
H-France Review Vol. 18 (June 2018), No. 130

Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870*. Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2017. xviii + 286 pp. \$49.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 987-1-107-18808-2.

Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920*. Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018. xvi + 694 pp. \$49.99 (hb). ISBN 987-1-107-18804-4.

Review by Christine Adams, St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Scholars of French women and gender have been waiting many years to see these two books in print. Karen Offen demonstrates justifiable pride when she writes, "This volume and its companion volume...represent the results of an empirical, detailed work of scholarship, the product of a life's work" (vol. 1, p. ix). While published as separate books, they could easily be considered companion pieces. (For ease of citation, I will refer to *The Woman Question* as vol. 1 and *Debating the Woman Question* as vol. 2 throughout this review). While these two books have been a long time in the making, scholars have seen aspects of Offen's arguments in print in many articles, essays, and book chapters over the years. More than any scholar of French history, Offen has made the case that "the woman question" should "be read as evidence of a serious sociopolitical problem" and that "No disagreement was more central to French society over time than that over the 'proper' relations of the sexes" (vol. 1, p. 1). She defines "the woman question" as a term that "encompasses the arguments both for and against change in women's position relative to that of men, and from perspectives that encompass the entire spectrum of political discourse from Right to Left, from reactionary to revolutionary," in short, "the complex totality of issues raised for women and for men by women's subordinate status" (vol. 1, p. 13). The two volumes explore all facets of that question over a five-hundred-year period.

Offen argues that the articulation of the woman question is unique in the French context, that "what needed to be addressed" in her book "was not France's 'universality' but rather its cultural exceptionality in a comparative European context" (vol. 1, p. 11). Eschewing Mona Ozouf's controversial views on the nature of relations between the sexes and what she calls "the French singularity,"[1] Offen examines debates between feminists and non-feminists over the woman question from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, with an emphasis on contestation and often resistance. She emphasizes that "in my study real women talk—and often they talk back to and contest views of the female sex that seem demeaning, destructive, or even downright dangerous" (vol. 2, p. x). The participants in these debates understood the harsh realities of women's lives, which were shaped by both productive and reproductive work and constrained by laws and customs that relegated them to second-class status. Although her focus is on debates that took place in print, in speeches, and at the many conferences on the status of women held in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Offen is interested in the reality of women's lives and women themselves as actors, challenging stereotypes about themselves and fighting for their rights *as* women, not in spite of their status as women.

In her acknowledgments, Offen foregoes thanking the usual long list of colleagues, instead generously citing the work of the many historians who have shaped French women's and gender history in the decades that she has been researching this project. She writes: "This strategy indicates not only that I

have read their books and articles but also that I have taken into account their findings and observations” (vol. 1, p. xii). Indeed, it would appear that Offen has read every primary and secondary source concerning the woman question in France ever produced. Her engagement with the ideas of fellow historians, both in the text of her book and in the discursive footnotes, illustrates the trajectory of research into the woman question during the more than forty years that Offen spent researching this topic as gender became essential to our understanding of the history of France.

The footnotes are an indispensable resource to anyone working in the field, and these two volumes are an essential work of reference. Offen is an empiricist who prefers to show the reader “the abundant evidence that I have unearthed...rather than imposing one or another theoretical ‘lens’ on the reading of that evidence” (vol. 1, p. xi). That abundant evidence is front and center in her account and proves that “The debate on the woman question surfaced in recorded form in virtually every century of French history since late medieval times” (vol. 1, p. 5) and that “the controversy lays bare the centrality of sexual politics, the significance of gender issues, a state in which men initially claimed all positions of authority and shaped new laws governing even the most personal aspect of human existence in dialogue with—and in opposition to—the imperial claims of Roman Catholicism” (vol. 1, p. 2). In effect, Offen argues for the significance of the women question to our understanding of the development of modern French society and its polity.

Offen’s work was inspired in part by Simon de Beauvoir’s famous claim in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women “have no past, no history, no religion of their own” (vol. 2, p. 634).^[2] Dissatisfied and unconvinced by Beauvoir’s claim, she decided to examine the evidence herself: “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” (vol. 1, p.10). And while her own research had originally focused on the Third Republic, Offen realized that one could only understand the distinctive nature of the women question in France through a much longer historical framework.

