
H-France Review Vol. 21 (December 2021), No. 222

Scarlett Beauvalet, Annie Duprat, Armelle Le Bras-Chopard, Mariette Sineau, Françoise Thébaud; preface by Michelle Perrot, *Femmes et République*. Paris: La Documentation Française, 2020. 263 pp. Bibliography, index, and illustrations. €32.00. ISBN 978-2-11-157246-1.

Review by Hanna Diamond, Cardiff University.

This large and striking book charts the checkered relationship that French women have had with the Republic since the 1789 revolution. If its format is more that of a glossy coffee table volume than the textbook it claims to be, the large page layout allows for a superb presentation of numerous reproductions of paintings and iconographies of all kinds. These accompany a lively and accessible text authored by renowned experts in the field. Written in accessible French prose, this book is ideal for teaching purposes, including for non-native speakers of French. Eleven chapters are grouped into three parts. The first two chronologically structured sections bring together illustrated essays which run from the Revolution right up to 2020. The final part comprises two essays covering the whole period; the first focuses on images of women in political and republican art, while the final chapter deals with France's "First Ladies." The book is undeniably a very welcome contribution and fills a necessary gap.

One of the book's key strengths lies in the way it seeks to bring to light unusual women's stories, or sheds new light on the better-known activists. While the double-page illustrations and other insets sometimes interrupt the narrative flow of the chapters and some are more smoothly integrated than others, they all cover related topics and are a welcome addition. Thirteen portraits flesh out the roles played by specific women. These range from the presentation of key personalities like Louise Michel and Simone Veil to lesser-known women like Louise-Félicité de Kéralio-Robert, a pioneer of female political activity during the Revolution, or the lawyer and successful politician Germaine Pinso-Chapuis who was particularly active in the late 1940s and 1950s. Nine insets are dedicated to the influential writings of six women (including, for example, Rosalie Julien and Camille Sée) and three men (Jean Jaurès, François Mitterrand, and Jacques Chirac) including both published (e.g. diaries and speeches) and unpublished (e.g. letters) works. Throughout the book, the authors also quote frequently from relevant women. In this way, the authors deftly allow women's voices to be heard and represented.

The uniqueness of the book lies in its blend of text and iconography. Each chapter is teeming with superb reproductions and the editors have drawn on rich and varied sources. Every page is full of visual interest. Reproductions of paintings, photographs, cartoon strips, tracts and newspapers all offer tempting primary source materials for teaching. One of the more striking photographs depicts a lonely Françoise Sauvé as the only woman in an image of the 1948-50

“class” of the *École nationale de l’Administration* (p. 129). A double-page photographic spread of Simone Veil presenting the law legalizing abortion at the *Assemblée nationale* on 26 November 1974 to an almost entirely male audience offers potent testimony to what a trailblazer she was (pp. 150-151). It also shows how these televised images might have helped her to capture public support for this cause. The image selections are often poignant, striking, and effective. The only caveat that could be made about the plethora of iconography is that the reproductions tend to be illustrative and the images themselves are rarely discussed except in Annie Duprat’s chapter at the end.

An opening preface by Michelle Perrot explores the vexed question of the French state’s long-term refusal to allow French women into the public sphere and participate in politics. Her text provides a lucid synthesis of the diverse arguments which have been rehearsed, both at the time and since, around this question. In line with its textbook ambitions, rather than presenting new research, the chapters offer a valuable synthesis of existing research. That said, the material often feels fresh despite largely covering well-established terrain and although the book provides a predominantly descriptive retelling, useful analysis also surfaces.

Of course, everything began with the revolution and in the opening chapter, Scarlett Beauvalet sets out in considerable detail how women were “au coeur de ces bouleversements dont elles ont été aussi actrices” (p. 17). She introduces the potent notion that resurfaces throughout the book, that women were “citoyennes sans citoyenneté” (p. 17). She underlines the extent to which women were involved in political discussions, in demonstrations, and in their own organizations. They were also present in the numerous assemblies. She cites Olympe de Gouges pointing out that her famous declaration was never cited during the revolution and its importance was only recognized much later (correcting a widespread misperception perhaps). Her chapter concludes that the revolution was important for a “remise en cause” of the relations between the sexes (p. 34). In her second chapter, Beauvalet shows how “feminist” demands became increasingly explicit and visible. While the Civil Code had consecrated female inferiority and confined them to the private sphere, women were not marginal to political movements. She chronicles the frustrations experienced by women in 1848 when, for the male revolutionaries, “l’exclusion politique des femmes va de soi” (p. 43). Many of the key actors were against seeing women in the public sphere. The many texts and caricatures designed to discredit women and reduce them to silence provide telling evidence of this.

