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Amélie Puche, *Les femmes à la conquête de l'université (1870-1940)*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2022. 404 pp. Photographs, illustrations, appendices, and index. €39.00. (pb). ISBN 9782343250113; €39.99. (pdf). ISBN 9782140238475; €39.99. (epub). ISBN 9782140238482.

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To be a female student in a French university during the Third Republic was to know challenges, as Amélie Puche observes in her book, *Les femmes à la conquête de l'université (1870-1940)*. Puche's text begins with the datum that in 2022, 58 percent of the student body at French universities were women. This situation was perceived by contemporaries as a feminization even though fields including engineering, science, and commerce remain male-dominated while women occupy lower-status domains such as teaching, literature, languages, and medicine. The scholarship on gender issues in contemporary university environments documents ongoing gender discrimination despite the broader democratization of academia.[1] Puche's study, originally a thesis defended at the University of Artois in 2020, examines how this demographic change occurred and what it signifies in the longer process of women's search for equality in French society, with a focus on the 1880s to 1930s. Higher education for women, like mixed-sex education itself, has proven to be a necessary but insufficient precondition to dismantling persistent inequalities.

Puche's book offers a synthesis of women's experiences as students in higher education, both in the provinces and Paris, in terms of their reception by male students and professors, the impact of education on their identities, and their ambitions for a successful postgraduate life. This text knits the history of post-secondary education to the history of feminism and gender studies revealing the pervasiveness of conservative forces, and persistence required by women seeking new paths. It is an important complement in the history of education to Pierre Moulinier's research into the emergence of the "modern student" and augments with geographical breadth and depth Carole Lécuyer's master's thesis on the female students at the University of Paris.[2]

The entrance of women into French universities was hailed as a harbinger of women's emancipation during the late nineteenth century. Puche illustrates how difficult it was not only for the first generation of female students to gain purchase against hostile critics, but also for the subsequent generations to secure the funds to sustain their academic pursuits. Each generation faced barriers when searching for employment upon graduation, rendering marriage a more reliable investment for financial security than the diploma alone. Exceptional women found employment in their fields of expertise while also juggling their familial and domestic responsibilities. Judicious examples of pioneering women's experiences in varied fields--

including Madeleine Brès (medicine), Marie Curie (physics), Simone de Beauvoir (political philosophy), and Charlotte Bèquignon-Lagarde (law)--enliven the text. The contextualization of these remarkable figures is balanced with documentation on the more typical lives of female students, primarily bourgeois in origin, both foreign-born and French nationals. One of the particular strengths of this synthetic study is Puche's use of departmental archives to elucidate the history of female students at the universities in Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, and Montpellier. Methodologically, the book offers readers a combination of quantitative data, illustrative qualitative descriptions, and intellectual and social history. Press sources, including student newspapers as well as the feminine and feminist press, are interlaced with data from French university archives.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part one highlights the many ways in which a university education for women was a proving ground to justify their role as students and demonstrate their intellectual and physiological capacities to their many critics. The myriad antifeminist arguments are also cataloged, primarily from print sources. The debate and history of the emancipation of female students involved the societal and individual shifts that indicate the current degree of tolerance of female independence. While egalitarian thinkers applauded the women's academic successes, critics decried the virilization of women and bemoaned the threat to the traditional *foyer* under the specter of gender role reversals. Although readers familiar with the history of feminism will recognize the themes and scope of this debate, [3]
Puche found fresh examples teased from students' newspapers and affiliated sources.

Part two details the material conditions, preoccupations, and financial woes of female students from sociological and historical perspectives. By interpreting class background from the evidence provided by the stated professions of their fathers, Puche determined that the majority of female students are those whose fathers were also educated: 27 percent of their fathers were *employés*, 21 percent were in liberal professions, and 14 percent worked as teachers. Education did not guarantee a family material comfort (then or now). We learn of the benefits of collective housing, *foyers*, and cafeterias that developed after the First World War. For unmarried students, collective habitation in single-sex communities reduced the isolation and anxiety of living alone, a change facilitated by private associations and institutional structures.

