Siân Reynolds

France Between the Wars

Gender and Politics

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FRANCE BETWEEN THE WARS

France between the wars is often seen as a time of great political instability: governments changed frequently, supporters of the right and the left clashed bitterly and there was the fear of another world war. This book argues that the period saw another kind of instability, for these were years when the all-male monopoly over political life in the French Republic was being undermined and challenged.

Siân Reynolds looks at political life in inter-war France from the perspective of gender relations. From the implications of new technologies, like aviation or the factory assembly-line, to the politics of social work at the dawn of the welfare state, *France Between the Wars* reveals the significant political roles taken by women. This is important not only for our understanding of France in the period, but also for demonstrating how a history focused on gender can contribute to new kinds of historical analysis.

For Mair Williams and Ben Reynolds
who were married on 28 October 1939

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ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Archives Nationales
APD	Association pour la Paix par le Droit
APPo	Archives de la Préfecture de Police
ARAC	Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants
BDIC	Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine
BHVP	Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris
BIT/ILO	Bureau International du Travail/International Labour Office
BMD	Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand
CCRP	Caisse de Compensation de la Région Parisienne
CFLN	Comité Français de Libération Nationale
CFTC	Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail
CGTU	Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire
CLAJ	Centre Laïque des Auberges de Jeunesse
CMFCGF	Comité Mondial des Femmes contre la Guerre et le Fascisme
CNFF	Conseil National des Femmes Françaises
CNR	Conseil National de la Résistance
DBMOF	Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français
ENS	Ecole Normale Supérieure
GDFS	Groupe des Femmes Socialistes
GFEL	Groupes Féministes de l'Enseignement Laïque
HBM	Habitations Bon Marché
ICW	International Council of Women
INED	Institut National des Etudes Démographiques
IWSA	International Women's Suffrage Alliance
JAC/F	Jeunesse Agricole Chrétienne/Féminine
JC	Jeunesses Communistes
JEC/F	Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne/Féminine
JOC/F	Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne/Féminine
LDH	Ligue des Droits de l'Homme
LFAJ	Ligue Française des Auberges de Jeunesse
LFDF	Ligue Française du Droit des Femmes

LICP	Ligue Internationale des Combattants pour la Paix
LIFPL	Ligue Internationale des Femmes pour la Paix et la Liberté (section française)
LIMEP	Ligue Internationale des Mères et Educatrices pour la Paix
LPF	Ligue Patriotique des Françaises
MRP	Mouvement Républicain Populaire
OPMES	Office de la Protection de la Maternité et de l'Enfance de la Seine
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
RUP	Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix
SAP	Section de l'Aviation Populaire
SDN	Société des Nations [League of Nations]
SFIO	Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière [French Socialist party]
UFCS	Union Féminine Civique et Sociale
UFFCGI	Union des Femmes Françaises contre la Guerre Impérialiste
UFSF	Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes
UJFF	Union des Jeunes Filles Françaises
UNVF	Union Nationale pour le Vote des Femmes
WILPF	Women's International League of Peace and Freedom [cf. LIFPL]

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Writing about inter-war France: the textbook as text

> A history of historiography that takes account of the presence or absence of women is still to be written.
>
> (Pomata 1993: 11)

> Textbooks ... can make people disappear, but only temporarily, for the objects from the suppressed past – the public records, private papers and oral traditions – survive to pique the curiosity of another generation of inquirers.
>
> (Appleby *et al.* 1994: 294–5)

Writing about French history, especially as an outsider, is not an enterprise for the faint-hearted. Pierre Nora, the editor of the series *Lieux de mémoire*, has agreed that history is itself a 'lieu de mémoire' for the French, a site of memory, if not an obsession: 'History has played the same role in France as philosophy has in Germany or the "American way of life" in the United States ... that of cementing together the national community.'[1] A British observer has similarly observed that French history is full of myth and counter-myth, 'not in the sense of fiction, but in the sense of a construction of the past elaborated by a political community for its own ends' (Gildea 1994: 12).

