FEMINISM IN FRANCE

From May '68 to Mitterand

Claire Duchen

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CLAIRE DUCHEN

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Introduction

The life of the women's liberation movement in France (the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*, known as the MLF) since 1968 has been exciting, volatile and puzzling to feminists from other countries. It is the evolution of the MLF, its experiences and ideas, that I want to chart in this book. In a sense, several layers are present in my approach, from simple, schematic description to a fuller, more contextualised and more clearly focused analysis which concentrates on aspects of French feminism that I think are crucial to the movement, posing as they do both exciting challenges but also very real problems. There are two main sections to the book: the first describes and analyses the productive yet conflict-ridden decade of the 1970s, looking primarily at the internal dynamic of the MLF; and the second seeks to link the MLF to its political and intellectual context in an attempt to understand its specific contours. This I do both by looking at that context, and by singling out certain important and problematic aspects of French feminism in order to explore more closely the interaction between feminism in France and the French world around it.

I have been conscious, frequently to a paralysing extent, of the dangers and difficulties involved in trying to write about the women's liberation movement, especially about the French MLF when I am not a French feminist myself. My own place within the MLF was somewhat awkward, fraught with contradictory feelings about 'studying' other feminists, committed to feminism but not committed to staying in France and knowing all the time that I was

going to leave. I could not merely be an observer – nor did I want to be just an observer – but found it hard to become involved for a short time in a struggle which already had its shape defined, had its own past, and its freindship groups based on this shared experience. I never managed to resolve this in a satisfactory way, particularly as the time I spent in France (late 1980 to the beginning of 1982) was a transitional phase for the MLF, when attention was at first focused on problems that had been developing over a number of years, and later was concerned with the future of feminism in a new political environment. In spite of these difficulties, I am grateful for all the encouragement given to my project by women in France.

Most of the work for this book was done in Paris between October 1980 and the spring of 1982. During this time, the Socialists were swept to power and feminist priorities were reshuffled. Towards the end of the 1970s much energy had been spent in fighting the apparent take-over of the MLF by one group of women, who had registered the name, initials and logo of the MLF as their own commercial property – as a company title and trademark. This appropriation of the women's movement's 'official' existence was the result of a particular analysis of women's oppression and dedication to a strategy for women's liberation that was, and remains, in contradiction to an irreconcilable extent with others. This conflict is clear in the relations between this group (*Psychanalyse et Politique* – 'Psychoanalysis and Politics' – known as *Psych et Po*) and the rest of the women's movement, with the group calling itself 'anti-feminist' while co-opting the efforts of feminists and attempting to own the MLF. This tale of two, hostile women's liberation movements runs through the book. However after the election of the Left to power in 1981, the whole *Psych et Po* affair faded from centre stage. It became clear that the group was not going to enjoy the influence it had expected, and that most women were not fooled for long about what the MLF had now become: the ownership of the name became more of a nuisance than a real threat. It was the relation of the women's movement to the Socialist Government and to political institutions in general that came to the fore. This has raised questions for the MLF of strategy and power, alliances and co-option, autonomy and dependence especially concerning the issue of the Ministry for Women's Rights set up by the government in 1981. This is another of the main threads of the MLF story in this book.

Every woman has her own experience of feminism and of the

women's liberation movement, identifies herself as she chooses and as she can. The MLF that is presented here will be recognisable to some women and possibly not to others. Its most obvious limitation is that it is Paris-centred. This was for practical reasons: in Paris there was the greatest availability of documents, the presence of many groups and events, and last – but not at all least – because I had almost free accommodation for nearly a year and a half. If I had gone to Marseilles, to a steel town in Lorraine or to a village in Brittany, I would probably have formed different impressions. Each situation or experience has its measure of general validity and its own particularity. I hope to have shown some of the range of approach and experience within the MLF while acknowledging its Parisian bias, and do not claim to provide an exhaustive picture of the French women's movement. I would add, though, that as far as France is concerned, the situation of the women's movement is similar to that of other social and political movements: the spearhead is in the capital and, with certain regional differences, other areas of France may follow with a time lapse. The women's movement tends to be strong in urban areas and in university towns, while it may remain unknown in the more rural areas where traditional family structures and attitudes still dominate.

The book follows my own interests and preoccupations which are also the questions that I believe are crucial for the MLF. On the one hand, discussion of the 'concept of the feminine' pursues my own incomplete – and now abandoned – seduction by the idea; and the second focus, that of life on the political margins examined through the case of feminism in the French Socialist Party and through looking at feminism in political institutions in general, is pertinent to all feminists who live and work with institutions of one kind or another. For me, it is a daily confrontation with the constraints and limitations of an educational institution, but the experiences of women in political parties mirror those of women in all institutions.