Offen lays out five elements in the debate “that 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 the nation could be taken” (vol. 1, pp. 8-9). These five themes structure the chapters of volume one. The first chapter confronts the most distinctive facet of French thinking on women: “the enormous cultural power and influence that men publicly attributed to women—and, what is more, that women claimed for themselves” (vol. 1, p. 23). Men bowed in the direction of female “superiority,” since it was they who shaped morals, even while men made the laws. Writers as diverse as Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century, and Auguste Comte, Jules Michelet, and the Goncourt brothers in the nineteenth, made much of women’s cultural power and influence, thanks to their beauty, charm, and emotional intelligence. And yet, Offen suggests, “With this pervasive historical current of repeated acknowledgement of women’s power and influence, post-revolutionary nineteenth-century Frenchmen resumed work on the project of attempting to control it” (vol. 1, p. 27), in short, by excluding women from *political* authority, which is not the same as “power” and “influence.” This was apparently a result of male anxiety. The works of male writers “provide us with a searing portrait of masculine psychological insecurity in face of the fearsome specter of unbridled female power” (vol. 1, p. 34). In fact, asks Offen, “Was the ‘women question,’ ultimately, a Man Problem, an unresolvable problem of male identity and anxieties about masculinity?” (vol. 1, p. 35). The answer, ultimately, appears to be yes (vol. 2, p. 629).

In chapter two, Offen takes up “five centuries of explicit efforts to preserve the exercise of political authority for men” (vol. 1, p. 47), the result of that male anxiety. It was during and in the wake of the Revolution of 1789, as the French experimented with democratic forms of government, that women were relegated to a diminished position under civil and political law. The subordinate status of women, enshrined in the Napoleonic Code, has been studied extensively. Offen sees it as “a direct consequence of a long power struggle between two male-dominated hierarchies—the Roman Catholic Church and the French monarchy—for control of the institution of marriage itself, and for leverage over family heads

and their dependents” (vol. 1, p. 53). While the early years of the French Revolution offered the possibility of new citizenship rights for women, in the end, women were forcefully excluded from public life. The Civil Code of 1804 invoked the precedents of Roman law, and subsumed the interests of women, and, indeed, women themselves, to the family, headed by the patriarch. The issues of civil and political rights came up again during the Revolution of 1848 with the institution of universal manhood suffrage. Despite intense debates over the issue, “The shutout of all women, single or married, from French political life in the wake of ‘universal’ suffrage was virtually complete” (vol. 1, p. 81).

Offen takes on debates about women’s gendered bodies and their implications in chapter three. She asserts that “Biomedical thinking about the two sexes and their reciprocal relationship in society had become central to European debate on the woman question well before the French Revolution or the nineteenth century” (vol. 1, p. 84), tracing this approach back to university-trained physicians in the sixteenth century. In fact, this debate goes back even further, to the Middle Ages.^[3] The increasing valorization of medical thinking by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enshrined a predominantly male biomedical discourse about the bodies of women and “Women without professional credentials had a hard time making themselves heard over these authoritative male voices” (vol. 1, p. 92). Not surprisingly, women found many roadblocks in their quest to obtain those medical credentials. State interest in women’s bodies was justified at least in part by mounting interest in population growth. In a seminal article, as well as here, Offen makes the point that “the population issue was central to the elaboration of both nationalist and feminist thought and action during these years” (vol. 1, p. 97).^[4] France’s falling birth rate in the nineteenth century raised the stakes in the efforts to control the sexuality and fertility of women. Contraception, abortion, and sexual practices were no longer matters of interest only to individuals and to the Church, but were of significant interest to the French state.