Commemoration, that obsession of the late twentieth century, has helped to expose the fragile nature of what we call history. A clearer illustration of the construction of a national history could hardly be provided than the bicentennial of the French Revolution. In 1989, 'a commemoration that was intended to adorn the Republic instead divided the nation.' So bitter were the disputes about whether the Revolution was 'over' or not, and whether it should be celebrated, deplored or simply regarded as something to be avoided if possible, that questions about the Revolution were deleted from the secondary school examinations that year (Appleby *et al.* 1994: 291; Gildea 1994: 13–17). An even more painful process of commemoration of events closer to the present has been the re-examination of the French experience of Occupation during the Second World War. A series of fiftieth anniversaries in the early 1990s prompted the official recognition of 16 July, the date in summer 1942 of the Rafle du Vél d'Hiv when, on German orders but with the collaboration of the French authorities, several thousand Jewish families living in Paris were rounded up for deportation. This new *lieu de mémoire* could be seen as the result of a process of historical review. Both 1789 and the Occupation are

examples of episodes in the French past that have been constructed, taken apart and rewritten more than once, with a view to exploring the national history. However disturbing, both could be seen as yielding positive experiences from the historical point of view, in spite or rather because of their result: a more fragmented picture than earlier versions of these critical and traumatic events. In both cases, though, the task of the writer of textbooks, on which much of national history reposes, was made more difficult. We have come a long way from the time when the 'petit manuel Lavisse', the schoolbook read by millions of French schoolchildren at the turn of the century, could be seen as 'the primary schoolteacher of the nation' telling them what they took to be the literal truth. But we are still in an age when students are anxious to find a 'clear and well-informed guide' to national history.[2]

Some episodes in the past have posed a less obvious challenge, but feminists might argue that their construction by historians is just as fragile and partial. One of the benefits of the fragmentation of the historiography of the Revolution, after all, was that more space opened up for consciousness of the presence or absence of women in revolutionary history. By contrast, the inter-war period, the subject of this book, has not been subjected to the same drastic revision and interpretation as the two previous examples. There may be considerable nuances in the way the story is told, but the narrative outline of 'what happened in France' between 1918 and 1939 will be found in recognizable form in most student textbooks or histories for the general reader. This book sets out to rethink that period from a feminist perspective, not so much to challenge what has so far been written as to query what has not been written, using the new research of recent years to ask different questions and – inevitably – to propose some alternative readings. It aims to apply the perspectives and the findings of what is variously known as women's history, gender history or feminist history to a rather resistant historical 'site of research'. I do not underestimate the difficulty of trying to do this. It was after having taught twentieth-century French history to students, and found it awkward to incorporate the findings of women's history into it, that I began this project. Authors of textbooks, who must try to write concise accounts, have my sympathy. But the prevailing gender-blindness of so much of the historical literature has been a spur to explore how it could be otherwise. It is not a matter of 'putting the record straight': this account, like others, will be partial, in both senses of the word.

The choice of period was not random. The history of inter-war France is a particularly clear example of a broader historical problem: the non-integration of women into political and chronological historical narratives, or to put it another way, the absence of gender as a framing structure of such history. What we have in most political history is a single-sexed narrative that does not speak its name. This is not through some 'conspiracy of historians', although virtually all political history of inter-war France has so far been written by men, but neither is it accidental. As it happens, during these years French women were barred from any formal share in parliamentary or even local politics, since they could neither vote nor stand for election before 1944. As a result, authors of general or political histories of the inter-war years might well plead that they have found it either unnecessary or just too

difficult to identify women as participants in the national history. Their exclusion is sometimes stated, but not as a rule analysed. But we should beware of taking this as an adequate explanation: the political history of France after 1945 has not been remarkably gender-conscious either. Part of my purpose is therefore to question a definition of politics that eliminates all mention of those without formal power, or which fails to recognize the gender structures governing a history in which all the significant actors belong to one sex. The logical consequence of that is to do at least two things: to reconsider the conventional political arena to see how gender relates to it; and to open up for enquiry some areas not always perceived as part of the political field. Both approaches will be tried in what follows. Before explaining more fully the outline of the book and the spirit in which it has been approached, let me briefly review first the state of historiography of the inter-war years in France, and then the ways in which a gender-conscious approach might approach rethinking history.

