WOMEN IN EUROPE SINCE 1750

Patricia Branca

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY

ROUTLEDGE

WOMEN IN EUROPE SINCE 1750

PATRICIA BRANCA

Volume 4

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1978

This edition first published in 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

First issued in paperback 2014

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group, an informa company

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-62583-8 (Volume 4)
ISBN: 978-0-415-75244-2 (pbk)

Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer
The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY

WOMEN IN EUROPE SINCE 1750

CONTENTS

WOMEN IN EUROPE SINCE 1750

PATRICIA BRANCA

Volume 4

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1978

This edition first published in 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

First issued in paperback 2014

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group, an informa company

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-62583-8 (Volume 4)
ISBN: 978-0-415-75244-2 (pbk)

Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer
The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

WOMEN IN EUROPE SINCE 1750

PATRICIA BRANCA

CROOM HELM LONDON

Croom Helm Ltd, 2-10 St John's Road, London SW11

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Branca, Patricia
Women in Europe since 1750.
1. Women – Europe, Western – Social conditions
I. Title
301.41'2'094 HQ1587

ISBN 0-85664-225-8
ISBN 0-85664-729-2 Pbk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Billing & Sons Limited, Guildford, London and Worcester

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Encountering the table of contents of this book, a reader could conjecture that, given the youth of women's history, the undertaking was a mite presumptuous as a field of scholarly endeavour. A moment, then, for my sense of purpose. In eight years of researching and teaching in the field I have continually tried to come to grips with what has seemed to me at times to be the riddle of the sphinx. What is women's history? Each year new works of scholarship are published on diverse aspects of this subject: biographies of eminent women, monographs on suffrage movements, studies of women's economic roles and family position along with polemics on the culture of womanhood. What I wanted to know was how did all these pieces fit? Was there any relationship between the history of the mill girl and the experience of a woman like Parnell's mistress, Catherine O'Shea? Was there any conceptual framework that would help one to understand better the diverse experiences of women's growing-up in modern society. Thus I set out to write this book.

The task inevitably involved dealing with controversies. This presentation clashes at times with the theses of a number of historians of women. However, the point of this book was not to find fault. It is concerned primarily with the development of a framework for beginning to integrate the dynamics which have marked the modern experience of women. The emphasis is on interpretation. Thus, in order to avoid undue interruption of the conceptualisation, controversy has been limited to footnote discussion wherever possible. In addition the bibliography includes a listing of secondary works in fields where contention is most acute. Hence a point of view, an interpretive study follows and it will not accord with everyone's previous work. But that is the only way a real history of women can be constructed. To many the empirical base will seem wanting. This book is designed to facilitate new thinking in new directions.

Having briefly given due to the book's *raison d'être,* I would like to express my sincere thanks to all my students whose questions and enthusiasm throughout the years made this project worthwhile. I would like to thank David Crawford and Vicki Erd for their efforts at transcribing my cryptic thoughts into type. A word of appreciation goes to David Croom whose advice on how to make myself understood

better was taken to heart. Thanks also to my dear friends, Theresa McBride, Jeffrey Kay, Gerald Chait and Fred Samuels. A personal note of deep feeling for constant support and belief in me I give to Howard Smalley. And finally I thank my loving daughter Nancy whose growing up has given me new visions.

1 THE WHY OF WOMEN'S HISTORY

Whatever one's image of modern women there is the underlying consensus that the history of modern women is really very new. For some it is an accounting of current events. At most it is the story of twentieth-century Anglo-American women, with a few bows to nineteenth-century precursors. Within these boundaries the relevant question seems to be whether there is a *history* of modern women given their recent emergence into the public realm. What is there to know about a past that is so short? Short it is but not as short as some historians would have us believe. The purpose of this book is to show that the history of modern women, while still unfolding, has a rich and varied past, with its roots in the late eighteenth century and indeed even earlier for some women of the upper classes.

Modernisation is a concept rarely applied to women. Recently it has been the subject of a semantic debate and has suffered harsh criticism essentially from anti-modernists. This book is not meant to debate the usefulness and validity of the concept of modernisation. Modernisation is only a word that is used to describe the dynamics of social change brought about by the transformation of the Western economy over the last two hundred years. It is not used as a philosophical statement of how things *should* be but as a way of measuring the rate of this change.

The process by which this tranformation occurred is most complex. Basic to it all was the transformation of society into an industrial framework. Common people began to find that agriculture was not the only means of making a living. Newer types of work – mechanised work in factories, jobs in offices, government bureaucracies, even schools – were developed. Modern society became urban. In the nineteenth century millions of people in Western Europe uprooted themselves from their centuries-old rural setting in favour of moving to urban centres. But these were only the outer trappings of change. Modern living involves more than simply how people work or where they eat and sleep; it involves their perception of the world and their place in that world. A new state of mind prompted people to seek new residence and new work roles. Obviously it is difficult to articulate the states of mind that this produced. The artist is better suited for this task than the historian. But history, if it does anything at all, must try to capture the intangible for us. Only by getting inside evolving mentalities can we begin to feel for the past.

In very general terms modern people think rationally and believe in progress and self-determination. While this undoubtedly sounds quite simplistic, we know it represents a vital transformation. Progress inevitably implies change and for centuries change was not only discouraged but was prevented by traditional strictures both materially and spiritually. Equally as distinctive, modern people think as individuals. Their motivations, their expectations are by and large determined by a desire to enhance personal well-being. As a result modern people are secular, even materialistic, reducing the hold of traditional structured religion in their lives. An expression of this new sense of individuality is the surge of political consciousness. People came to believe that they had rights of participation in the state which is formed to guarantee their individual welfare.

