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Geoff Read, *The republic of men: gender and the political parties in interwar France*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. x + 289 pp. Table, notes, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8071-5521-9.

Review by Charles Sowerwine, University of Melbourne.

Geoff Read's book is an examination of interwar political discourse on race and gender in interwar France, finding the ways gender and race figured in political discourse or, more precisely, in discourse in the political press. The book constitutes a broad study of the political press across the spectrum. This is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the culture of the period. It helps us particularly to understand that, despite the intense polarity of the politics of the time, different stances worked within the same fundamental discursive economy.

Two major points become clear from Read's research. First, what are loosely called "traditional" gender and race values were more pervasive than ever in the interwar period. Indeed, it would not be pushing Read's material too far to suggest that, during this period, they reached their apogee as part of the French and probably Western discursive economy. Second, and perhaps the point Read most insists upon, the different strands of thought across the political spectrum converged on a reaffirmation of these "traditional" values, overcoming some tentative efforts from the Left in the 1920s to challenge them.

While these conclusions won't surprise historians of the period, it is important to have established them with an across-the-board study of discourse. In addition, Read nuances our understanding of how these values played out. In French discourse, Read finds, woman was valued as mother, man as breadwinner and defender of the hearth, as soldier and citizen. Self-abnegation was a fundamental virtue for both women and men, but for women it was limiting, for men transcendent. With the Depression, as natalism gained a hold across the political spectrum, women's purity came to be a universal value, although one fundamental difference between Left and Right remained: while the Right made a cult of the *famille nombreuse*, the Left valued *famille, nombreuse* or not, and "only belatedly embraced some pronatalist measures" (pp. 34-35).

Read does not always bring enough theoretical armory to the study, and he does not sufficiently contextualize the discourse he studies, tending at times to make condescending judgments from the present. He picks up, for example, a contradiction which has intrigued historians, but fails to dig below the surface. While political parties of the Right and center opposed women's political participation, they welcomed and indeed often actively encouraged women's participation in their cause. Indeed, it was not the parties which, at least in theory, supported women's suffrage that boasted the largest women's participation, but some of those which opposed it, most notably the Croix de feu. It attained at least 100,000 women members, and its more legally-minded successor, the Parti social français, may have reached 400,000.[1] With the influx of new members during the Popular Front, the SFIO, as I have argued, reached 286,000 members, of whom only three percent were women, or about 9,000. Only a

handful of them participated in the women's group as well as in their male section (220 across the nation in 1930).^[2]

Read misses the opportunity to analyze this intriguing difference. He appears to accept previous organizational arguments: the socialists were crippled by their insistence that women join the party first rather than enter through and militate in women's sections.^[3] By implication, he would surely accept that the Croix de feu's emphasis on women's social action through a separate women's organization was a major factor in making the league more attractive to women. But he misses the chance to go beyond these structural factors to analyze the discourse of the day in ways that illuminate women's choices.

Kevin Passmore offered a valuable analysis of the phenomenon: "Although Croix de feu/PSF discourse could, if abstracted from its context, be made to imprison women within a straitjacket of absolute otherness, in practice, the shifting, contradictory, and indeterminate nature of conventional notions of femininity permitted a certain room for maneuver to female members." Passmore went on to suggest that it was this situation within "conventional notions of femininity" but offering "room for maneuver" that attracted women to the Croix de feu. It may well be that the SFIO and the PCF, by offering apparent frontal opposition to current gender norms while actually reinforcing them, were asking women to marginalize themselves without giving them "room for maneuver."^[4]

Read does not pursue such analysis because he abstracts the discourse he analyzes from its context (to paraphrase Passmore) and judges from today's perspective. Thus he complains that even socialists like Monette Thomas "bemoaned" women's returning from work to "tackle the housework," but did not "rethink the usual division of household tasks" (p. 150).^[5] He approves of the few communist women who suggested "men do their fair share" (p. 151). But these suggestions did not arouse an echo at the time, and the reason they did not must be sought in the lives people actually led and the constraints upon the dominant discursive economy.

As Read notes, far from suggesting that men do their share, the dominant trend was toward a hyper-masculinity, which he calls, following George Mosse, the fascist "new man."^[6] Read argues that "the fascist version [of the new man] does appear as an adaptation of its communist predecessor" as "the Communist new man helped inspire a fascist equivalent and together the fascist and Communist new men aroused a creeping totalitarian drift" (p. 55).

