

H-France Forum Volume 2, Issue 1 (Winter 2007), No. 3

Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. xi + 277 pp. \$45.00 (hb). ISBN 0-8014-4464-0.

Review Essay by Karen Offen, The Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University.

Judith Surkis's *Sexing the Citizen* makes clear that feminism and the "new woman" were far from raising the only troublesome gender issues for the architects of the early French Republic. This accomplished and intricately constructed study explores the prescriptive discourses of and by progressive older men about and for younger men across a wide range of political, intellectual, administrative, and pedagogical venues. Their objective: the construction of a new anti-authoritarian masculinity and, particularly, a revised masculine sexuality suitable to undergird republican citizenship. The key concept here was self-governance and social responsibility, centered in heterosexual family life.

These older men include primary and secondary educators (parts one and two, as epitomized by Ferdinand Buisson and Henri Marion), social scientists (part three, as epitomized by Emile Durkheim), and (part four) a cluster of physicians and public hygienists (including spokesmen for medical issues in the military) who were distressed by rampant venereal diseases and who therefore upheld state-regulated prostitution, the two bitter fruits of profligate and non-marital male heterosexual behavior, despite the latter institution's clear threat to women's civil rights. Throughout, the author's focus--and point of interrogation--is the concerted emphasis of the masculine discourses she is studying to encourage heterosexuality and to channel male sexual expression into conjugal marriage and family responsibilities. She wants to understand why these were seen as normative, even optimal, for social order and progress in the new regime. There are (to quote Jane Austen) "hardly any women at all" speaking in this history (besides the author), though, of course, women figure in some male discourses as fearful, polluting prostitutes and in others as potentially virtuous, reproductive, and companionate wives and mother-educators.

This is a book replete with arguments, and sophisticated "postsocial" ones at that. They are also mightily repetitive. Let's look at the "In this book, I argue" statements from the Introduction:

1. "This book examines and seeks to explain the powerful hold of married love on the social imagination of French policy makers and moralists from the Third Republic's beginnings in the 1870s through World War I" (p. 1).
2. "In this book, I argue that discussions of the regulation of the passions, instincts, and desires associated with men's sexuality anchored wider debates about the meaning of moral autonomy, the nature of civilization and social progress, and the normative regulation of social life" (p. 5).
3. "I am here to offer a historically specific argument about the ways in which republicans imagined marriage as an institution for the social and sexual regulation of men" (p. 5).

Well, yes--and also for the social and sexual regulation of women--under male supervision. But what is specifically "republican" or, for that matter, "French" about this?

4. "Sexing the Citizen . . . demonstrates how instability, rather than undermining masculinity as a regulatory political and social ideal, actually lent it its force" (p. 8).

5. "I want to suggest that the instabilities that haunt . . . socially constituted categories are not, of necessity, delegitimizing. They can, in fact, motivate and justify efforts to police the boundaries of these admittedly unstable, but nonetheless effective norms" (pp. 8-9).

The target of all this analytic concern is the socialization of French men, in parallel with "efforts to define and regulate women's socially productive and reproductive roles" (p. 9). And, of course, also in parallel with "the emergence of new ways of thinking about sexuality and about sexual deviance"(p. 10). But all too soon the women disappear. Surkis says far more about sexual deviance, and, in particular, same sex desire, shrouded at the time in vague references to perversion, etc.: "I aim to historicize how heterosexuality emerged as an idealized model of 'normal' sexual identity"(p. 11); to "show how the risk of social and sexual deviance was integral to how contemporaries imagined the male individual and his relationship to a rapidly changing environment in the first place"(p. 12).

In short, *Sexing the Citizen* reeks of sophisticated theories about sexual instability and a certain postmodern fluidity born of the absence of decreed truths and the need of reinventing rationales and control mechanisms. Although "nature" is repeatedly invoked by the prescribers, their shared presumption that heterosexuality is "normal" is constantly questioned by this author, who seems highly critical of any measures that might keep anyone in his (or her) "place" or constrain his (or her) choice of sexual object. The shadow of Foucault looms over this project, which is not so rare these days, but his shadow is not the only one. Every book has multiple godparents, and this one has an impressive list of *parrains* and *marraines*--Dominick La Capra, Joan Scott, Carolyn Dean. It could be said that the mind that produced this book is argumentatively imprinted to a very considerable degree by the concerns and interests of these mentors.

