

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 34

Jean Elisabeth Pedersen, *Legislating the French Family: Feminism, Theater and Republican Politics, 1870-1920*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003. v + 271 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8135-3279-5.

Review by Kristen Stromberg Childers, University of Pennsylvania.

In her book on French politics and family legislation at the turn of the twentieth century, Jean Elisabeth Pedersen sets out to examine the intersections between fields of study which historians of the Third Republic tend to have studied separately: “the world of masculine authority and parliamentary politics, the world of women’s organization and feminist activism, and the world of theater authors and their audiences” (p.2). *Legislating the French Family* seeks to redress this imbalance by combining historical analysis with literary analysis to portray social reform and political culture in France in a new light, focusing especially on a series of closely-analyzed plays that electrified spectators in Parisian theaters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pedersen elucidates the ways in which definitions of citizenship and national identity were played out around conflicts over marriage and divorce, illegitimacy and paternity suits, and abortion and birth control, both on the stage and in real life (p. 3). Recovering the importance of “social drama” and the appeal of the theater as an arena to dramatize social injustice, Pedersen argues that the theater provides unique access to popular opinion at the time. Using specific laws as milestones, such as the 1884 Naquet Law on divorce, the 1912 Rivet Law on paternity suits, and the 1920 Ignace Law on contraception, Pedersen details how fears of depopulation, concern over national identity, and feminist activism were depicted in the theaters of Paris and in the minds of French men and women of the Belle Epoque.

Pedersen does a commendable job of truly combining these strains of research: not merely alluding to a play’s success or its long run in the theater, she illuminates the very real points of intersection between the spheres of the theater and politics. A playwright such as Emile Augier, for example, had risen to the status of political commentator when lawyers defending the Naquet divorce project in the Chamber of Deputies cited his *Madame Cavarlet* as a justification to “continue the work of the French Revolution, decrease incentives to adultery, and signal their respect for human individuality by legalizing divorce” (p. 15). The content and meaning of plays, as Pedersen shows, were scrupulously analyzed by drama critics and mainstream newspapers, demonstrating both the significance of the theater in the life of the Parisian bourgeoisie and the repercussions these works could have on political discussion occurring at the same time. Consulting the archives of the *Académie française*, the *Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal* and the *Bibliothèque de la Comédie-Française*, Pedersen combines the press coverage and censorship discussions of the world of the theater with the debates of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies to argue persuasively for the need to see these domains as overlapping, rather than distinct, fields of historical evidence.

Another innovation in this work is the attention accorded to French legislators’ and social critics’ insistence on France as a Roman Catholic, rather than Protestant, nation when they discussed both art and the family. Much has been written about French fears of depopulation and the haunting power of the German “other” across the Rhine, especially in the wake of disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Although comparisons to German social reform and population growth certainly played an important role in generating social welfare initiatives, Pedersen demonstrates that another powerful imagined “other” came from further north, from Scandinavia, especially from the noxious ideas emanating from Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. The success and message of this play frightened critics who worried that French dramatists were unduly influenced by a “fog from the North” when they applauded

Ibsen's heroine, who finally leaves her husband and children (p. 42). Some perceived Ibsen's plays as a "serious national political threat" when works about independent heroines or rebellion against sexual norms came to the stage in France (p. 51).

Although, as World War I would make plain, the Germans were more of a threat to French national security, the Scandinavian nations were often forerunners in crafting social legislation concerning welfare and women's and children's rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this regard, it would perhaps have been helpful if *Legislating the French Family* had offered some analysis of whether specific Scandinavian examples of social legislation were ever studied in the same detail as Ibsen's plays. Did the Norwegian laws on illegitimate children, for example, chronicled by the U.S. Children's Bureau in the early 1900s, alarm or inspire French legislators as they debated the Rivet Law? Did fears of the "fog from the North" reach beyond artistic references into the world of parliamentary debate?

Pedersen does enlarge her analysis of social legislation in this period to include its impact on the French colonies, a welcome introduction of the question of citizenship and national identity as it was applied in both the "old colonies" of the West Indies, as well as the more recent French possessions in Africa. This is not a main focus of the book, but nevertheless Pedersen's analysis of how colonial policies of assimilation or association meshed with legislation on familial and sexual relationships emanating from the metropole is intriguing and will surely stimulate further research. The Governors of Guadeloupe and Guyana, for example, encouraged the application of the French law on paternity suits in their territories, believing it would discourage free unions and encourage people to "regularize their situations" (p. 151). In contrast, Governors in predominantly Islamic parts of Africa were less inclined to graft such French laws onto local customs, and Pedersen speculates, without any definite conclusions, as to why this might have been the case (p. 152). *Legislating the French Family* does not dwell at great length on the question of the colonies and scholars specializing in French imperialism will surely have much to add to the interesting questions posed here. Pedersen's inclusion of some of these debates, however, is a welcome addition to a historiography that has tended to focus almost exclusively on metropolitan France and its European preoccupations.

The last chapter of *Legislating the French Family* takes up the topic of motherhood and reproduction, focusing on the infamous Ignace Law of 1920 that introduced new regulations against abortion and birth control. Pedersen writes that the Ignace law "was the culmination of decades of debate over whether the best responses to depopulation would encourage fatherhood or regulate motherhood. The senators and deputies' decision to focus on abortion and birth control indicates both the triumph of medical solutions to social problems and the victory of a specific prewar vision of how the women and men of different social classes should relate to one another, their families, the state, and the nation" (pp. 164-165). Pedersen cites plays, including Nelly Roussel's *Par la Révolte* and Eugène Brieux's *Maternité*, that had explicitly tackled the powerful influences of the church and society as they enslaved women with the patriotic duty to bear numerous children, yet nonetheless these artists' visions of reproductive rights for women lost out to a bourgeois, masculine, medical logic that assigned women the majority of the blame for France's problems of depopulation.

Pedersen does point out that there were strains of difference among the voices arguing for reform, from the "patriarchal patriotic" to the "solidarist positions" (p. 177). Perhaps more could be said, however, about the different ways in which social legislators imagined differences between "productive" and "patriotic" men (fathers of large families), and their sterile counterparts, the "célibataires." Concern over depopulation in France, particularly after the carnage of the Great War, provoked widespread anxiety not simply about whether women were fulfilling their biological imperatives, but about whether men were shirking their reproductive responsibilities. Pedersen deftly illustrates how male-female relationships across class lines were subject to certain prejudices at the time; this analysis could be

enlarged as well to examine the changing assumptions and concerns about “prolific” versus “selfish” males of all classes.

In *Legislating the French Family*, Pedersen contributes to a growing body of scholarship dealing with the rise of the welfare state and social citizenship in France, especially relating to the inclusion or exclusion of women from political representation. Sylvia Schafer’s work on the 1889 law on divestiture of paternal authority would seem to be particularly relevant here as well, although Pedersen does not explicitly address it.[1] *Legislating the French Family*, however, manages to take contemporary critiques of the theater and make them directly relevant to the political concerns of the Third Republic. Although “thesis plays” would not enjoy much success as the twentieth century wore on, Pedersen argues that “the study of social theater has much to offer for those who seek to understand the first half of the Third Republic” (p. 203). In her interdisciplinary approach and her careful analysis of the impact of these plays, Pedersen makes a good case that this is so.

NOTES

[1] Sylvia Schafer, *Children in Moral Danger and the Problem of Government in Third Republic France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Kristen Stromberg Childers
University of Pennsylvania
stromber@sas.upenn.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies 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 Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 34

ISSN 1553-9172