It is not clear (and Read does not spell out) how the communists' representation of masculinity affected right-wing groups. There is no doubt that communists glorified the male body, as did the fascists--Read reproduces a number of illustrations showing heroic men stripped to the waist--but creating a "new man" was not an explicit project for the communists, nor did glorifying the male body emerge *de novo*. The militant masculinity of the PCF continued that of the pre-war SFIO Left and, above all, of the unions.

What was common to the Left and the Right in the 1920s was the wartime experience, and surely it is there that one should look for the origins of any common hyper-masculinity. That experience could lead men into either fascism or the SFIO. The vote for the SFIO to join the Third International was carried by new, younger, blue-collar adherents, leaving the older, experienced, often white-collar militants in the reconstituted SFIO, so it is no mystery that the party emphasized young, virile militants.^[7] Read's failure to situate this discourse of masculinity in its historical context limits the scope of his analysis.

Race is the second focus of the book. Read's findings here parallel those on gender. He notes that "the language and politics of 'race' were nearly omnipresent," leading to "a widespread racialism, wherein nearly everyone treated the existence of definable human races as a fact." "Racialism," he concludes, "was a defining feature of the interwar mentality" (p. 94). What then of the long nineteenth century? Even in our own day, despite fifty years' struggle against racism, we face Donald Trump, Norbert Hofer, and Marine Le Pen. Read fails to historicize or contextualize the persistent racialism.

Instead, he pounces on racial and racist thinking and holds it up to shame. “Even on the Marxist Left,” Read argues, “one could find the vilest racism” (p. 93). He bases this assertion on three articles by a stringer in *Le Populaire*, the official paper of the SFIO, in 1920 and 1921, which certainly treated exotic subjects in the Orientalist language of the day. Read goes on to argue that such language was “not as aberrant as it might seem. The Socialist Party continued to evince concern over immigration.... The party program in 1924 even promised to pursue the ‘regulation of immigration’ and...pledged...‘equal pay for equal work’” (p. 98). Such measures hardly seem to constitute “the vilest racism” (p. 93).

At times, Read’s tendency to judgment leads him to overplay his hand. In the 1930s, he argues, the socialists and communists “converted to pronatalism” and the Popular Front parties came to share eugenicist values and policies (pp. 121-122). So far so good, though rather broad brush, but Read goes further. He quotes the pioneering urbanist and long-term socialist Mayor of the Paris suburb of Suresnes, Henri Sellier: “it is not enough to raise the birth rate, the quality of the race must also be improved” (p. 125). Read sees this as proof that Sellier was a eugenicist and indeed a supporter of forced sterilisation: this demonstrates “a sinister side to [Sellier’s] thinking. What was to become of those whom Sellier felt to be undesirable was unsaid, but one can conjecture that he might have supported a policy of sterilization” (p. 125).

This is condemnation by conjecture. Talk of “improving the race” was general. Sellier devoted his life to improving housing and hygiene in working-class areas. It seems more likely that Sellier was referring to such improvements, rather than to sterilization. If he had meant sterilization, he could have said so. Sterilization was not then unmentionable. It was practiced at the time, in the United States and Germany, and explicitly supported by some French thinkers, such as Dr Edouard Toulouse, the pioneer clinical psychologist who played a significant role in supporting the young Madeleine Pelletier, the very militant feminist and socialist, whose ideas, as I have argued, were also consonant with racist and eugenicist thinking.[8] Thus, Sellier could have voiced support for sterilization, but he did not.

Similarly, Read is scandalized by a 1920 statement from the radical Yvon Delbos, typical of commonplaces about France’s role “as protector of the oppressed nationalities and races” (p. 102). For Read, this “represented as pure a colonialist fantasy as one could hope to find, but delusional though it may have been, it was widely shared and propagated” (p. 103). “Delusional” obscures the point. Is he saying that this was unusual for France as opposed to other Western nations? Or unusual for 1920? In the absence of any effort to situate such commonplaces, we’re left unsure of the point.

Much of Read’s method is to label politicians or activists and quote from them. In this instance, Read characterizes Delbos as a “member of the Socialist Party at the time” but provides no evidence for this label (p. 102). Delbos edited a radical newspaper in his youth and remained in the Radical Party, a party certainly to the left of big business and reaction but hardly to be lumped with the SFIO or labelled as “the Left.” I know of no suggestion that Delbos was ever a member of the SFIO.[9]