The body of the book is less stridently argumentative, and the reminders of a homosexual undercurrent become less frequent (though they never fall entirely from sight). Three of the four parts concern projects for gender construction in the republic's educational agenda and in the developing social sciences (the "science of man"). This focus hardly seems like news. Feminist scholars have been analyzing constructions of gender and sexuality in educational materials for decades. Remember Linda L. Clark's important article, "The Molding of the Citoyenne," some thirty years ago and Phyllis Stock-Morton's book on the development of "morale laique."^[1] Peter N. Stearns was there too, before others, with his insightful *Be A Man* as was Robert A. Nye with *Male Honor*.^[2] Indeed, secular debates about "gendering" the citizen male and attending to his sexual, emotional, and moral development have been going on in France at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *Émile* in 1762, and they do provide a fascinating object of study. Men's curriculum prescriptions for both girls' and boys' schooling have always been explicitly concerned with socially acceptable constructions of sexuality and social behavior, or the formation of public and domestic "roles." In 1791, at the height of revolutionary debates about public education, Talleyrand argued--against Condorcet and others who invoked abstract principles of the rights of man (embracing both sexes)--on the powerful grounds of "public utility" for a purely domestic (as opposed to political) role for girls and women.^[3] Politically active citizens should thus be male heads of households. The newly empowered male republicans of the 1880s and 90s built on such thinking, but they had a dramatic new opportunity to try to reshape social roles and behaviors in the name of morality, and, unlike their predecessors in the first revolution, fortune accorded them sufficient social and political stability to take full advantage of it. Public utility was still very much on their minds, but "morality" became their idiom of choice as they strode forth to "gender" the French male.

What is news in Judith Surkis's book is the impressive range of topics she covers (and the detail in which she covers them) in examining particular attempts to "construct" or rather "reconstruct" male heterosexuality. She provides fascinating evidence of the specific ways in which the republican elders worried about antisocial consequences of unchanneled male desire--notably the growing numbers of "educated" but underemployed young men who did not marry and father families, coupled with the rampant proliferation of syphilis, prostitution, bastard children, and other consequences of unchanneled

heterosexual desire. The important question here was something like: What should it mean to “be” a socially responsible male in late nineteenth-century France? These men aspired to produce self-governing, conscious men who would take responsibility for and become vested in the new social political order—in short, model citizens. By the 1890s, one focus involved a critique of the Kantian ideal of the “abstract, autonomous individual” promulgated by instructional programs in the boys’ lycées, a devastating critique that was taken up both by nationalists and organic thinkers on the right such as Maurice Barrès and socialists on the left and that was developed more fully in the thinking of Emile Durkheim on “the social” and in the programs encouraged by the Solidarist republicans in the interests of social peace.

One of the most important things I have learned about French history during the last three decades is that *nothing* began with the Third Republic. I have also learned that the term “republic” functioned for a very long time as a rather empty repository for anti-authoritarian critique as well as signifying the broader and vaguer “*res publica*”; it had no preordained shape, nor was it necessarily democratic. But in those days rule by the people was still a scary idea; hence, the importance of shaping “citizens.” The Third Republic was a particular, negotiated form of democratic government, a parliamentary regime with a weak president constructed in opposition to several different forms of monarchy. After the republicans actually took control, circa 1880, it took a deliberately laic turn. The republicans knew what they were against, but it was another matter to spell out and implement what they were for. Their social theory began not with Durkheim (don’t forget Comte and the social theorists of the Enlightenment), but more especially in the trenches of daily problem solving, of which state education was one. It was hacked out in “public space,” in newspapers, monthly periodicals, pamphlets, dictionary projects, in the assemblies, in freemasonic lodges, in positivist circles, in national and international congresses—and around the dinner table. And, for some, it was haunted by the worry that if women become more like men, or—more to the point—were able to access some of their privileges (such as their monopolies on force, political power, and wealth), they would avoid marriage. In such a case, men would either become nothing at all or at least find themselves severely threatened by women’s economic and professional competition. Might not their investment in social order and in the nation-state dwindle without dependent wives and children? One fear, repeatedly manifested in satirical cartoons, was that women’s emancipation might thrust men into unwelcome responsibilities for childcare and housework.

Should readers be surprised by the republicans’ assumptions concerning the importance of the conjugal family and heterosexuality to social order in late nineteenth-century France? I think not. Why question the obvious? It seems to me that our job as historians is not to criticize these men for what might seem to a few today like absurdly old-fashioned values, but to understand and explain where they were coming from and why these concerns mattered so much. In nineteenth-century France (and elsewhere in Europe and the western world), virtually everybody believed that the union of the sexes and resulting families were central to the social order and to the future of the nation-state. At issue was the set of institutions that governed these relationships—marriage, divorce, etc., and who controlled these—the church or the state. In every human society of which I am aware, some notion of heterosexual marriage and family remains central to sociopolitical organization, for purposes of social reproduction and continuity. France is no exception. The question in this case is really what was specific to the way in which the French republican men envisioned it. Indeed, most French feminists in the late nineteenth century also espoused heterosexual marriage but a dramatically reorganized form that would make marriage more equitable for women—by equalizing the legal and economic powers of the spouses (thereby eliminating the dominance/subordination relationship that had been built into it under the Civil Code) and by asserting that women must control their own bodies and fertility, and that men might share more equally in childcare and housekeeping responsibilities.