From sexed bodies to the “unsexed mind,” debates over women’s intellect and education structure chapter four. From Christine de Pizan’s celebrated defense of women, most notably in the *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), to fights over female rulers, to arguments over female literary prowess and intellectual abilities, these disputes focused on what women *should* do as well as what they *could* do. Women’s education was central to these discussions. What kind of education was appropriate for women? What was the purpose of that education, when most women would become wives and mothers? Could their smaller brains handle higher education? These topics inspired passionate treatises throughout the early modern era. By the nineteenth century, the idea of the “mother-educator” had taken hold, a narrow and utilitarian view of education that women nonetheless seized upon to expand their influence in a variety of ways. Debates over religious versus secular education became important as the state increasingly assumed the responsibility for educating both boys and girls. Many women challenged the efforts of men to restrict women’s access to higher education, and some of these women would also go on to challenge the narrow perspective of women’s history that men were writing, a history that “asserted the timelessness and necessity of the patriarchal family” and served to “justify male rule” (vol. 1, p. 160). This battle over the politics of women’s history is the subject of chapter five. Women’s lack of access to libraries and archives as well as formal university training hindered but did not halt their efforts to contest histories written by men such as Jules Michelet and Frédéric Le Play.

Women have always worked, although not always “outside the household, nor always in industrial production, nor invariably for pay—much less for pay equal to that of men” (vol. 1, p. 182). In chapter six, Offen looks at the politics of women’s work. The debate was less over whether women should work and more about the type of work they should do. Tension emerged between men and women in the eighteenth century, especially with increasing specialization of labor and the beginnings of industrialization, as men sought to keep the more lucrative positions for themselves. Quarrels over women’s work for pay intensified in the nineteenth century as much of the work they did, unpaid productive and reproductive labor in the home, was erased from economic calculations. The “male breadwinner model” that won out for many as the idealized sexual division of labor served as a powerful argument against the employment of women with children outside the household, but also contributed to “the feminization of poverty” as it kept women’s wages low, so low, in fact, that for many, prostitution

was an alternative or supplement. The valorization of women's role at the center of the family militated against their need—and desire—to work outside the home. However, the census of 1866 revealed that France had the highest proportion of employed women in the Western world (vol. 1, p. 211).

The late Second Empire was a time of new interest in women's civil and political rights and freedoms, including the topic of women's suffrage. France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, followed by the Paris Commune, in which women played an important and much-studied role, would significantly influence later debates on the woman question.^[5] This story is covered briefly in chapter seven, and serves as the bridge to the second volume, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920*.

Volume two, which covers a period of fifty years, is, at 694 pages, two and half times longer than the first volume, which covers nearly five hundred years. Under the Third Republic, many more individuals were engaged in the debate over the woman question, producing far more material to consider and analyze. It would be more difficult and probably not fruitful to summarize each chapter (and would go far beyond even the generous word limit of an H-France book review) because, with the chronological approach of the second volume, the same themes repeat multiple times as “virtually all the significant issues concerning male-female relations were placed on the table for debate” (vol. 2, p. x). The debates during these years expanded on issues discussed in the first volume and revealed the endless variety in the approaches that both women and men took concerning all facets of the women question.

It was also during these years that the French feminist movement took form in ways specific to France. The word itself—“féminisme”—originated in France. Offen makes that case that “Hubertine Auclert deserves the credit for pioneering the use of ‘féminisme’ to refer to women's rights and emancipation” (vol. 2, p. 160) in the 1880s. By the 1890s, however, “feminist factions and fractures did emerge,” as different groups and individuals sought to define the true meaning of feminism, applying different labels: “‘familial feminists,’ ‘integral feminists,’ ‘Christian feminists,’ ‘socialist feminists,’ ‘bourgeois feminists,’ ‘radical feminists,’ and, of course, ‘male-feminists’” (vol. 2, p. 171). Most French women emphasized that feminists should “perform femininity,” displaying charm and elegance while demanding their rights. Here, as in her other published works, Offen challenges the earlier historiography that denigrated the efforts of French feminists as “conservative,” and male republicans as uniformly hostile to women, noting that many liberal republicans, such as René Viviani, supported legal changes for women (for example, in the case of divorce, civil and legal rights, and education), even if they did not always actively support woman suffrage.^[6] She has long suggested that by focusing too narrowly on “integral” or “individualist” feminism, championed primarily by Anglo-American feminists, historians have neglected French “relational” or “familial” feminism that emphasized a biologically-differentiated, family-centered vision of male-female complementarity along with a positive conception of women's special nature that informed their demands for change.^[7] She takes an expansive view of feminism and treats sympathetically French women's efforts to improve their condition and to shape the terms of the debate given the realities of French society. The politics of maternity, family, sexuality, and women's work dominated discussions under the Third Republic, although demands for the right to vote became increasingly insistent in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The French defeat at the hands of Germany in 1870-71 created a crisis in French politics and national identity, with the result that the population question became especially heated. More than ever, maternity was a matter of public concern given national anxiety over the issue of “depopulation,” fueling the belief that maternity was a female form of patriotism. Different individuals promoted different solutions to the falling birth rates in France, with some feminists, such as Marie Deraismes, arguing that an improvement in the legal and moral situation of women would encourage them to bear more children, while others called for harsher laws against abortion and birth control. At the same time, French pronatalists were challenged by proponents of birth control, or “neo-Malthusianism,” such as Nelly Roussel, who asserted women's right to determine the conditions of motherhood. In the eyes of most feminists, a woman's familial role undergirded her demands for improved civil and legal status,