The choice of sources is another issue. Read has done heroic work reading the party political press, but even he must make choices, and he fails to explain them or to situate them in their contexts. On the Radicals, for example, he takes the bulk of his evidence from *L’Ère nouvelle*, the newspaper Delbos founded and edited initially, which Read argues, “provided a revealing glimpse at trends and attitudes in the interwar left” (p. 107). Delbos soon lost control of *L’Ère nouvelle*, but it remained an unofficial organ of the Radical Party’s conservative wing. It refused to support the Popular Front. It was neither typical of the Radical Party’s evolution nor an organ of the Left. Nor was it a paper of national significance. Its circulation in March 1939 was a mere 4,000 copies, compared to 157,837 for the SFIO’s *Le Populaire*, and 349,587 for *L’Humanité* (and much more for commercial papers: 1,739,584 for *Paris Soir* and 1,022,401 for *Le Petit Parisien*).[10]

It is not that the Radicals had no national press. On the contrary, the historian faces an *embarras de choix*. The excellent *Histoire générale de la presse française*--the kind of tool Read should have used more frequently--concludes, interestingly, that in the interwar period political weeklies are better indicators of shifting currents of thought than national political dailies: "*La Lumière, Marianne et Vendredi* nous offrent aujourd'hui un témoignage beaucoup plus clair et plus profond de la pensée radicale et socialiste que *l'Œuvre* ou *le Populaire*." For the dailies, it suggests that *l'Œuvre* best reflected "des idées et des réactions de la gauche Radicale." I think *La Dépêche de Toulouse*, which "publiait tous les jours des chroniques des principaux leaders radicaux," was most important in influence. By 1939, when *L'Ère nouvelle* was selling 4,000 copies a day, *l'Œuvre* was selling 274,000, *La Dépêche* 260,000.[11] Read does not consider any of these except for *le Populaire* and a few examples from *La Lumière*. Such choices need to be justified and contextualized.

Read concludes with a discussion of debates about women's suffrage. An advantage of his method is that he can see a broader picture than those of us who specialize. He makes a convincing and interesting case "that women engaged in this debate disproportionately in their respective parties and leagues" across all parties (p. 183). His analysis, however, could have gone further and explored some of the arguments he cites about the Third Republic's failure to grant women the right to vote and used them to sharpen his analysis of discourse.

Read dismisses out of hand the clerical argument as "patently fraudulent" and is surprised that "it was omnipresent" (p. 183). He does not consider the argument that the feminists were hog-tied by their commitment to the republic, nor the argument that what needs to be explained is the militancy of Anglo suffragists.[12] He does consider that emphasis on the male breadwinner may have led to the rejection of women's suffrage (p. 182). But in Australia, the 1907 Harvester Judgment instituted in law--just six years after women were granted suffrage--an obligation to pay the (male) breadwinner a wage sufficient to maintain his wife and children.[13]

Having rejected most arguments about suffrage, Read concludes that "one must look to politics to explain the lateness [or "delinquency," as he also calls it] of women's political emancipation in France. France's politicians...failed French women" (pp. 180-181). "Politics," however, failed women everywhere until it succeeded. New Zealand politicians granted women the right to vote in 1893. American and British feminists complained for a quarter century about their countries' comparative lateness, more intensely after the newly federated Australian states granted white women suffrage in 1901. And what about Spanish women who, after five years of voting under the republic, had to wait until 1976 to regain suffrage? Lateness, as I have argued, is not a helpful concept here.[14]

Read fails to pursue one argument for which he has found some evidence: "obstructions...were found...most frequently in those parties most closely associated with republicanism" (p. 181). This correlation merits a closer look. Much work about earlier French gender history focuses on the construction of the citizen as male and it would be logical to pursue this question through discourse analysis.[15] Indeed, Read's account of the 1944 Algiers Vote, with which he concludes, elides aspects which at the very least raise the question.

Read credits the radical *rapporteur* of the commission with the proposal for women's suffrage. But the radical report, in fact, proposed women's suffrage only in principle and only after two million male deportees and prisoners of war returned to France! The socialist Louis Vallon, a confidant of de Gaulle, rightly argued that the radicals' hesitations were a throwback to the bad old days: "Many times, the Parliament voted women's suffrage with near unanimity, but each time it was arranged behind the scenes, by procedural arguments, to prevent it. These small-minded maneuvers have to end (Applause)." It was Fernand Grenier, a communist, who successfully amended the radical proposal to provide simply, "[w]omen will vote and be eligible in the same conditions as men." [16]

The radicals, the quintessential republicans, obstructed to the last. The fear of women's subjection to priests was real. And, at a deeper level, does this not suggest the republicans' continuing sense that citizenship had been constructed male and remained male? After all, it took an end-run by less republican parties--Gaullists, communists, and socialists--to circumvent the radicals' opposition. It is a pity that Read does not penetrate more deeply into the discourse he has so well researched.

