

Muel-Dreyfus seeks the "sociogenesis of these visions of the feminine" that emerged with the National Revolution (pp. 5-6), tracing their roots to two earlier but critical moments, the defeat of the Paris Commune of 1870-71 and the Popular Front in 1936. Yet rather than approaching the material in chronological order, she divides the book into three thematic parts. Part 1, "The Hypnotic Power of Punishment," explores the writings, anxieties, and policy recommendations of three groups of French writers. Chapter 1 considers how intellectuals, through books, newspapers, and reviews, developed a thoroughly anti-modern, *völkish* literature of renunciation that rested on the myth of an eternal return to a "natural" order of artisan and peasant families. Chapter 2, drawn from sermons, writings by catholic intellectuals, and periodicals like *La Semaine Religieuse*, follows similar themes. Chapter 3 continues the exploration of these themes in scientific circles, primarily amongst demographers and pro-natalist doctors. Punishment had hypnotic power for these writers because they believed that France had sinned. Women bore much of the weight of reprobation, for rejecting their natural roles, working for wages, marrying late if at all, carrying more about their appearance than about having babies, and aborting pregnancies. France's defeat represented salutary punishment. Muel-Dreyfus's book clarifies how critical restoring women to their so-called natural sphere was to the National Revolution.

In Part 2, "The Culture of Sacrifice," Chapter 4 examines Vichy rhetoric through *Commissariat Général à la Famille* (CGF) propaganda, the fervent promotion of Mother's Day, and laws relating to female employment, divorce, and abortion. Chapter 5 considers catholic feminine culture, focusing here on social catholicism and what Muel-Dreyfus labels catholic feminism. Chapter 6 examines the familial movement, as distinct from the pro-natalists covered earlier in Chapter 3. Part 3, "Biological Order and Social Order," details how Vichy tried to impose its views of natural, biologically-determined gender roles on girls and women. Chapter 7 focuses on education and aptly connects teaching about sexual hierarchy to both class and racial hierarchies. Vichy programs dictating how and what girls should be

taught, like prewar right-wing reactions to the *école unique* disputes, were profoundly anti-democratic and elitist. Finally, Chapter 8 returns to scientists, prominent doctors, and the newly formed Doctor's Association. Here Muel-Dreyfus astutely links the reification of the traditional family to family physicians' struggle to assert themselves against the growing power and prestige of specialists. She also analyzes demography, eugenics with a focus on Alexis Carrel, and the politics of abortion.

When Muel-Dreyfus's book appeared in France in 1996, one of the first to analyze Vichy's gender politics in a systematic way, it contributed much to our knowledge of both Vichy and gender history. She established gender as fundamental to Vichy's National Revolution, uniting its vision of gender inequality with class and racial hierarchies. This translation of Muel-Dreyfus's book joins a growing list of works on gender during the war. Since Aline Coutrot's first took a stab at this material in 1972, the body of work includes articles by Paula Schwartz, Karen Adler, Cheryl Koos, Hélène Eck and Michèle Bordeaux, Dominique Veillon's books on fashion and on daily life, Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier on gender and the cinema, Hannah Diamond and Celia Bertin's books on women in France during the war, and many works on women in the Resistance. Finally, Miranda Pollard's *Reign of Virtue*, published in 1998, tackles the same material in a more accessible style.[1]

Muel-Dreyfus's book is provocative and rich in materials. It makes a strong contribution to the debate about historical continuity, something I have always found puzzling: Did Vichy's gender politics represent a simple intensification of, or a critical break with, those of the republic? Muel-Dreyfus lays out the unmistakable signs of progress for women in 1930s France, their professional accomplishments and increasing access to higher education, highlighting the violence (her word) of Vichy's anti-feminism. However, on the other side, Vichy's rhetoric about femininity echoed a large volume of pre-war essentialist ideas about women.[2] Such notions as the special nature of woman and female domesticity existed across the political spectrum, from left to right, catholic youth movements to labor and socialist groups, anti-feminists to feminists.