including an end to the legal double standard on adultery and the right to divorce. Even single mothers were entitled to support and respect, leading to demands to repeal the notorious Article 340 of the Napoleonic Code, which forbade *recherche de la paternité*. [8] Divorce became legal in 1884, and *recherche de la paternité* was revised in 1912, but in both cases, the legal changes fell far short of feminist demands.

With concerns over natality and population growth, debates over women and work became particularly intense. Women's right to work, as well as their abysmal pay, structured the complaints of feminists and antifeminists; socialists worried that women in the workforce undercut men's pay, while bourgeois men worried about competition, especially as women fought for access to improved education. Men fretted that work took women away from their familial duties, while feminists cited low pay for women as contributing to prostitution and demanded equal pay for equal work. French politicians eventually decided that the best solution to the "problem" of women workers was "protective" legislation passed in 1892 that restricted women's working hours and night employment. Its effects were disastrous for women: More and more, they were relegated to even more poorly compensated home-based work in the garment industry. While the work conditions for educated women experienced some improvement in the early twentieth century, those of poor women worsened. Offen quotes Marilyn Boxer's assessment that "protective labor laws should be considered among the factors deemed responsible for the marginalization (and impoverishment) of women workers" (vol. 2, p. 445).[9]

These debates over maternity, work, and prostitution or "white slavery" in the terminology of the time, as well as access to the vote, were carried out by men and women who participated in numerous organizations and conferences devoted to these issues. These included specifically French organizations (such as the Conseil national des femmes françaises) as well as international ones (for example, the International Council of Women). Organizations worked on different and sometimes very specific issues of concern to women. The year 1889 saw two important congresses on women: the unofficial Droits des femmes, which promoted women's economic independence, as well as the official Oeuvres et institutions féministes, which focused on philanthropy and morality, the humanities, and civil legislation. At times, these activists and organizations operated at cross purposes. For example, socialist activists Suzanne Lacore (known as "Suzon") and Clara Zetkin urged French women to reject "bourgeois" feminism in favor of the commitment to class struggle. The cacophony of voices and the plethora of associations, congresses, and issues amply demonstrate enthusiastic attention to the woman question in the years around the turn of the century.

Women's suffrage finally became an issue of passionate debate among French women and men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Offen tackles the question that has dominated the historiography of woman suffrage in France: "Why did it take so long for women in France to obtain the vote?" (vol. 2, p. 490). Women in France, even those very much committed to the right to vote, rejected the militant tactics of British suffragettes, and instead "insisted that French women could—and must—obtain the vote and eligibility to run for office by dignified, well-reasoned and 'ladylike' means" (vol. 2, p. 492), relying on their connections to influential men. By 1914, this strategy appeared to bear fruit: a suffrage law to enfranchise women at the local level was brought before the Chamber of Deputies in mid-June of that year (vol. 2, p. 538).