THE TEXTBOOK AS TEXT

To write about inter-war France is to venture on to very fully mapped territory in one sense. Most of the existing works have been produced in France itself. Hardly surprising, perhaps: in most countries, the national history has pride of place. But it is not a matter of indifference where history is written.[3] The prevailing historical narratives will inevitably reflect the structures and – to be blunt – the power relations at the centre of French historical production: the institutions, the personalities, the schools of thought, all reflected in the syllabuses adopted by schools and universities. Our period is perhaps a special case. Twentieth-century France has become a popular topic with students of history because it overlaps with the study of politics, a subject accorded much respect in the French educational system. Hence the large numbers of textbooks (*manuels*) and general histories of a more discursive kind (*synthèses*) devoted to the inter-war period. Both kinds of books have a script which it is hard to depart from. Because the politics, domestic and international, of the inter-war period were dramatic, and because they contain the origins of the Second World War, the need to tell that story tends to dominate any brief study. The writer is obliged to present the reader with a sequence of familiar events that seem to lead with tragic inevitability to September 1939: the Treaty of Versailles, the occupation of the Ruhr, the Briand interlude, the depression and the rise of fascism, the 6 February riot, the Popular Front, Munich. Interwoven with this story is the more jerky narrative of French domestic politics, with its battles between left and right. Sections on the economy or society may introduce some variety and choice of material, but the 'mainstream' history seems to write itself. The textbook writer, it could be argued, really has little choice: deemed to present a synthesis of received wisdom on the subject, he or she must tell a simple tale.

But as Gianna Pomata has written, in an illuminating article, 'the textbook is not a neutral form':

> It is a form created with a specific pedagogic intent when history was introduced into the schools. The fundamental message entrusted to the textbook seems that of transmitting a 'universal' and synthetic image of history. How is this universal dimension constructed? By means of the generalizations that do not explicitly deny, but implicitly omit as irrelevant, certain differences in historical experience, such as the difference between men and women. This is the reason why the chronological format is fundamental in this kind of text. The textbook needs a universal and abstract standpoint from which to organize the historical material. The idea of historical time as neutral time [the time of chronology] allows events to be represented through an 'objective' medium, independent from the point of view of the people who experienced them. Thus the illusion of a 'general' and unified vision of history is created. This is also the reason why textbooks are usually obsessed by the need to 'cover' everything (they often pass on this obsession to their readers). I do not know of a history textbook that openly admits any gaps in our knowledge or that presents historical knowledge as an open-ended research process. To do this would be an admission of partiality and fallibility that the textbook cannot afford, because it is a direct contradiction of the image of omniscient universality claimed by this kind of text.
>
> (Pomata 1993: 42)

At one level, this comment prepares us for the potential for despair of the unfortunate textbook writer: the format drives him or her to claim that Olympian detachment which we all know to be an illusion. The assignment is mission impossible. At another level, Pomata's observation points towards something else: the cultural power of the textbook. Reaching a mass audience, directly or indirectly, it shapes popular views of history. In France in particular, with a centralized school-leaving exam, a large student population and competitive entry to the *grandes écoles*, textbooks sell regularly every year to high school and university students. Their authors are under all manner of editorial pressures, partly because they write for a mass market. Series like the 'Cursus' books (Armand Colin) and the new 'Premier Cycle' (PUF), designed for first-year university students, cater for an apparently insatiable demand, inside France and to some extent outside. When television programmes are made about history, the textbook writers are the first to be consulted. These are the books that will in the end have shaped the overall view of a given time in the past, will have been read by the largest number of individuals and will have laid down what counts as historical knowledge. Priorities, rhetoric, great men, famous sayings – here they all are.

But what counts as a textbook? It may seem both sweeping and unfair to class *manuels* and *synthèses* together. Whereas the textbook aimed at, say, high school students has to be fairly schematic and simple, the general history, aimed at more advanced students and their teachers, can afford to add nuance, to include details and exceptions, to discuss rival interpretations and, through its footnotes and

references, to send the reader to the particular histories of which it provides a general synthesis. It is invariably more thorough, more far-reaching and more speculative than the textbook. A good example of the general history for our period would be the relevant volumes of the *Nouvelle Histoire de la France Contemporaine*, newly revised and updated.[4]

