
H-France Review Vol. 17 (January 2017), No. 3

Delphine Gardey, *Le linge du Palais-Bourbon: Corps, matérialité et genre du politique à l'ère démocratique*. Paris: Le Bord de l'eau, 2015. 256 pp. Illustrations, notes. 22€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-35687-365-1.

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From its title onward *Le linge du Palais-Bourbon* is an unexpected book. *Linge* (meaning both linens and laundry) is not a word usually found in the titles of political histories and unlike most other histories of French politics, the focus here is not on republican theory, political parties, or politicians. Rather, Gardey argues that the shape of French politics from the early nineteenth century to the present may be best understood through a material and everyday life history of the French legislature, as it played out in the Palais-Bourbon, built as an aristocratic country house, and become with the Revolution a seat of government. Gardey therefore includes not only a history of the building, but also a detailed discussion of all of those whose work is invisible in most histories of political institutions. The clerical staff charged with the task of accurately recording and quickly disseminating the often raucous and fast-moving debates in the chamber are presented. The laundresses and needlewomen who maintained the linens and curtains, as well as the men who supplied the broth for mid-morning sustenance, are vividly described. Even the dogs and the children roaming the building get their due. The point is not simply to offer an *histoire totale* or a “people’s history” of the National Assembly, but rather to demonstrate how fundamental political conceptions shaped the organization of this labor, which in turn had consequences for the building itself, the form of which then influenced the legislative process. The system Gardey analyzes is a dynamic and interactive one. The *linge* in the title, then, is a metaphor that references not the “underside/underwear” (*dessous*) of the institution but rather its foundations (*soubassements*) (p. 15). Those foundations, however banal they might appear, are the ground upon which the whole political structure rests.

The three challenges facing post-Revolutionary France focused on here were those of sovereignty, continuity in governance, and the establishment and maintenance of the “universal masculine neutral.” Defining sovereignty in a post-monarchical regime—when the State was no longer coterminous with the monarch—was a problem. By what right did the Assembly legislate? It was neither the State nor the people, yet it was part of both: “an Assembly and its administration are part of the State but they are also . . . as a ‘public power’ differentiated from it. This relation of inclusion/exclusion is one of the difficulties of the mode of existence of Assemblies” (p. 125). The solution was to secure the sovereignty of the Assembly by establishing its theoretical autonomy and independence from both the State and the city in which it did its business. And yet, in practice, complete autonomy from either was impossible, as was manifest in the physical structure of the Assembly, in the bodies of the deputies, and in the status of the staff who made the daily business of governance possible.

The first step in moving to a representative form of governance was to determine the physical and legal attributes of the building housing the National Assembly. Gardey demonstrates that the spatial arrangements and internal and external appearance of the National Assembly were designed to “carry, incarnate and make the values of the parliamentary institution” (p. 54). That design required finding

answers to a series of questions of basic but politically and pragmatically charged questions: Where should it be located? Who should own the building? What should it look like? How should the internal space be organized? And, how should it be connected to the surrounding city? The first question was easily answered—Paris, the capital of the nation, was the appropriate venue. The second provoked more debate but it was quite quickly determined that the initial solution of renting part of the Palais-Bourbon was not satisfactory; an autonomous institution required a sovereign space. Then there was the stylistic question; what forms would best suit a republican institution? All elements of the interior and exterior design were discussed at length, the building modified and furnishings commissioned so that both the sovereignty of the Assembly could be adequately represented and its work be efficiently accomplished. This necessitated a series of compromises. Sometimes what was best for the dignified appearance of the Assembly was not ideal for the everyday life of the deputies. The inadequate ventilation, for example, in the sacrosanct space of the *hémicycle* in which legislators spent lengthy hours made them ill and laundry hung visibly in the upper stories where some of the Assembly's staff were housed, uncomfortably melding the political and the domestic. *Le linge du Palais-Bourbon* effectively demonstrates that when abstract republican values were translated into a working institution, those values were necessarily modified.