The outbreak of the Great War at a moment when it appeared that movement towards the vote for French women was inevitable appears to the reader as a crushing rupture in the activity and passion that had gone before; women's issues were temporarily set aside. Most French women's organizations rallied patriotically in support of the republic at war, building on earlier efforts "to identify feminism with the national community and to integrate themselves within it as full partners" (vol. 2, p. 549). The nation called upon women to work in support of the war effort, especially in the munitions factories, and to help turn around the rapidly declining birth rate, which would become even more important as the war came to an end. But rather than encouraging women to bear more children with the promise of greater rights and economic security, the post-war French government instead passed draconian legislation outlawing abortion and access to contraception while the Senate refused to support woman

suffrage at all. Women, deprived of a political voice, could do nothing about the aggressive antifeminist legislation of the 1920s, except refuse to “comply with the pronatalist offensive; the birth rate would continue to drop” (vol. 2, p. 610). In Offen’s words, “the political and economic climate of the 1920s and 1930s was unhospitable, to say the least” (vol. 2, p. 615). French women would not gain the right to vote until 1944.

It is difficult to convey how impressive Offen’s two books are, and this summary cannot do justice to them. There is no historian better versed in the intricacies of the women question in France and the breadth of the scholarship on display is breathtaking. Offen also writes beautifully. The prose is clear and lucid, and every chapter demonstrates the depth of her knowledge. That said, while *The Woman Question* is easy to follow, the same is not always true for *Debating the Woman Question*. It can be difficult to keep track of the cast of characters, the names of organizations, the many congresses, and the nuances of the legislation proposed. And because the second volume is organized chronologically, there is necessarily repetition as Offen traces the evolution of debates on various topics. Perhaps some of the material could have been condensed, for example, the direct language from assorted speeches and treatises. On the other hand, I understand why Offen made the choices she did. She wanted to show “the interconnectedness...of the various themes and topics, and to engage readers to more closely follow through time the development and distinctive inflections of the arguments and issues, and to experience vicariously the personalities of the debaters, to feel the heat and intensity of the debates...” (vol. 2, p. xi). That might not have been possible without recording the competing views in such detail. Further, given that part of her goal was to prove Beauvoir wrong, to show that the woman question *did* have a history, the weight of the evidence constitutes that proof.

Offen’s afterward, a very personal piece of writing, traces how both the field of women’s history and the ways in which we do research have changed in the past forty years. I read it in part as a gentle admonishment to younger scholars who take for granted the resources available to us, resources that her generation did not have for many years. As a scholar one generation behind Offen, I am profoundly grateful for her pioneering work, as well as those whom she cites extensively: her close collaborator Marilyn J. Boxer, Linda L. Clark, James B. Collins, Rachel G. Fuchs, Steven C. Hause, Jo Burr Margadant, and so many others, who have mentored and inspired so many of us who study women, gender, and the family in France.

NOTES

[1] Mona Ozouf, *Les Mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), translated by Jane Marie Todd as *Women’s Words: Essay on French Singularity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[2] The quote is from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Shelia Malovaney-Chevalier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 8.

[3] John W. Baldwin, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 88-97 and 127-37.

[4] Karen Offen, “Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France,” *American Historical Review* 89:3 (June 1984): 648-76.

[5] Important books on women’s participation in the Commune include Edith Thomas, *Les Pétroleuses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), translated by James and Starr Atkinson as *The Women Incendiaries*, (New York: G. Braziller, 1966); Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Carolyn Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[6] In particular, Offen challenges the interpretations of Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) and Charles Sowerwine, "Revising the Sexual Contract: Women's Citizenship and Republicanism in France, 1789-1944," in Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Accampo, eds., *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender* (Basington, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 19-42.

[7] Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," esp. p. 654.

[8] That is, the right of a single mother to seek child support from the father. On *recherche de la paternité*, see Rachel G. Fuchs, *Contested Paternity: Constructing Families in Modern France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

[9] Marilyn J. Boxer, "Protective Legislation and Home Industry: The Marginalization of Women Workers in Late Nineteenth-Early Twentieth-Century France," *Journal of Social History* 20:1 (Fall 1986): 45-65.

Christine Adams
St. Mary's College of Maryland
cmadams@smcm.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172