Françoise Thébaud’s chapters deal with the period from 1870 to 1944. She explains that the communards once again wanted a revolution without women’s involvement and promoted a republican social model based on the family. Her discussion of the emerging feminist movement charts its disagreements about focusing on the right to vote. This did not become a priority until the eve of the First World War. The war both marked the apogee of the movement and stymied it. Women suspended their political demands during the conflict and feminists called on women to make a patriotic contribution. After the war, Thébaud explains how new arguments elaborated by feminists did not suffice to sway hostile Radical party senators who dominated in the *Sénat*. Women’s assertions that they had shown proof of their capabilities, that they should rightfully be involved in reconstruction, and that France should follow the example offered by other countries were not found to be sufficiently persuasive, and the Radicals continued to systematically block suffrage legislation throughout the inter-war period. Nonetheless, the idea that women should vote gained ground and the fact that women were increasingly visible in public space was exemplified by Blum’s nomination of three women ministers in 1936. Thébaud

attributes the eventual passing of women's suffrage in North Africa in April 1944 to the weakness of the Radical party almost absent from that Assembly. However, she argues that, even after finally acquiring the right to vote, French women were still not seen as citizens like others and women were not really integrated into the Republic.

This interpretation is vividly confirmed in the next chapter by Armelle Le Bras Chopard, who shows the extent to which the Fourth Republic proved to be a disappointing period for women. Its promising beginnings soon gave way to women's exclusion from power. She shows how society continued to operate within the traditional norms of the Civil Code favoring the pre-eminence of husbands. Nonetheless, she identifies several elements which signposted a sense that change was on the horizon and concludes by citing de Beauvoir's analysis that the Fourth Republic represented a period of transition.

Mariette Sineau's ensuing account of women under the Fifth Republic from 1958 is particularly insightful. She sets out how de Gaulle ensured that women had no place in politics in his "patriarcat institutionnel" where men's power was supreme (p. 128). Giscard d'Estaing's and Mitterrand's presidencies, on the other hand, both opened doors to women. D'Estaing saw them as valuable to his modernizing agenda and brought women into government for their capacities and new ideas. He mobilized them not as politicians whose legitimacy arose from being elected, but as "techniciennes" whose value arose from their competence in their fields. Sineau posits that Mitterrand too was a friend to women and designated many women to powerful roles in the Republic including most notably Edith Cresson, "la femme d'état la plus accomplie" (p. 158). Unlike those who came to the fore under Giscard, these women were politicians. While men still held the most powerful government portfolios, Sineau suggests that a point had been reached whereby subsequent presidents would be unable to turn the clock back.

It was Chirac who was destined to be in power at the time of the changes brought by parity. This approach emerged, Sineau argues, as the only way to break the resistance of the political parties to fielding women candidates. The measure passed in 1999-2000 finally allowed women to gain a foothold in the National Assembly. But the decisive breakthrough of parity government only came in 2017 with Macron's mini revolution when women gained 39 percent of the seats. These numbers were accompanied by even more impressive breakthroughs on a regional and local level finally making it possible for women to access the political apprenticeships they needed to have a chance at making national level careers. Overall, she concludes with the suggestion that women's involvement in politics might finally have come of age and closes by evoking the very real possibility of a female president, suggesting that this ultimate glass ceiling might also be about to shatter.

The final section opens with Annie Duprat's compelling analysis of images of women in political and republican art. Her discussion of the origins and differences in representations of Marianne builds on Agulhon's scholarship and is a particular highlight of the book. She provides a comprehensive reading of images of Marianne depicted not just in paintings but also in caricatures, on coins, sculptures, and in contemporary artwork. She shows just how convenient and elastic Marianne has proved to be as an icon of the Republic. The final essay by Le-Bras Chopard on the "First Lady" and her place in the Republic is less remarkable. Perhaps inevitably, given the topic, it is a little lacking in content but does provide a good excuse to reproduce images of all the women concerned. Le-Bras Chopard asks whether presidents' wives are effectively playing the role of a living Marianne. Her chapter however rather sidesteps the answer to this

question concluding that while the French remain hostile to investing the role with any official duties, the public seems to be generally satisfied with the contribution made by these wives in representing the Republic particularly overseas.

Overall, the book has much to recommend it both in terms of its content and its presentation. However, it does seem to be an inescapably odd editorial decision to create this very bulky glossy coffee-table publication as a textbook for students. If its ambition was to showcase the wonderful reproductions and iconography, it certainly succeeds. But this choice of presentation means that it presents more like an exhibition catalogue than a textbook. In the preface, Perrot points to the book being destined for “programmes scolaires” but its format seems to belie this (p. 12). While the book is also available as a pdf at a slightly cheaper price, and this is marketed online as an e-book, from the context of my own university library, this was not considered to be a viable library purchase for teaching purposes. It might be possible to suggest the pdf option to students as recommended reading but the beautifully polished production of this book, its superb presentation and artistically edited images work immeasurably less effectively on a screen.

Hanna Diamond
Cardiff University
diamondh@cardiff.ac.uk

Copyright © 2021 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