The parliamentary system faced far more acute threats than the compromises required to create the physical conditions necessary to draft and to pass legislation. Revolutions and coup d'états, both actual and threatened, were an inescapable reality of the nineteenth-century French state. The National Assembly needed the army to protect it but was sometimes threatened by that same army, as discussed in chapter four. That paradox was resolved by establishing the principle of the National Assembly as sanctuary. The building itself was to be inviolable; political representatives had immunity from arrest (except for the most serious crimes); and, an autonomous armed force—the *huissiers*—protected the institution. Gardey underscores the importance of this corps who, to this day, are stationed within the *hémicycle*, to assure that order is maintained and that those who seek to disrupt the work of the people's representatives are excluded.

The coup d'état of 1851 proved, however, that even the *huissiers* could not assure the sovereignty of the body; it was therefore essential to put a structure in place so that if the system of protection were to fail, and the sanctuary were violated, the National Assembly would endure. That failsafe had two key elements: the Assembly had its own civil service and the Assembly both maintained its own records and had a capacity for mobility, a subject Gardey explores in chapter five. The civil service was part of the state but “a clearly a body separate and distinct from the other administrative bodies in service to the State” (p. 151). The other strategy to assure the continuity of the institution in case of disruption was the maintenance of an extensive written record, kept in-house. The National Assembly jealously guarded its own archives, handing them over to the National Archives only recently (and reluctantly). The personnel were thus relatively protected from political pressure and each time a crisis forced the National Assembly to leave its home, its staff, crucial pieces of furniture and other elements of interior décor, and the archives went with it enabling it to resume its work immediately in its temporary location.

Since Gardey's focus is the everyday and material history of the building, she extends her analysis beyond its appearance and its organization into the relation of the Palais-Bourbon with the city of which it was a part. Until well into the twentieth century, the Palais-Bourbon was relatively autonomous from Paris. Much of its staff was housed within the building (and its president was required to live there). It formed, in a sense, a city unto itself. But it also always depended on the infrastructure of Paris for supplies of food and fuel and, in time, it was literally tied to the city through electrical and telephone lines, the sewage system, and pneumatic tubes. Most crucially, it was essential that both people and information cross the threshold. The Assembly was, after all, a public institution, responsible for representing the will of the people. The people, therefore, had a right to attend sessions and journalists to report on them.

Key in making the work of the Assembly transparent to the nation's citizens who could not attend the sessions was the work of the stenographers and other clerical staff. The detailed discussion of the structuring of the labor and role of the stenographers and other clerical staff is one of the most powerful and effective parts of the book. That a state's citizens should be able to know what has been said in their name in the nation's representative bodies is so widely assumed that we give little attention to the question of how that transmission occurs. Gardey's descriptions of the adaptation of the furnishings in the *hémicycle* for the stenographers, the critical shift in their status in 1848 when the Assembly itself took over their employment from the press, and the way the work of transcribing, correcting, printing, and disseminating the transcripts was organized, gives a different and richer meaning to the concept of "publicity." The ingenuity and resources devoted not only to the accuracy of the reporting, but also to its speed and thoroughness, give life and weight to the French state's commitment to a certain transparency in governance, a commitment, Gardey argues, that was unmatched by any other representative government in the world.