Yet something was strikingly, radically different about Vichy's gender politics. Muel-Dreyfus connects the heightened rhetoric on femininity to a historically specific moment, the birth of Vichy and its attempt (unique amongst occupied counties) to institute a National Revolution. She argues that the supreme national crisis, the unimaginable trauma of military defeat, exodus, and occupation in June 1940, created a social logic that engendered a resurgence of mythic reasoning. We might usefully recall that in less than six weeks, between 90,000 and 100,000 French soldiers died in battle, nearly two million were captured, between six and eight million civilian refugees flooded south on the exodus. Having recently experienced a profoundly disturbing national trauma ourselves within the U.S., we should better understand why people in June 1940 France felt the need to invest their despair with greater meaning. This explains the adulation of Philippe Pétain, who in June 1940 became the charismatic, prophetic savior, soothing injured emotions, awakening hope. Muel-Dreyfus clarifies what is difficult for many on this side of the Atlantic to fathom (witness how Jerry Falwell's attempt to blame September 11 on pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians, and the ACLU fell completely flat), the power of the contrition/redemption rhetoric, the orgy of *mea culpas*. The eternal feminine represented not just *la femme au foyer*; it fed on deeper needs born of the catastrophe, the search for eternal truths as a path to redemption. The National Revolution's desire to restore the traditional family and strictly segregate gender roles rested on the idea that in France, as Pétain stated in June 1940, "the spirit of pleasure has won out over the spirit of sacrifice" (p. 63). Muel-Dreyfus considers the National Revolution, including its gender aspects, a millenarian movement, a "collective quest for salvation against the backdrop of catastrophe under the guidance of an inspired prophet" (p. 4). The eternal feminine became part of a mythic, cyclical repetition. Thus her title alludes to the 1943 Jean Cocteau film *L'Eternel retour*, itself based on the medieval myth of Tristan and Isolde.

However, the very strength of Muel-Dreyfus's book in tying the unique aspects of Vichy's gender politics to its moment of birth highlights the static nature of her analysis. As we have also recently

experienced, the stunned reaction to national trauma passes. Her portrayal of the eternal feminine and gender ideology as univocal, uncontroversial, unchanging, and unanimously accepted leads her to neglect evidence of both discord and change. While Muel-Dreyfus mentions laws and policies from all four years, unlike Pollard she does not track changes over time. The mythic logic of the eternal feminine worked in the summer of 1940, but the power of myth faded quickly. As it became clear that Vichy was hardly able to stem the worst excesses of occupation or prevent France becoming a battlefield, many people became disillusioned and cynical. The rhetoric of renewal through sacrifice seemed to involve sacrifice only for some while others lived it up. Meanwhile the war continued, German repression increased, POWs mostly did not return, shortages intensified, Jews were rounded up and deported, workers forced to go to Germany. Here looking beyond elite writings and official policies provides a useful corrective. My own archival research into materials generated by the postal control system, summaries of opinions found by opening mail, reveals that even ordinary people were keenly aware of the discrepancy between Vichy family propaganda and reality.[3]

To be fair, Muel-Dreyfus sets her task as elaborating the discourse of gender and femininity, not the reality of women's lives. Still, she insists, "Only a work of historical sociology will allow us to follow the thread of the political and institutional stakes involved in defending and promoting the 'eternal feminine' that the Vichy government would never have succeeded in imposing with such irrepressible force by itself" (p. 5). But were Vichy's gender politics successfully imposed? And with irrepressible force? Neither this book nor the others cited above prove that the "eternal feminine" was successfully imposed.

I wonder, too, if Muel-Dreyfus's analysis inordinately elevates Vichy's gender rhetoric. She refers time and again to the "specific violence of the regime's policy with respect to women" (p. 75, see also pp. 8, 67, 100). But of the voluminous citations included in the book, only one, from Education, struck me as possibly deserving the label violent: "If little women, pleasure seekers, egotists, and lazy women for whom the words "devotion" and "family" do not exist, will soon have something to complain about, all the better" (p. 239). Angry and patronizing? Certainly. Violent? Not compared to the language directed against Jews for example, or Freemasons, or communists.

