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Christine Machiels, *Les Féminismes et la prostitution, 1860-1960*. Préface de Xavier Rousseaux. Collection Archives du Féminisme. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016. 329 pp. Footnotes, biographical notices, index (names only), list of abbreviations, sources, and bibliography. € 22.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7535-4916-6.

Review by Karen Offen, Stanford University.

*Les Féminismes et la prostitution, 1860-1960* offers the first comprehensive and comparative study of the feminist campaigns in France, Switzerland, and Belgium against government-regulated prostitution and the traffic in women and children (earlier referred to as the “white slave trade”). Christine Machiels offers a superb analysis of how the feminist campaigns not only “fit” into but helped shape a more general struggle that finally concluded in 1949-1950, with the United Nations international convention that condemned prostitution in no uncertain terms as “incompatible with the dignity and value of the human being” and “dangerous for the well-being of the individual, the family, and the community” (p. 13). To say that I am deeply impressed by this book is to severely understate my enthusiasm. This is a pioneering, ambitious, and authoritative study for which the author, under co-direction for her thesis, has been awarded two doctoral degrees, one from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium (in the Center for the History of Law and Justice), and a second from the University of Angers (Center for Historical Research) in France.

Rather than plunging immediately into the subject, the author’s introduction to the book provides a resolutely theoretical, methodological, and historiographical excursion that invokes the women/gender/sexuality debates of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, via Michel Foucault, Joan Scott, Judith Butler, and not least Alain Corbin, along with French, English, and American historians of feminism. The author is well acquainted with the pertinent literature in English as well as in French, Flemish, and German. Christine Machiels frames her study as an exercise in “histoire croisé”—which we would call historical intersectionality—among the three countries, among levels of concern (local, national, international) and among intersecting issues. In short, this book is more complicated than most works of history. It embraces yet transcends the “national.” The author puts it this way: “L’approche croisée implique une complexification de la grille d’enquête” (p. 24). She also remarks on the “dispersion” and the “diversity” of the sources (i.e., there is no single archive that one can exploit to reconstruct the full story). This latter attestation carries no surprises; since the debut of the field of women’s history in the academy during the later 1960s, such dispersion and diversity of sources has typified the recovery of women’s voices, women’s lives, and the histories of feminisms, and this holds equally true for reconstructing the debates on the woman question. In fact, more often than not, the published

sources (whether recovered in archives or found in publications) are the primary sources. These theoretical and methodological concerns are never invoked again.

The body of Machiels's dense yet extremely readable book is divided in two parts of three chapters each, splitting in 1920, following World War I. The documentation includes over 1,100 footnotes.

Part one (pp. 27-138) contains three chapters: focusing respectively on "the pioneers" (1860-1882); "Continental abolitionism: a feminine and feminist revolt (1883-1905)"; and "Nationalist tensions, the Great War, and contractions (*crispations* is the French word used here) of moral concerns (1906-1919)." What do we learn from these three chapters? Here Machiels's intersectional narrative begins. The guiding question seems to be: how (and why) did the various nascent campaigns for women's rights in France, Belgium, and Switzerland join forces with the pan-European campaign begun by Josephine Butler against government regulated prostitution in England?

The author is keen to point out that French advocates for women's rights had developed a critique of government-sanctioned prostitution well before the later 1860s, when Josephine Butler's campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts began. Machiels points to the writings of Julie-Victoire Daubié, especially in *La Femme pauvre* (1866), emphasizing the originality of Daubié's critique of the *police des mœurs* and the municipally-sanctioned brothel system as described by Parent-Duchâtelet in 1836 and the way in which she linked it squarely to the notion of women's rights--especially their right to earn a living.[1] Daubié castigated a system that claimed to "protect" decent women, but at the expense of their less fortunate sisters. A little known fact, presented here by Machiels, is that Daubié even sent a petition to the French Senate in early June 1869, calling for the abolition of regulated prostitution and, in the same breath, the restoration of the right of women to bring paternity suits against men who had seduced (and abandoned) them. Perhaps not surprisingly, the French Senate never acted on this petition. Machiels also reveals that André Léo (a.k.a. Léodile Béra, veuve Champceix) had raised the same question in early May--in the 5<sup>th</sup> issue of *Le Droit des Femmes*. And the outspoken French women's rights advocate Maria Deraismes continued the onslaught. It was only in October 1869 that Josephine Butler wrote to Léon Richer, the editor of *Le Droit des Femmes*, and shortly thereafter Butler published an English translation of Daubié's article on "morality under the [French] regulation system." The trans-channel links were being set in place. From there, it was only a short step to connecting with Marie Goegg's Association Internationale des Femmes, initiated in Switzerland, and to the French-speaking Butler's attempts to further link with the French women's rights campaigns. The Franco-Prussian war interrupted these efforts, as did the political repression that followed in France. It was then that Josephine Butler decided to "invade" Europe.