Gardey's close analysis of the *work* of getting the voices of the people's representatives to the people not only elucidates a crucial attribute of the French political process, it also provides a way in to further insight concerning the gendering of republicanism. One of the longstanding puzzles of French political history is why, particularly given women's active participation in the French Revolution of 1789 and every revolution that followed, women's suffrage came so late in France. A further conundrum is why, even once women could vote and run for office, so few, before the Parity Law of 2000, were elected to the National Assembly. Through her careful reconstruction of the mechanisms of exclusion and harassment, in the very body that had voted for gender equality, Gardey demonstrates the everyday enactment of the paradoxes of republicanism so powerfully analyzed by Joan Wallach Scott, Geneviève Fraisse and other feminist theorists and historians.[1] Gardey's fine-grained reconstruction of the strategies used to keep women, even as clerical labor, out of the Palais-Bourbon's sacred space—the *hémicycle*—well after 1945, vividly demonstrates the commitment to maintaining the "universal masculine neutral" of the Republic (pp. 29, 35). She argues that the absence of women from the *hémicycle* was essential because their presence would have rendered immediately obvious the fact that the masculine was one element of a binary pair; the illusion of the universality of the masculine required the exclusion of the feminine. Women had their place in the Palais-Bourbon but it was as the wives, widows, and daughters of the staff, or as "feminine" domestic labor. They could even, under certain circumstances, be present as part of the public. The public nature of the institution forced the admission of women into some of its spaces; its relative autonomy and the fact that it was a domestic space in which people lived as well as worked, meant that it had to incorporate women into others. Women could not, however, be in the space of lawmaking, whether as *huissiers* protecting the integrity of the Chamber or even as notetakers (unless they were seated where they could not be seen). It is hardly surprising, then, that French political parties and French voters (even women voters) had, and still have, such difficulty imagining that they can be represented by a woman. The analysis here does not change our understanding of the gendering of French republicanism, but it does add a richness and depth to our grasp of how abstractions (like the universal masculine) become very effective everyday practices of exclusion. It also makes clearer why, long after women had been granted a political voice, so few were to be found in the Palais-Bourbon.

It is her very unusual melding of disciplines, research methodologies, and sources that allows Delphine Gardey to combine the histories of political theory and practice in this way. Scholarship in French political history, and in political and social theory (particularly Michel Foucault's work on governance and Bruno Latour's on institutions and materiality), as well as the above-noted feminist scholarship, provide the historical and conceptual scaffolding for the analysis.[2] The empirical richness is provided by the extensive and detailed administrative archives of the National Assembly and a close reading of the building itself, but it is also informed by the author's employment as an *assistante parlementaire*, followed twenty years later by fieldwork, in the National Assembly. This eclecticism is not without

some costs; topics appear and disappear and the narrative is not always easy to follow. Some historians may also be uncomfortable with the use Gardey makes of her work and ethnographic experiences—to reinforce her argument about the willful exclusion of women from the *hémicycle*—although I am not. The diversity of scholarly conversations and kinds of sources adds crucial depth to the analysis.

In sum, *Le linge du Palais-Bourbon* is a compelling read, contributing a great deal to building a fine-grained understanding of the everyday of “politics in the era of democracy.” As is the case with many exciting, ambitious, innovative projects, it leaves open many questions. Gardey argues, at points quite strongly, for the specificity of the French case. As always with such arguments, one longs for a comparative analysis. (She does mention the British system, but only in passing.) Some of the challenges and paradoxes she identifies in the French system are in fact common to most systems of representative government. All, for example, excluded women from national representative politics until the twentieth century. Did that produce a similar spatial division in their National Assemblies? One also wonders how France’s status as an imperial nation state mattered and thus how that might have compared to the material everyday of national legislatures in other racial regimes (the U.S. under slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow leaps to mind). These are good questions with which to be left and we can hope that she, or another scholar, will pick them up and run with them.

NOTES

[1] Geneviève Fraisse, *Muse de la Raison* (Paris: Folio Histoire, 1995); Michèle Riot-Sarcey, *La Démocratie à l’épreuve des femmes* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1994); and Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[2] Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4 (Paris, Gallimard, 1994) and *Le Corps utopique, les hétérotopies* (Paris: Lignes, 2009). Bruno Latour, *La Clef de Berlin et autres leçons d’un amateur de sciences* (Paris: La Découverte, 1993); *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes. Essai d’anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991); and *Changer de société. Refaire de la sociologie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

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ISSN 1553-9172