Sexing the Citizen might have nodded more toward the parallel campaigns for women’s emancipation than it does. And it could have made much more of what is perhaps the most important contextual element: the secular republicans’ competition with Roman Catholic Christianity, whose leadership (when

it was not preaching celibacy for the select) had been promoting heterosexual marriage for centuries, as had the Jewish people before that. Remember Genesis, when God pairs Adam up with Eve? Remember the Ten Commandments? And the doctrine of the “equality of souls”? These tenets lay at the foundation of the French belief system, and even its opponents reflected them to a very great extent. That the Catholic church had made marriage a sacrament made it even more central to French understandings of how life should be ordered.

Secularists in France had been aiming to wrest control of marriage as an institution from the Catholic church for centuries. They finally succeeded during the French Revolution, and what were formerly “personal status laws” under the church became embedded in Napoleon’s highly masculinist Civil Code. Obviously, the Catholic believers were unhappy about civil marriage, and even more unhappy with the notion of secular divorce. But the unraveling of the order and arguments imposed by the church meant that, inevitably, new notions of order and new secular ideals would not stray too far from the older ones. Heterosexuality and marriage (albeit secular) figured at the core of these scenarios. “How and why did republican politicians and professionals [male] make marriage so central to their conception of modern society?” asks the author (p. 2). Go figure! They could hardly stray too far from the model then in place. And don’t forget, also, that the church had no peer when it came to inquiring into one’s personal life and practices: just have a look at the confessors’ manuals. The republicans were not the first to carefully scrutinize personal, and especially sexual, behavior. And then there is Michelet, who since the 1840s had piped the tune to which all the later republican men danced, about restoring husbandly authority in the conjugal household—and evicting the priests.[4] It is noteworthy that neither Michelet nor Oscar Wilde, for that matter, appear in the index to *Sexing the Citizen*.

All this criticism is in no way to minimize the careful and ambitious research that Judith Surkis has done or her thoughtful efforts to wrestle with an immense body of prescriptive literature and with the arguments of practically everyone who has ever published on the early Third Republic. This is, in many respects, an admirable study. What I am contesting here is her rather narrow contextualization and the particular orientation of her interpretation.

There is also a third area for contestation. What *Sexing the Citizen* does not do is to address or attempt to assess the consequences or outcome of this intensive prescriptive effort. Clearly, the republicans were disappointed with the results or they would not have continued their efforts to “civilize” (domesticate) their youth. Today, in an era in which birthrate deficits are again haunting Europe and threatening its social welfare system, increasing numbers of young heterosexual couples do not marry either in the church or civilly while, conversely, same-sex couples call for legal recognition of their commitments, and pent-up male aggression breaks out in domestic violence against women and children as well as public violence against persons and property, the question of how best to socialize young men remains important not only for the French—but for all of us. Questions about “savagery” and “civilization” remain unfortunately pertinent in the early twenty-first century, and sexuality, gender constructions, and power relations continue to lie at the core of the problems—and the solutions. How does one motivate young people of either sex to accept the norms of a social order (however imperfect it may be) that they have not helped to create, and how does the leadership—in any institution—create the “buy-in” opportunity that will structure people’s behavior in socially constructive ways? And how can an equitable balance of power between the sexes be assured in the process? Surely, the price of male “civility” cannot still be dominance over and control of women and children.

Studying published prescriptive literature only goes so far toward understanding the realities of behaviors. Had Surkis also looked at police records, court proceedings, trials, or even the “*faits divers*,” she might have uncovered some evidence of the extent to which prescriptions were effective or not. There is an old adage: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” I want to know more about what happens when it drinks, and if not, why not. Did sexing the citizen succeed—or not? Would

these republican men have done better had they abandoned the commitment to heterosexuality and marital family life that is under scrutiny in this book? Frankly, I doubt it.

NOTES

[1] Linda L. Clark, "The Molding of the Citoyenne: The Image of the Female in French Educational Literature," *Third Republic/Troisième République* vol. 3-4 (1977): 74-104. Phyllis Stock-Morton, *Moral Education for a Secular Society: The Development of Morale Laïque in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

[2] Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979); and Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3] See Karen Offen, *European Feminisms 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 58-59.

[4] For the salient passages in Michelet's *Le Prêtre, la femme, et la famille* (1845) in English translation, see *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents*, ed. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 170-73.

Karen Offen
Stanford University
kmoffen@stanford.edu

See also the Review Essays on this book by Judith F. Stone, Florence Tamagne, and Robert A. Nye, as well as Judith Surkis's response to all four Review Essays.

Copyright © 2007 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum Volume 2, Issue 1 (Winter 2007), No. 3

ISSN 1557-7058