

Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*. Trans. Katherine Streip. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998. xxii + 415 pp. Tables, notes, index. \$24.95 US (pb). ISBN 0-520-06-7193.

Review by Laura Mason, University of Georgia, for H-France, November 1998.

Thanks to the scholarship of the past decade and a half, few historians can, or ought any longer to read the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" without considering the degree to which the revolutionaries of 1789 understood "man and citizen" to be a sexed being. And yet, as influential as scholarship on the French Revolution and gender has been, it has also been overwhelmingly dominated by intellectual and cultural historians.(1) Thus, while we are beginning to understand how revolutionary legislators imagined women's place in public life and why Marie-Antoinette was the object of such outrageous contempt, we are far less certain about the Revolution's impact on the daily lives of ordinary women.

Dominique Godineau's *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution* addresses precisely this issue. Published in French in 1988 and now translated into English, hers is a careful study of the complex status and experience of women "of the people" between 1789 and 1795. In particular, Godineau examines how revolutionary women asserted their place and their rights when they had not been granted the full rights of citizenship. In so doing, she demonstrates the broad range of women's political activism and its motivations, as well as the complexity of the responses they aroused. In the end, she concludes that neither revolutionary legislation nor the Revolution itself can be characterized as simply "antifeminist" (p. 345). Rather, women's activism and its repression were part of a dynamic interplay between political circumstances and ideas about gender which ebbed and flowed between 1789 and 1795.

Structurally, *Women of Paris* alternates between, on the one hand, descriptions of the material conditions and *mentalites* of its subjects and, on the other, a chronological narrative of their activism. Much of Godineau's description of the daily lives of Parisian working women--their place in the public arena, their roles and aspirations as wives or lovers, mothers, and workers--will be familiar to those who have read Arlette Farge.(2) Here, the author suggests that the Revolution had a relatively limited impact on women's experience of love, marriage, and child-bearing. The Revolution more directly affected women's work, however, both by intensifying the "crisis of labor" which had begun under the Old Regime and by providing new opportunities in the form of access to national workshops and better paying jobs. Laboring women were quick to appropriate a revolutionary rhetoric to justify demands for improved working conditions.

Godineau clearly developed her study in dialogue with Albert Soboul's classic study *Les Sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II*, so it is hardly surprising that she links her discussion of material conditions to an analysis of mentalites. Moving from women's egalitarian aspirations to their presence at the guillotine and to counter-revolution and Catholicism, she suggests that gender and social background shaped women's political ideologies and actions in different ways. So, for example, socio-professional affiliations were more likely than gender to foster counter-revolutionary sentiment, but gender was a principal factor in determining continued loyalty to Catholicism (although she reminds us that Catholic loyalty was not necessarily at odds with revolutionary patriotism). Most importantly, Godineau underscores that republican women faced tremendous conceptual and practical obstacles to exercising their rights after they had been formally excluded from the sovereign body of the nation.

The remainder of *Women of Paris* provides an analytic narrative of women's revolutionary activism. Section II focuses on militants before 9 Thermidor, particularly the members of the Society for Revolutionary Republican Women. During the spring and summer of 1793, militant women supported the Montagnards against the Girondins and were welcomed into the revolutionary movement: Jacobin speeches and the festival of August 10 celebrated feminine contributions to politics. During that same summer, however, militant demands exceeded what the Montagnards were prepared to grant. As *sans-culottes* women agitated for greater price controls, and a vocal fraction of the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women engaged in the *\_enrage\_* struggle to extend popular sovereignty. Others criticized women's subordinate status within the new republic. When moderate deputies moved to suppress this radical and popular activism, they exploited gender to achieve their political ends; such men won support among their more radical colleagues to demobilize the women by advancing ideas about women's "proper" social role, shared by even "the most politically advanced revolutionaries" (p. 171).

The final section of the book details the last gasp of women's activism during the Germinal and Prairial insurrections of the year III. Following the repression of the *sans-culottes* movement, women gained new prominence as activists. And now the literate and well-informed militants of 1793 were joined by younger, illiterate women, who were motivated by anger against merchants and deputies rather than by political commitment to Jacobins or Mountain (the political fraction which dominated the Convention during the Terror); the two constituencies were visibly linked by the insurrectionary demand for "bread and the Constitution of 1793". But once again, women's activism elicited a decree which condemned women as gendered beings in order to undermine their status as political actors: holding women responsible for the popular insurrection of Prairial year 3, deputies forbade them to gather publicly in groups of more than five. This decree, Godineau argues, sounded the death knell of

women's activism: effectively silenced, they would not even find a place in the radical Gracchus Babeuf's "Conspiracy of Equals."

