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Kelly Ricciardi Colvin, *Gender and French Identity after the Second World War, 1944-1954: Engendering Frenchness*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. vii + 247 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$114.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 9781350105553; (e-PDF) 9781350031128; (e-book) 9781350031135.

Response by Kelly Ricciardi Colvin, Brown University.

In 1949, in her *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir posed a seeming paradox for her readers' evaluation: how was it, she wondered, that women in France finally enjoyed full political and legal rights and yet their lives remained so defined by patriarchal structures? [1] Certainly the book and its author were flawed, but the question remains relevant some seventy years later. It is, indeed, the central question of my book, *Gender and French Identity*, which seeks to understand how assumptions about women and femininity remained relatively stagnant despite the granting of civil rights, and especially within the context of war/postwar tumult.

I am grateful to Karen Offen for her work on the review, as well as her own impressive body of research, which has influenced how I think about feminism and history. However, it seems to me that we have a fundamental methodological disagreement about the notion that political institutions ought to be examined from a cultural standpoint, and whether historians should see how women—and men—actually absorbed these developments in their lives, as well as the most optimal way to approach the tensions between institutional proclamations and cultural osmosis. To that end, in the book I pointedly articulate how I did not focus on the relationship between demographics and culture, but rather on the messages contained within a plethora of cultural sources and what they reveal about the evident gap between cultural and political realities. My book therefore demonstrates how, in this case, culture does not operate as a "superstructure," something built upon a demographic "structure," and instead zeroes in on the widely prevalent cultural messages themselves in order to understand their broad impact on the nation of France.

I wish to address two more specific points in Offen's review that I found especially problematic. First, she argues that my analysis of postwar French women treats them as victims of normative gender assumptions embedded in French culture. This assertion misses the book's central premise, which is about the role of gender in shaping French cultural norms. Indeed the evidence presented in the book explains how the obsessive drive for a return to "normalcy" at the end of the war, despite women's widely celebrated wartime participation and postwar enfranchisement, essentially resulted in a return to traditional gender norms, which benefitted the nation both internationally and nationally. The purpose of my book is to examine the

cultural evidence of why and how such an overwhelming emphasis on traditional femininity developed, as well as how this emphasis helped the nation. Mapping the gender landscape does not victimize women; it brings historians closer to an understanding of people's choices and actions.

Second, Offen's claim that my analysis of women who colluded is "voyeuristic" ironically reflects how postwar influencers dramatized these women's experiences in specific ways that emphasized their outrageousness and contrast to proper French women. The very reason that these sullied women's names became so well-known to the broader public was indeed because they served an instructive purpose—to show "good" French women how to behave. This purpose hewed closely to a more general postwar blueprint that saw women's behavior restricted and confined to conservative gender norms. My analysis, based on multiple memoirs, trials, magazines, and newspapers, lays bare how authors, politicians, and cultural critics deployed these "bad" figures as torchbearers of the potential for feminine evil should a woman stray from the prescribed path. Offen wishes I had highlighted more "heroines" of the time, which I did do in an earlier section. There, I analyzed how pieces on these "good" women also served to reinforce the narrow conventions and boundaries of femininity. Where those acceptable women, who might be in positions of high political and cultural authority, were lauded as maternal and beautiful, women who had colluded were publicly "proven" to be ugly, unattractive, and unnatural, effectively painting them as the flipside of the coin of proper French womanhood. As others have oft-noted, I also show how aesthetic or gender-based takedowns were almost entirely woman-centric; no such instructive measures proved necessary in the takedowns of male collaborators.

Understanding the historical development of gaps between institutional progress (which, I should add, is shaped by the patriarchy of those institutions) and how people understand that progress is key. It will allow historians to ask essential and challenging questions about the nature of democratic institutions and their ability to address functional inequality. As we move more and more into a world that demands some institutional accountability—fingers crossed, anyway—around gender equality, those kinds of questions become increasingly important. We do not have to look far to see examples: recent developments related to sexual harassment of/violence against women clearly provide evidence that institutional analyses do not necessarily represent the lived experiences of people. We have witnessed a wave of victims recount incidences of sexual harassment at the hands of colleagues. Many of these cases, including my own, went unreported, despite formal institutional and governmental policies. Powerful cultural forces—historical and contemporary—worked to persuade me and countless others that the potential penalty to our careers and lives outweighed the benefits of institutional reporting. This gap between the static subway platform of institutions and the speeding train of cultural reality represents, to me, a rich field of potential historical inquiry, and it requires an innovative methodology, an attempt at which I undertook in my book. This approach is not reflective of some sort of "heavy-hand[ed] Anglo-American cultural studies," as Offen derides it, but rather of foregrounding lived marginalized experiences that are not necessarily reflected in the annals of official documents and organizations.

I want to end with a response to Offen's final point, in which she questions whether "anything having to do with persuading women to focus on making life pleasing or comfortable for others, or dissuading them from taking jobs outside the home is, by definition, 'confining.'" When I lie awake at night and worry about what the world will look like for future generations, I do not

ask myself if my young daughter should be content with pleasing others as a primary focus, whether that kind of role would be enough for her, and I certainly do not ask myself if she should listen to the “dissuading,” as Offen puts it, that women still must face down when they seek an unconventional path. Instead I wonder whether she will be able to live in a world that, as Beauvoir envisioned, might be a little freer of those patriarchal practices that remain stubbornly persistent, despite institutional reforms. I hope my work contributes to these efforts and questions that broaden fields of inquiry and explore exciting new historical possibilities.

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NOTE

[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 721. Beauvoir located the corrective action in women’s economic independence.

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