Machiels rehearses the comings and goings of Butler and the alliances she made with women and men, primarily in France, Belgium, and the Suisse romande prior to 1877. She expounds on the details of the founding congress in September 1877 in Geneva of the Fédération britannique, continentale et générale pour l'abolition de la prostitution réglementée (only later known, after 1896, as the Fédération Abolitioniste Internationale [FAI]) and underscores the reticence some felt with respect to hitching the abolition of government-regulated prostitution to the cause of emancipating women. She addresses the stance taken against regulation by the first International Congress on Women's Rights in Paris (1878), and the subsequent founding

in Paris (1879) of the Association française pour l'abolition de la prostitution réglementée (by the Swiss-born Emilie de Morsier and Yves Guyot) as well as the cautious beginnings of the abolitionist campaign in Belgium. Throughout she makes effective use of the Morsier-Drouin papers--especially of Butler's letters to Emilie de Morsier--in addition to the abundant published sources deposited by the FAI in the archives of the Bibliothèque de Genève (BGE).

The author then turns to the building out of the abolitionist movement and examination of the relationships between the leaders (both women and men) of the expanding "feminist" movement in the three countries and Butler's Fédération britannique, continentale, et générale. Chapter three is particularly interesting as it concerns the politics of abolitionism and feminism during the Great War. Having no "official" role in the war, the feminist leaders nevertheless had much to say about the war and in particular about issues of morality. The resurgence of government efforts to provide "safe" sexual outlets for soldiers in the field flew in the face of the ongoing--and partially successful--efforts of the abolitionist feminists to combat both regulated prostitution and the traffic in women (most of whom were minors) since the beginning of Butler's continental network-building efforts.

The second part of the book (pp. 141-267) hones in on the "development of abolitionist feminism" in the forty years following the Great War (1920-1960). The fourth chapter, "Lobbying at the League of Nations," focuses first on the work of the international women's organizations (particularly the International Council of Women [ICW/CIF], the International Woman Suffrage Alliance [IWSA/AISF], and the newest group, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom [WILPF/LIPL]) and their intrepid leaders in the promising new context provided by the newly founded League of Nations, headquartered in Geneva, where these organizations' leaders chose the French feminist and abolitionist Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix (secretary-general, then president of the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises), to represent their coalition at the League. The latter also served for many years on the League's Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children.[2]

Machiel's findings in this chapter provide a Francophone parallel to the pioneering research (an unpublished Oxford D.Phil and a sequence of important published articles) by the British scholar Carol Miller, which highlighted the importance of British women's participation in the development of the League of Nations.[3] Of particular interest is the 1921 declaration of the women's international organizations, which insisted that no measures (such as controlling the mobility of underage girls) be enacted by the League that did not apply to both sexes. In the context of controversy over the French occupation of the Rhineland with black soldiers from their African colonies (where the army established brothels for the soldiers), and the consequent growth of neoregulationist activity and sentiment, the network of feminist abolitionist activists was tempted by proposals for control and regulation, but in the end they consistently upheld the principle of individual liberty. Another landmark intervention concerned the Sokal proposal to repatriate foreign prostitutes; this proposal forced the international women's groups (led by Madame Avril de Sainte-Croix) to clarify their position--they vetoed the Sokal proposal because it implicitly endorsed the retention of (and thereby granted official recognition to) the "maisons de tolérance," to be staffed exclusively by local prostitutes. This chapter draws on a wide range of sources, from the archives of the League of Nations in Geneva, the Francophone feminist and abolitionist press in all three countries, the papers of the ICW at the CARHIF archive in Brussels, the Mundaneum in Mons, *Jus Suffragii* (the monthly publication of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance), plus various published

commission reports, and previously untapped correspondence. At no time did the feminists call for the outlawing of prostitution per se; what they wanted was that government bodies at the municipal level cease to sanction the practice, and that pimps, madams, and other individuals colluding in the trafficking of underage girls between countries be subject to prosecution.

To counter the resurgence of regulationism in the 1920s, coalitions of abolitionist feminist activists and other “moralist” groups began to form. From 1926 on, the coalition founded and coordinated by the French abolitionist feminist Marcelle Legrand-Falco, known as the Union Temporaire contre la prostitution réglementée (UT) pursued abolitionist goals with a feminist thrust. This alliance is discussed in chapter five and draws heavily on the Legrand-Falco papers housed at the Musée Social in Paris. Campaigns against venereal disease complemented the work of the abolitionist feminists, which led to alliances with the leaders of the social hygiene movements in the three countries. In chapter six, Machiels turns to consider the second world war and the *assainissement moral* of nations, which ultimately pushed the new United Nations Organization to address the ongoing issues around prostitution and regulation. These efforts ultimately led to a final UNO Convention (mentioned above), passed in 1949 and issued in 1950. In the interim government-regulated prostitution did come to an end in Switzerland, France, and Belgium.

The author succeeds admirably in demonstrating the significance of the contributions made by continental feminists in France, Switzerland, and to a lesser extent Belgium, to the cause of abolition. The book also enriches our perspective by decentering several generations of earlier anglophone and anglo-centric scholarship, focused particularly on Great Britain (and its colonial possessions) and the United States. Machiels insists that, for these francophone feminist abolitionists, efforts to end regulated prostitution and the traffic sometimes took on more urgency than did obtaining the vote.