Vichy's attempt to return waged women to their homes illustrates less the ability to impose a radical vision of female domesticity than the contrast, in Pollard's words, between "radical assertions and moderate initiatives." [4] The 11 October 1940 law stipulated that the civil service could not hire or recruit women, forced retirement for women over fifty, created financial incentives for female employees under twenty-eight to quit their jobs upon marriage, and allowed married female employees whose husbands' means were adequate to be put on unpaid leave. This is clearly regressive social policy aimed at returning married women to domesticity. But it was limited to public service jobs and did not require that all female employees be fired. As for the success of this law, repealed in 1942, in forcing women out of the workforce, Muel-Dreyfus concedes that the number of women working for wages actually increased during the Occupation (p. 102). This stands in sharp contrast with anti-Semitic legislation, also passed in part in October 1940, that fired all Jews from the civil service, the military, and teaching positions, banned Jews from the press, film, or radio industries, revoked naturalizations, condoned the internment of foreign Jews, and appointed "Aryan" administrators for Jewish property, without any consideration for how Jewish families would support themselves. Muel-Dreyfus did not have the Taliban as an example when writing her book, but the Taliban's extreme and violent policies of prohibiting women from working for wages, girls from attending school, and the denial of access to medical care to both provide a marked distinction to Vichy's regressive but more limited initiatives.

To maximize the contrast between the 1930s and Vichy, Muel-Dreyfus overstates the unanimity of Vichy's gender ideology, to the neglect of internal disputes and policies that might trouble her presentation of Vichy's eternal feminine. Miranda Pollard's book affords a more careful analysis of such disputes within the corridors of power at Vichy. Pollard analyzes the conflicts that erupted over gender

policies, underscores changes in leadership and policy over time, and contrasts heady goals with disappointing (to *Vichyistes*) reality.^[5] Not everyone at Vichy always marched in the same direction. Even when they all did, promoting the eternal feminine dissolved within its own contradictory rhetoric.

Vichy and the Eternal Feminine is well worth the trouble of reading for scholars interested in right-wing gender politics from the Commune through the Liberation and their apotheosis during Vichy. Muel-Dreyfus provides a generous and strong taste of the National Revolution's written and visual rhetoric centered on women, in an original, stimulating, if sometimes frustrating, interpretive framework. Probably not appropriate for the average undergraduate, it would be a very good book for a graduate seminar, provided its uniquely top-down, a-historical perspective is supplemented with other works on women and gender during the war.

NOTES

[1] Aline Coutrot, "La Politique familiale" in *Le Gouvernement de Vichy* (Paris: FNSP, 1972); Paula Schwartz, "'Partisanes' and Gender Politics in Vichy France," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 126-151, and "The Politics of Food and Gender in Occupied Paris," in *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1999), pp. 35-45; in that same "Gendering the Occupation of France" issue of *Modern and Contemporary France*, see also Karen Adler, "Reading National Identity: Gender and 'Prostitution' during the Occupation," pp. 47-58, and Cheryl Koos, "*On les aura!*: The Gendered Politics of Abortion and the *Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation*, 1938-1944," pp. 21-34; Dominique Veillon, *La Mode sous Vichy* (Paris: Payot, 1990) and *Vivre et Survivre en France* (Paris: Payot, 1995); Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français, 1930-1956* (Paris: Nathan, 1996); Hannah Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1939-48: Choices and Constraints* (London: Longman, 1999); Célia Bertin, *Femmes sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Stock, 1993); Michèle Bordeaux, "Femmes hors d'Etat français, 1940-1944," in *Femmes et fascismes*, ed. Rita Thalmann (Paris: Tierce, 1987); Hélène Eck, "Les françaises sous Vichy" in *Histoire des Femmes en occident*, eds., Georges Duby, Michelle Perrot, Françoise Thébaud (Paris: Plon, 1992); Melanie Hawthorne and Richard Golsan, eds., *Gender and Fascism in Modern France* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1997); Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* (New York: J. Wiley, 1995); Margaret Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[2] Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[3] "It's a disgrace, a scandal! Children are deprived of milk... and the government that preaches about the birth rate is doing nothing, absolutely nothing to ease the problem!" *Archives Nationales de France*, F7: 14927, 24 February-2 March 1944.

[4] Pollard, p. 125.

[5] Pollard, pp. 64-67.

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