* * *

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In October 1984 I went to Paris to 'interview' a number of women

involved in various ways in feminism in France and I would like to thank them for participating in this work and for their hospitality: Françoise Ducrocq, Liliane Kandel, Nadja Ringart; Oristelle Bonis, Marie-Jo Dhavernas, Françoise Duroux, Françoise Gollain, Hélène Rouch; Odette Brun, C. Andrée Cabada, Josée Cantegreil, Anne le Gall, Françoise Grux, Edith Lhuillier, Solange Maurice, Marie-Claude Ripert, Lucette Soskis; Noelle Moreau, Colette Guillaumin, Claudie Lesselier, Nicole-Claude Mathieu; Rosi Braidotti; Danielle Haase-Dubosc. Special thanks to Rosi, Danielle, Claudie, Josée and Françoise Ducrocq for organising the groups with whom I talked. Most of the discussions, which concentrated on the whole on recent developments in the MLF, are to be found in Chapter 7, but parts of them have found their way into different sections of the book, to re-tell a story, to add a comment on, or a new perspective to, the topic under discussion.

A word on style. I have called feminists 'they' throughout, which no doubt reflects my own ambivalence about where I was speaking from in relation to the French women's movement. I felt uncomfortable with both 'we' and 'they': I could not honestly say 'we' as most of what I discuss took place in my absence. Saying 'we' would have felt as though I was pretending that I had been there all the time. On the other hand, 'they' sounds as though I divorce myself from feminism which is of course not so. I settled on 'they' because it felt less dishonest. I am not a French feminist and it is really their story, which as an almost outsider (but not quite), as a sister sharing some of it (but not all), I have tried to tell.

When I refer to the MLF, unless it is stated otherwise, I am referring to all those individuals and groups of women who consider themselves to be part of the women's liberation movement. The MLF as the name of the Association founded by the group *Psychanalyse et Politique* is called *Psych et Po* or *MLF marque déposée* throughout, to make the distinction between this group and feminism clear.

A word on translation: all quotations from the French are my own translations except where credit is given to another translator. Sometimes when more than one meaning is possible (or intentional) as is frequently the case, I have put in several choices. When the nuances contained in the French are impossible to translate and need explanation, I have added a footnote.

It remains only to be said that all interpretations and errors in the text are my sole responsibility. Claire Duchen

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

Feminism in France was not invented in May '68; there was by then already a long tradition of women fighting for a better life for women. These women, mostly isolated and ignored, often imprisoned and sometimes killed, struggled for women's civil and political rights in the context of the society they lived in, or sought to change that society through a socialist revolution, and linked their struggle to the struggle of the working class. Largely forgotten by history, it was only after the emergence of the 'new' feminism, significantly different in many ways from the 'old', that women began to look back, uncover and reclaim as their heritage the words and actions of their foremothers.

During the French Revolution of 1789, women demonstrated for price ceilings on bread and flour as they had always done when their families' subsistence level was threatened, but they also demanded political rights for the first time, wanted the right to participate in public life on the same footing as men. Like men, they formed political clubs of their own (as they were not permitted to join most of the men's clubs), wrote in newspapers, demanding education for girls and reform of the marriage laws, and showed concern for the 'public good' and public morality rather than for themselves. One woman's voice stood out: Olympe de Gouges rewrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* in 1791, substituting Woman for Man wherever it occurred and was ridiculed for her efforts. (She was guillotined, however, because she supported the king, not for her feminism.) Revolutionary men proved to be as misogynistic as any

others, and women's activity was suppressed by revolutionaries and reactionaries alike.

By the mid-nineteenth century, women's political activity largely fitted into a schema of 'reform versus revolution' which set different perspectives in opposition to each other. On the one hand, women became involved in Utopian or revolutionary socialist movements, inspired by Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier or Louis Blanc, while on the other, they pressed for reforms through legislation concerning women's status in French society. Women did not see themselves as sharing a common 'condition', a common lot, but created their identity along class lines. There were moments when these class lines were crossed, such as in 1832 when women joined together to produce a women's political newspaper and proclaimed that 'Women, up till now, have been exploited, tyrannised. This tyranny, this exploitation must stop. We are born free, like men, and half the human race cannot justifiably be enslaved to the other.'[1] These women defined themselves as Utopian socialists and working class, and broke the tradition whereby working-class women demonstrated for economic reasons while middle-class women wrote and talked with ideological motivations. The 1832 experiment was repeated during the 1848 revolution, when a daily feminist newspaper was founded by women, bourgeoise Eugénie Niboyet and proletarians Jeanne Deroin and Suzanne Voilquin, who wanted the new French Republic to be truly republican and apply 'Liberty, fraternity, equality' to women as to men. Probably the best known feminist of this time is Flora Tristan, who has retrospectively been acclaimed as the first socialist feminist, believing that the struggle of workers and of women for their emancipation could not be successful without the support of the other, as it was ultimately the same struggle. It was Tristan who said, before Engels, that 'The most oppressed man can oppress someone else – his wife. She is the proletarian's proletarian.'[2] Tristan lived as an outsider and a nomad, dying at the age of 39. Her words were not heard during her lifetime, and the euphoric moments of women working together, regardless of social origin and status, were even more shortlived than the revolutions that inspired them.