The problem is that, more often than one might imagine, and in the case of inter-war France in particular, the dividing line between the textbook and the more advanced general history is not quite as clear cut as it might seem. As a rule, both are available in paperback editions, and the most realistic readership for both is the student body, at different stages of expertise. The available books would be more sensibly arranged along a continuum from the simple to the advanced, rather than divided into separate groups. What is more, the writers of the textbooks are sometimes the same individuals as the authors of general histories. And because in France many specialists on the twentieth century are political historians (in the broad sense) there is a certain convergence of their approach. No secret this, it has been openly acknowledged in the introduction to a book of historiographical essays entitled *Pour une histoire politique*:

> [The collection reflects] the concrete existence of a group of historians; they have over the years built up an intellectual familiarity, in a spirit of trust and friendship .... [They vary in approach, but] there is a practical solidarity which has its own topography. It has been constituted on an axis running between the University of Paris-X Nanterre and the rue St Guillaume, home of the Institut d'Etudes politiques .... We all have links with one or other or both of these institutions.
>
> (Rémond 1988: 9)[5]

Anyone working on twentieth-century France will have regularly used books by this group of historians over the years with profit, and their writings will often be cited in what follows. In that sense there is a classic corpus, inspired by a collective ethos. That ethos is, moreover, far from being confined to the approach of 'traditional political history'. Indeed, the essays in that collection set out to 'dispel the prejudices which persist about political history'. It should, the authors argue, no longer be assimilated to *l'histoire événementielle* [the mere narrative of events], but has been 'revitalized', interacting dynamically with other sectors of history – 'the cultural, economic and social'. Well placed at the centre of a lively research culture in Paris, these historians and their associates are responsible for many of the most stimulating developments in twentieth-century history. Doctoral theses and specialized studies of the period have multiplied in number in recent years, as the inter-war years recede into the past.

Not so very long ago, Theodore Zeldin could argue that it was still too early to try to write seriously about the inter-war years:

> The history of inter-war France remains far less documented than that of Germany in the same period ... the French national archives have only

> recently been (partially) opened to historians .... It is only gradually that the perspective that regards these years as ones of exceptional chaos and failure will recede and allow the changes that took place in them to be seen in a less negative way, and with some sense of what was permanent and what was superficial.
>
> (Zeldin 1977: 1041)

Archives were opened faster in the 1980s than before, partly because of the expiry or abolition of fifty-year rules: the 1986 commemoration of the Popular Front helped release some documents. Gaps remain in many archival series – politically sensitive papers were often removed or destroyed – so the sources are still patchy. But some outstanding theses have now appeared, with a wealth of detail impossible before. New subjects have been tackled: technology, social movements, religion, welfare, the arts – topics falling outside the political histories penned in the 1950s and1960s, and more akin to social and cultural history. Some studies show more awareness of gender than others, but taken together they provide a huge resource of secondary material. To mention only three which have been published in France in the last few years, we now have Jean-François Sirinelli's exhaustive study of the students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure between the wars (1988), Pascal Ory's thesis on the cultural policy of the Popular Front (1994) and Christine Bard's survey of feminism between the wars (1995). Far more has now been written about the economy and society of these years, as well as about the politics.

Some of this has found its way into the general narrative histories at the sophisticated end of the textbook spectrum. Yet the priorities of the writer of syntheses do not seem to have changed greatly. The major controversies are still very largely determined by left–right differences, and concentrate on the issues of French foreign and domestic policy, including the rise of fascism, and whether the Popular Front was a 'good' or a 'bad' thing. For all the undeniable 'revitalizing' that has taken place, in one respect little has changed: with one or two notable exceptions, historians of twentieth-century France continue to pay remarkably little attention either to women as actors in history or to gender as a historical concept.

From a feminist perspective, then, even the 'new' political history seems to mean business as usual. What mattered between the wars was done, directed and experienced primarily by men – and a certain category of men at that: politicians. Women are so absent from, so shadowy in the recounting of events that they might as well not have existed. Banished to subordinate clauses, parentheses, paragraphs on showbusiness or fashion, negative implications (such as not bearing enough children), or simply omitted altogether, women will be sought in vain in most versions of the central narrative – which is in turn not explicitly presented as single-gendered.[6] I don't want to construe this as sexism, although some readers may be tempted to do so. It represents to my mind a conceptual difficulty that still surfaces surprisingly often in the form of contradictions in the writings of historians. To take an eminent example, René Rémond, doyen of political historians, is the chief