This detailed and complex book is remarkable. Dominique Godineau deploys a vast knowledge of and an intense passion for her subject. She paints a complex picture of the revolutionary experience, and of women's experience of the Revolution by refusing to settle for simple explanations. Recognizing that *Parisiennes* included women at different stages of life, in different socio-professional categories, and committed to different kinds of political opinions and activism, she simultaneously conveys the variety within, and unity of these experiences. And her love of her subject shapes her writing, from which emerges the striking personalities of individual activists.

*Women of Paris* is an exemplary work of women's history and of social history. It is Godineau's extensive knowledge of the archives that allows her to paint her subjects in such breadth and detail. And in developing a nuanced picture of women's revolutionary experience, she broadens our knowledge of the Revolution. For Godineau not only asks us to look anew at revolutionary politics and women's place therein; she also addresses changing labor practices, the evolution of neighborhoods, and the mobile dynamics of riots and insurrections during the final decade of the eighteenth century. In short, *Women of Paris* is aimed not only at those seeking to understand the relationship between the French Revolution and gender it contributes as well to the rich literature on the social history of the Revolution, deepening our understanding of common people's lives during the early modern period.

Admiration for Godineau's accomplishment does not, however, preclude criticism. While she persuasively interprets the dynamics of particular political moments, her attempt to make the broader, and by now familiar argument that the Revolution witnessed a separation between and gendering of public and private spheres is less plausible. At times, Godineau's own evidence undermines her argument because she so richly illustrates the intimate interrelationships between public and private in the lives of Parisian women of the people. More generally, she fails to persuade because in concluding she abandons the attention to context which is one of the book's greatest strengths. In describing the years after Prairial, Godineau looks at women in isolation. Certainly, Godineau is right to assert that working women were silenced following the violent suppression of the Prairial insurrection of the year III, but the silencing of those years was not gender-specific. Rather, after 1795 the common people of Paris--male and female alike--were excluded and withdrew from political activism. The reports of police spies written during the last years of the Revolution make clear that women, like men, simply returned to bars, cafes, and bridges where they discussed--or loudly dismissed--politics, just as they had done under the Old Regime. And, in later years, the daughters and grand-daughters of these working women would turn out to

take part themselves in the great insurrections of the nineteenth century. In other words, it is not that women in particular were silenced after Prairial, but that common people in general ceased to demonstrate at the same time that newspapers ceased to represent their activities. That Godineau misses this point is all the more surprising given her close attention to the broader political context within which women acted during the Terror.

Equally problematic is the dated quality of much of the book's historiographic frame. Godineau's assertions about public and private will seem outdated to those familiar with the literature on gender and revolution published in the last decade.<sup>(3)</sup> She can hardly be faulted for that, since the book was first published in 1988, but she is responsible for the archaisms which arise from her refusal to address the Anglophone literature in print at the time of the book's writing. Godineau frames many of her arguments in opposition to Albert Soboul and against George Rude's *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (which appeared in French in 1982). Certainly, these are foundational texts for the social history of the French Revolution but neither offered, by any means, the last word on *sans-culottes* or women. One looks in vain for references to the work of Richard Andrews and Michael Sonenscher on the *sans-culottes* or, more crucially, the early articles on women by Olwen Hufton, Jane Bray and, above all, Darlene Levy and Harriet Applewhite.<sup>(4)</sup> Thus, Godineau's most explicit arguments with existing literature address narrow notions of class and gender which were outmoded even a decade ago.

These criticisms are, however, reservations not a wholesale dismissal of the book. *The Women of Paris and their French Revolution* is an extraordinarily well-researched and thoughtful work. Its appearance in English finally makes Godineau's work available to undergraduates even as it continues to provide us with a social history of revolutionary women. This book may also be usefully combined with the rich intellectual and cultural histories produced in the past decade to help us explain how and why the French Revolution was political, cultural, social, and sexual all at once.

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## Notes

1. Joan Landes, *Women & the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1988); Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992); Lynn Hunt, *The Family Roman of the French Revolution* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1992); Sarah Melzer & Leslie Rabine (eds.), *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* (New York & Oxford, 1992); Genevieve Fraisse, *Reason's Muse: Sexual Difference and the Birth of Democracy*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago & London, 1994); Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists*

*and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass. & London, 1996).

2. Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. by Carol Shelton (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

3. See, in particular, Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History & Theory* 31 (1992).

4. Richard Andrews, "Social Structures, Political Elites and Ideology in Revolutionary Paris, 1792-1794," *Journal of Social History* 19 (Fall 1985); Michael Sonenscher, "The Sans-Culottes of the Year II: Rethinking the Language of Labor in Revolutionary France," *Social History* 9 (October 1984). Olwen Hufton, "Women in the French Revolution," *Past & Present* 53 (November 1971); Jane Abrey, "Feminism in the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 80 (February 1975); Darlene Levy & Harriet Applewhite (eds.), *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795* (Urbana, Ill., 1979); Darlene Levy & Harriet Applewhite, "Women, Democracy, & Revolution in Paris, 1789-1794," in Samia Spencer (ed.), *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984).

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