

Women in France since 1789 by Susan K. Foley. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004. xi+378pp. 0-333-61992-7 (hardback) 0-333-61993-5 (paperback).

This is a clearly written synthesis of the contribution of a number of recent historians to the study of aspects of the history of women in France since the Revolution. It is an empirical survey which aims to show how women's lives have changed and seeks to define the extent to which women have acquired more control of their existence.

Foley deals with 'woman' and feminist theory, which could easily dominate the topic, with a sensible, light and balanced touch, enough to make her book required reading for Gender Studies' courses, without alienating mere French historians for whom it will also be the most succinct introduction to the subject to date in English.

The brief introduction summarises the failure of women in the 1789 Revolution to secure equal civil rights with men and the actual downgrading of the status of women in the Civil Code of 1804. Next Foley traces the contrasting lives of women in different social groups in the nineteenth century, 'elite', urban working' and 'peasant', but not 'middle-class'. There is no parallel section for the twentieth century, apart from a few references to the effects of specific educational and job changes. The rest of the book adopts chronological divisions that are, with one exception, dictated more by men's than women's lives. Part II looks at 'Sex and Citizenship' throughout the nineteenth century. It does not engage with the problem why many early socialists were feminist and demanded votes for women in 1848, while later left wing politicians held out against the enfranchisement of women and the women themselves became so wet compared with the dynamic seamstresses who ran *La Femme Libre* in 1832. Part three covers the period from the 1890s and the

'New Woman' to Vichy, while Part four describes the rapid changes that followed 1945.

This book provides useful basic information on most of the legislation which improved the status of women and is thus heavily focused on describing change, particularly of the political variety. More details on related social issues would have been welcome. Certain features of women's lives in France appear rather different from those of women elsewhere in Europe and might merit some comparative attention, for instance the high proportion of French women working throughout the nineteenth century. One tends to assume this was partly the predominance of agriculture, partly another oddity in France, the huge significance of wet nursing. Why was wet nursing so ubiquitous when nurslings died in large numbers and the French became so paranoid about their failure to reproduce themselves in the second half of the nineteenth century? It would have been useful to know more about whether in the twentieth century female employment was related to the availability of nurseries and other social welfare provisions. Then there is the puzzling question of the disenfranchisement of Marianne. Why was it that France was the first state to decree universal male suffrage, yet the last major developed country to enfranchise women in 1945? Foley's statistics seem to hint at a lack of any real interest in the vote among French women. Even with gender parity of candidates in the legislative elections of 2002 the number of women deputies rose only from 62 to 68, from 11 to 12% of deputies. French female politicians tend to have much closer personal links to successful male counterparts than in other countries: Cresson, who was briefly France's first female prime minister was closely connected to Mitterrand, while Martine Aubry, several times Minister of Labour in the 1990s is the daughter of Jacques Delors. Foley suggests that this may be related to the fact that although more

girls than boys undertake tertiary study, in 2000 only 21% of the students at the most elite establishment, the ENA, were women. This author suggests that the long period of study may explain this discrepancy, but time constraints do not stop girls studying medicine and law. Foley has a little to say about the very low educational and work status of recent female immigrants. What of the second and third generations? Do they imitate French girls and pursue educational and professional qualifications? The impact of immigration on the status of women would be worth analysis earlier in this book, given that France was importing foreign labour throughout the whole period.

It is difficult not to focus on 'progressive' aspect in such a topic, but what is progressive? It might come as a surprise to some readers that in 1919 Pope Benedict XV actively supported female suffrage. The author touches on the role of women in charitable religious organisations in the nineteenth century and mentions that in the 1920s and 1930s the largest women's organisations were affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church. The Feminine League of French Catholic Action had two million members in 1939. The female branch of the Young Christian Workers Organisation (JOCF) grew to be the biggest organisation of its kind in France. Foley describes the skills young working girls learned in running such an organisation. It would be enlightening to hear more of their voices and their attitudes to suffrage. The reader is left wanting to know far more about the impact of such groups, which offered women extensive experience in the 'public sphere', perhaps more than in the political world today. Could it be that the women found more of value in charitable, educational and other social organisations, than in the world of politics? Is this another disregarded aspect of the 'French Exception'?

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