Although Read could have pushed his analysis further, his study will be of interest to historians of the interwar period and to all historians of race and gender. It offers a wide base of empirical research. Historians will find in it a gold mine, particularly on the persistence and pervasiveness of nineteenth-century race and gender discourse and on the convergence during the 1930s of thought back to the ideas challenged in the aftermath of the Great War. Louisiana State University Press has continued its fifty-year tradition of quality publication in French history with a handsomely produced volume, marred only by the absence of a bibliography.

NOTES

[1] Robert Soucy, *French fascism: the second wave, 1933-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 110-12; Kevin Passmore, "Planting the Tricolor in the Citadels of Communism: Women's Social Action in the Croix de feu and the Parti social Français," *Journal of Modern History* 71/4(1999): 814-851, 817; Caroline Campbell, "Women and Gender in the Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français: Creating a Nationalist Youth Culture, 1927-1939," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 36(2008): 249-264; Caroline Campbell, *Political belief in France, 1927-1945: gender, empire, and fascism in the Croix de feu and Parti social français* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

[2] Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens?: Women and Socialism in France since 1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 168-175.

[3] Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens?*, pp. 168-175. Read erroneously attributes to Louise Saumoneau, the women's group leader, an attempt to reverse that policy. In fact, it was she who initiated and maintained it.

[4] Passmore, "Planting the Tricolor," p. 817.

[5] Thomas is simply labelled "socialist." She could usefully have been identified from the Maitron: she was a very advanced member of the SFIO before the schism of 1920. <http://maitron-en-ligne.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article132570>, accessed September 17, 2014.

[6] George L. Mosse, *The image of man: the creation of modern masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); *Masses and man: nationalist and Fascist perceptions of reality* (New York: H. Fertig, 1980).

[7] Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français: Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1964); Daniel R. Brower, *The new Jacobins: the French Communist Party and the Popular Front* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

[8] Charles Sowerwine and Claude Maignien, *Madeleine Pelletier, une féministe dans l'arène politique* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1992), pp. 44-45 ff.; Charles Sowerwine, "Woman's Brain, Man's Brain: feminism and anthropology in late nineteenth-century France," *Women's History Review* 12/2(2003): 311-329.

[9] Benoît Yvert, ed., *Dictionnaire des ministres de 1789 à 1989* (Paris: Perrin, 1990), pp. 430-431; John E. Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos at the Quai d'Orsay: French foreign policy during the Popular Front, 1936-1938* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973); Bernard Lachaise, *Yvon Delbos 1885-1956 biographie*

(Périgueux: Fanlac, 1993); Peter J. Larmour, *The French Radical Party in the 1930's* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).

[10] Claude Bellanger, Jacques Godechot, Pierre Guiral, Fernand Terrou, eds., *Histoire générale de la presse française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969-1976), vol. 3, *De 1871 à 1940*, pp. 511, 562.

[11] Bellanger et al., *Histoire générale de la presse française*, vol. 3, pp. 400, 461, 564-565, 606.

[12] Steven C. Hause and Anne R. Kenney, "The limits of suffragist behavior: legalism and militancy in France, 1876-1922," *American Historical Review* 86(1981): 781-806; Charles Sowerwine, "The Organization of French Socialist Women, 1880-1914," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 3(1976): 3-24, esp. 23-24.

[13] Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, and Marian Quartly, *Creating a nation* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1994), pp. 200-203; Mark Hearn, "Securing the man: narratives of gender and nation in the verdicts of Henry Bourne Higgins," *Australian Historical Studies* 37/127(2006): 1-24; John Lack and Charles Fahey, "The Industrialist, the Trade Unionist and the Judge: The Harvester Judgement of 1907 Revisited," *Victorian Historical Journal* 79/1(2008): 3-18.

[14] Charles Sowerwine, "Revising the Sexual Contract: Women's Citizenship and Republicanism in France, 1789-1944," in Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Accampo, eds., *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 19-42; Charles Sowerwine and Patricia Grimshaw, "Women's Suffrage," in Stephen Stockwell and Benjamin Isakhan, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 341, 344.

[15] For discussions of this historiography, see Judith Surkis, *Sexing the citizen: morality and masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 6 ff.; Sowerwine, "Revising the Sexual Contract."

[16] Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: culture, society and the making of the republic* (2nd edn; Basingstoke [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 212. Account based on Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne*, pp. 448-49; Letter from R. Aubrac to C. Sowerwine; Joan Tumblety, "Responses to Women's Enfranchisement in France, 1944-1945," *Women's Studies International Forum* 26/5(2003): 483-497, 484; Charles de Gaulle, *The complete war memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, trans. by J. Griffin and R. Howard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 481.

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