Though overall, I have high praise for this illuminating book, it does have some small flaws—flaws that might easily have been avoided given one more round of editorial scrutiny prior to going to press. First, there is the problem of major misspelling in one name that recurs (perhaps several hundred times) throughout the book: Ghénia [Avril de Sainte-Croix], is rendered here as Guénia. I point out this specific gaffe to ensure that nobody else makes the same mistake with regard to this formidable Geneva-born French feminist whose contributions to feminism and abolitionism at the national and international levels are huge, but whose story has only recently been reconstructed.[4] Additionally the name of Kâthe Schirmacher is given here as Kathe without the umlaut (in English, this name is usually written out as Kaethe). There are several other mistakes in names. The author, of course, is ultimately responsible for these errors, but clearly neither the copy-editor nor the series editor performed the necessary “due diligence.”

A second problem is anachronism in titles of organizations: from the beginning of the book, Machiels refers to the FAI (pp. 48-49) although from 1877 to approximately 1896 this association was still operating under its original name—Fédération britannique, continentale, et générale pour l’abolition de la prostitution réglementée. Only then did its name change to Fédération Abolitioniste Internationale. Likewise, the author applies the terminology “feminist” and “feminism” for the 1860s and 70s, without noting that those words were not yet in circulation until the 1890s. There are also some problems with chronology: the author frequently collapses chronology, or skips about (as on pp. 94-96), thereby losing the thread of

development of arguments and events over time. This problem is particularly noticeable in chapter three, especially in the sections concerning feminism and abolitionism during the Great War.

Of greater concern is the absence of credit given to the investigations of Anne Summers, who conducted a pioneering, multi-year (2004–2007), cross-cultural study of Josephine Butler’s international networks, funded by the Leverholme Trust, and sponsored by The Women’s Library, which brought scholars (including Machiels) from all over Europe together in two different conferences to expand understanding of Butler’s efforts. Some of the articles that resulted from this project are cited, but without specific reference either to Summers’s project or her edited special issue (2008) of the *Women’s History Review* that resulted from this pathbreaking project.<sup>[5]</sup> Nor does Machiels cite or refer to Andrea Mansker’s book, *Sex, Honor and Citizenship In Early Third Republic France* (2011); her chapter six analyzes the work of the 1904–1907 French extra-parliamentary commission on the morals regime.<sup>[6]</sup>

Despite such small yet significant caveats, it has to be said that this is an extremely important book, one that adds richly to our understanding of feminist politics in France and the significant alliances it forged in the campaigns against regulated prostitution, the sexual double standard, and the traffic throughout Francophone Europe. Working on three countries at once is no small feat, much less embedding the work of the abolitionist feminist activists in the complicated local and national politics of each country and in the international arena, particularly at the League of Nations and the United Nations. This was indeed a century-long campaign, one that finally succeeded—at least for a time. Persistence did pay off—the abolitionist feminists did ultimately persuade authorities that government-regulated brothels violated women’s individual liberty, that licensing and medical inspection of prostitutes did not forestall the spread of venereal diseases, and that those brothels could not be abolished without first addressing—and halting—the traffic in women and children. Knowing that the traffic has experienced a huge and unfortunate resurgence worldwide in our own time does not diminish the significance of the earlier abolitionist feminist campaigns to end it.

This book should be read by everyone who works in or teaches—or simply enjoys learning about—the “hidden” history of Francophone Europe. Machiels’s pathbreaking study (pending a few corrections and revisions) clearly deserves translation into English.

## NOTES

[1] Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet, *De la Prostitution dans la ville de Paris*. 2 vols. (Brussels: Hauman, Cattoir, & cie., 1836; 3rd ed., Paris, J. B. Baillière, 1857).

[2] See my articles on Mme Avril de Sainte-Croix: “Madame Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix, the Josephine Butler of France,” in *Women’s History Review* 17:2 (April 2008): 239–255, and “La plus grande féministe de France: Pourquoi a-t-on oublié l’inoubliable féministe internationaliste française, Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix,” in Christine Bard ed., *Les Féministes de la première vague* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), pp. 181–194.

[3] Carol Miller’s published articles include: “Women in International Relations? The Debate in Inter-War Britain,” in Rebecca Grant & Kathleen Newland eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Buckingham: Open University Press; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991),

pp. 64-82; “Geneva - the Key to Equality’: Inter-war Feminists and the League of Nations,” *Women's History Review* 3:2 (1994): 219-245; and “The Social Section and Advisory Committee on Social Questions of the League of Nations,” in Paul Weindling ed., *International Health Organisations and Movements, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 154-175.

[4] See note 2 above.

[5] *Women's History Review* 17:2 (April 2008), special issue: “Gender, Religion, and Politics: Josephine Butler’s Campaigns in International Perspective (1875-1939),” edited by Anne Summers. See also Anne Summers’ earlier article (which Machiels does cite), “Liberty, Equality, Morality: The Attempt to Sustain an International Campaign against the Double Standard, 1875-1906,” *Sextant*, n<sup>os.</sup> 23-24 (2007): 133-153, reproduced in Karen Offen ed., *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789-1945* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 133-153.

[6] Andrea Mansker, *Sex, Honor and Citizenship in Early Third Republic France* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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