In Part three, Puche examines features of students' mentalities including tensions between religion and secular education, their political engagement, and their postgraduate aspirations. While incomplete data on religious affiliation hampers analytical certainty, Puche nevertheless notes that a sizeable portion of the non-French female students of the Belle Époque were either Jews from the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe or Orthodox Christians seeking freedom and opportunity in France. Secular university education for French Catholic students led to a confrontation between the teachings of Catholicism and science. As Puche explains, "Au cour de son apprentissage universitaire, l'étudiante est confrontée à des réalités qui heurtent sa foi. Le catholicisme apporte une vérité révélée. Or, et dans toutes les filières, les avancées de la recherche peuvent se trouver en contradiction avec la conception divine du monde et du cosmos. Aucune jeune personne fréquentant les amphithéâtre ne peut, à un moment ou au autre, échapper à la confrontation entre science et religion" (p. 288). In the post-World War I period, Church authorities sought to help students keep their faith intact. They did so by encouraging women's charitable works to address poverty and social inequality both through scientific study ("une

philanthropic intellectuelle" [p. 293]) and actual charity, in the form of teaching domestic science and hygiene aimed to improve the health of the working poor, as well as raising funds through charity auctions and balls. Political engagement, however, was not typical of students who were, perhaps, too preoccupied with their studies or not politicized by their status as role models in male-dominated institutions. While the law schools contained a larger share of activists, some of them, like Maria Vérone, were already seasoned political actors *before* becoming students.

While diplomas made it possible for women to pursue liberal professions, secure teaching posts, and engage in other intellectual work, Puche's book underscores that marriage provided a more reliable path to economic security for women of the Third Republic. Indeed, a majority of female students were married while at university and yet still generally completed their degrees. These women often found employment assisting their husbands and some were able to substitute for them after completing an identical curriculum. Most women who sought to combine careers with family and children, however, remained responsible for accomplishing both. Educated women responded to these pressures in part by limiting the number of their offspring and seeking flexible working hours. Only in exceptional couples did both partners equitably shoulder domestic responsibilities.

Puche's work contributes to the history of education, women, and gender in the context of modern France. As she convincingly explains, the dominant societal assumption of Third Republic France was that women were less capable than men of university studies and were still expected to dedicate their lives to their families. Gendered assumptions and the societal structures that reinforced them have shifted only gradually, reluctantly, and certainly not entirely. *Les femmes à la conquête de l'université (1870-1940)* is a welcome study that should contribute to the ongoing debate on questions about gender equality in academia and the professions, as well, perhaps, lead to new plans of action.

NOTES

[1] Nicky Le Feuvre is one of the most prolific current researchers on issues of feminization in the professions for France and comparative perspectives; see Nicky Le Feuvre, "Femmes, genres et sciences: un sexisme moderne?" in Margaret Maruani, ed., *Travail et genre dans le monde, l'état des savoirs* (Paris: Le Découverte, 2013), pp. 419-427. On women's education history comparatively, see Rebecca Rogers and Pascale Molinier, eds., *Les femmes dans le monde académique: Perspectives comparatives* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016).

[2] Pierre Moulinier, *La Naissance de l'étudiant moderne (XIXe siècle)* (Paris: Belin, 2002); Carole Lécuyer, "Les Étudiantes de l'Université de Paris sous la Troisième République" (mémoire de maîtrise, Université Denis-Diderot-Paris 7, 1993); Carole Christen-Lécuyer, "Les premières étudiantes de l'Université de Paris," *Travail, genre et sociétés* 4 (2000): 35-50.

[3] Karen M. Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Juliette Rennes, *Le mérite et la nature: Une controverse républicaine: L'accès des femmes aux professions de prestige, 1880-1940* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

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