By the time of the Third Republic (1871), differences between women of different social class were exaggerated rather than minimised. Socialist men denied that the reforms demanded by feminist associations could benefit working-class women, and insisted that 'feminist' meant 'bourgeois' and that therefore feminists

were enemies of socialism. One woman bridged the widening gap between reform and revolution, speaking out as a socialist for women's political rights. Hubertine Auclert led the small suffragist movement and opposed the distinction between middle-class and working-class women saying '. . . The only difference between most rich and poor women is the status of the man whose mission it is to exploit them'. The dominant attitude, however, was expressed by German socialist Clara Zetkin, in a statement made by the first International Congress of Socialist Women in 1907, saying flatly that on no account should socialist women ally themselves with bourgeois feminists. The tension between the socialist movement in France and feminism has never been resolved.[3]

What came to be identified as 'feminism' by the eve of the First World War was primarily philanthropic and reformist, with over 123 feminist organisations working to make Republican society more comfortable for women of all classes. There were 35 feminist newspapers produced between 1875 and 1914, representing the entire spectrum of women's interests from newspapers advocating education for girls to literary reviews. The most prestigious and ambitious of these was *La Fronde* a newspaper founded in 1897 by ex-actress Marguerite Durand and run entirely by women. Well-respected, the paper stressed pacifism, laicism, education as well as discussing the situation of women at work and advocating women's political rights. *La Fronde* expressed its opinions about all the issues of the day, and managed to do what no other feminist paper has tried to do since: keep going as a women's, feminist, daily paper for six years.

The two heated issues of early twentieth century feminism in France were the constant question of women's allegiance to class or to sex and the question of women's suffrage. Suffragism had never been a determined, violent campaign in France mainly because of the influence that the Catholic church had over women. The male politicians most likely to sponsor women's right to vote – left-wing Republicans and socialists – hesitated because they felt that a vote by a woman was a vote for the church, which was obviously against the programme of the Left. Women were given the vote only in 1944 by General de Gaulle, and even then everyone had reservations about it: on the Right, it was believed that the vote, together with increasing numbers of women in the workforce, would mean the death of traditional values, the end of the family and a drop in the birth rate; the Left was still afraid that women's vote would be reactionary; and

most women felt that it wouldn't change a thing.

In fact it did change things: once women were citizens, part of the electorate, politicians had to woo them. Everyone was fighting for the 'female vote' which they believed existed, in spite of lack of evidence. It also clearly altered women's relation to political parties, in which they were allowed to participate, as members and as candidates, for the first time. A new set of problems emerged, concerning the disparity between political rights on paper and women's experiences inside political parties, which contributed to the total disaffection for party procedures of many politically active women, and still causes problems for those feminists who try to remain active inside political parties today.

Women continued to fight for change outside parliament, in 'reformist' associations. One campaign in particular was fought outside parliament long before it became a central political issue: the campaign for the legalisation of contraception, and later, the legalisation of abortion. The *Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial* (the French Family Planning Association) paved the way for the eventual reform of the repressive 1920 law prohibiting abortion and of the outlawing of information about, and provision of, contraception. This matter was brought into political circulation by the 1965 presidential campaign of François Mitterrand who favoured the legalisation of contraception. The 1967 *loi Neuwirth* made this a reality, allowing feminists in the 1970s to concentrate on the abortion issue.

Women in the 1950s and 1960s participated in political parties and in pressure groups as well as continuing traditionally 'women's' activity in voluntary associations, charities and social work. Even one of the most outspoken women active in the 1950s, Simone de Beauvoir, did not see an agenda for the emancipation of women outside the agenda of the Left. By the mid-1960s, then, there were already different types of women's political involvement, different types of feminism and strong influences on the women who were later to be part of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes*. There are profound differences between the MLF and previous feminisms, but there are also many continuities, similar experiences, problems and issues shared by 'new' and 'old' feminism.

Nor was the 'new' feminism, the MLF, born in isolation from other political thinking in the late 1960s. Many of the ideas and practices that appeared in the MLF were shared by others: marginal