Defining a modern life style is complicated further by the fact that it is an ongoing process; its chronological limits are never set. Within this open framework it involves different stages for different groups in society.

Having said all this we need to address ourselves directly to the question of where women fit into this scheme. An effective argument could be mounted that women have not modernised, in that the industrialisation of work roles has been dominated by males. At the same time women have only been able to participate formally in politics during this century; since 1917 in England, 1919 for American women and in 1945 for French women. However, a key factor in understanding women's self-development is that it differed substantially from the pattern set by men during the same period. Emergence into the modern world for women involved political consciousness, directed not primarily at political rights but first at sheer legal recognition. More important than these incidents of change was the alteration of the female perspective, the struggle for individuality. The forthcoming pages will evolve around this very important question of self-image, and the difficulties females had and continue to have because of their sex in coming to terms with defining an image for themselves.

For the most part women's history does not fit into the conventional historical timetable; that is, it cannot neatly be divided into 1789-1815; 1815-48; 1848-70; 1870-1914, etc. Periodisation in women's history presents several complexities. Conventional studies of modernisation focus on the period 1800-1850 as the most productive. Certainly at this time women were involved in new things; most obviously they were found in increasing numbers in the burgeoning textile industry. However, this new sector of the female population was

minute, never comprising more than ten per cent. For the early years of the nineteenth century most women found themselves bound by the traditions of pre-modern society. As we will see, changes in the life style of the average woman were most clearly implemented only after the mid-nineteenth century. The focus in this study is therefore on the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Several recent historians of women have found the modern period to be important but have come away with the impression that pre-modern society was more significant for women. Contrary to the opinion that modern times brought progress, some believe that modernisation for women clearly entailed regression. The contention is that women's position in society deteriorated markedly with the advent of modernisation cum industrialisation cum capitalism. There seems to be only one basis for such a pessimistic overview of the female experience: work. Pre-modern woman's work role was highly productive: as she supplied society with its basic neccessities she received appropriate power positions. With the advent of industrial society and its male-oriented machines and factories women's work role was diminished. As a result her position in society became inferior to the male, now the only producer and thus the only holder of power. But in exploring the pre-modern woman's position in society we must try to perceive her work role as she did. All evidence suggests that the nature of work in pre-modern society was bleak, especially for women – constant physical strain yielding little material sustenance. This was particularly so in her role as mother. To be sure, the pre-modern woman was productive but the rewards must be viewed through her eyes, which were more often than not weary and strained.

In evaluating the process of modernisation of women some aspects are more difficult to assess than others. One of the more important developments affecting the lot of the common woman was improved health. No one seriously argues against the fact that women today are healthier. At the same time we realise that women still agonise over diseases peculiar to their sex, such as breast cancer. But when we move to still more intimate aspects of a woman's experience, for example, her sex life, we run into much controversy.

Is the modern woman *sexier* than her traditional counterpart? Women's modernisation depended as much on sexual liberation as on political and economic breakthroughs. Yet how does the historian begin to measure sexual fulfilment for women? Vital statistics can provide us with some crude measure. The increase in the number of illegitimate births in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, has

been hailed as the sexual revolution for women. There are many problems with this thesis. Vital statistics tell us little about the *quality* of sex a woman experienced which is essential for an overall evaluation of the impact of change. Until quite recently there have been no records of the number of orgasms a woman enjoyed or how she attained them. The lack of quantifiable accounts however does not mean that a woman's sex life has remained tradition bound or is untraceable historically. As we will see, an integration of a variety of sources shows that sex was becoming an important consideration for the modern woman's self-image. We can never be sure if she reached orgasm but we can be sure that she came to recognise her right to orgasm. Sexual awareness for women began to rise in the nineteenth century and the process has been much accelerated in the twentieth century but the revolution is not complete. The right to female orgasm is now widely acknowledged but not fully acted upon. The recent establishment of sex clinics and the proliferation of sex surveys show that we are still grappling with the problem. Yet, a change has occurred and for the majority of women it has meant new opportunities, either experienced or eagerly anticipated.

There are a number of ways to view the overall repercussions of women's modernisation. Three are most relevant for our purposes: the contemporary, the ideal and the historical. Through contemporary eyes women's history is viewed as one of repression: women in the past were forbidden to own property; forbidden to sue in court; forbidden to work outside the home; forbidden to vote; forbidden to enjoy sexual pleasures. The second set of standards is somewhat different but comes to the same conclusion. The idealist can see only the persistent inequities which confront women preventing self-fulfilment. Both perspectives serve useful functions, most specifically consciousness-raising. But they both distort.

The historical approach offers a more encompassing context as reference can well illustrate. Later chapters will discuss the degree of sexual fulfilment possible for a woman living below subsistence level. How important were erotic pursuits for a woman who was hungry, cold and weary most of the time? How freely did women indulge in sexual delights when the fruit was a nine-month pregnancy draining her already limited energy, and inevitably involving a painful and dangerous delivery for herself and the baby? Committed generalisation about the male conspiracy depriving women of their pleasures does not do justice to the full drama of the female experience.

An evaluation of the female experience must also take another point