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Gill Allwood and Kursheed Wadia, *Women and Politics in France, 1958-2000*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. xiv + 270 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$31.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-415-18493-2.

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“Women don’t like what men call Politics,
which is a mixture of theoretical discussions and personal dealings.”

Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, radio speech delivered in 1975 (p. 68).

What has been the relationship of women to political life in France since the founding of the Fifth Republic? In what ways (if any) does gender constitute a relevant category for analyzing political behavior across those years? How is one to account for the relatively restrained number of women representatives in the national legislature, where, even after their electoral breakthrough of 1997, women constitute just under 10 percent (both houses)—a figure which places France second from the bottom in the league table for European Union countries? And what kind of impact has the feminist movement had on women’s political activity? These are just some of the questions that Gill Allwood and Kursheed Wadia set out to answer in their dense and very useful survey of women and politics in France since the dawn of the Fifth Republic. The interest of the book lies partly in its timing. Published in the year 2000, just months before France’s first elections under the sign of parity (spring 2001), *Women and Politics in France* surveys the entire terrain of local and national office, traditional party politics, trade unions and new social movements, as all awaited the impact of the new laws intended to equalize access to political office.

The book is based on an extremely broad range of sources, including the data bases of the Interparliamentary Union, the European Women’s Lobby, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Eurobarometer, the European Database (Woman in Decision-Making), information from the women’s sections and press offices of the political parties and trade unions, newspaper and periodical articles (including those held in the press cuttings service of the *Fondation nationale des sciences politiques in Paris*), and the websites of the French government, parliament, parties and organizations. Underpinning this impressive array of primary source material is an exhaustive bibliography of secondary literature, which is analyzed in some detail throughout the various chapters of the book.

Women and Politics in France opens with a general introduction that lays out some of the authors’ main methodological concerns, notably: 1) the particular context formed by French republicanism, with its traditional emphasis on the universal, unitary nature of the state and concomitant resistance to all forms of identity (or “communitarian”) politics; and 2) the specific methodological difficulties that “bringing women back in” to accounts of French politics entails.^[1] Under this latter rubric, the authors focus in particular on the problem of gathering reliable data, for until quite recently French official state bodies did not collect statistics on the political participation of categories of citizens on the principle that the French people constitute an indivisible unity. This has made it very difficult for the authors to assemble even the most basic counts of the numbers of women in various bodies. Worse yet, the trade unions and

political parties seem also to have adhered to the principle of republican indivisibility, and were therefore (until quite recently) unable to provide much detail on the participation of women in the membership and internal organization.

In addition to the problem of incomplete data, however, feminist political scientists also confront problems of method and interpretation due to the fact that traditional definitions of political activity, with their narrow focus on the activities of parties and official state bodies, have tended to exclude important arenas of women's activism, notably the feminist and new social movements that have blossomed in post-68 France. Feminist scholars thus have had to work simultaneously on two fronts: 1) they have had to develop new methods in order to identify the ways in which mainstream studies have excluded women; and 2) they have had to take into account the ways that the feminist and new social movements in post-68 France have expanded and altered traditional definitions of political activity, changing popular notions of what politics actually comprises.

The strength of Allwood and Wadia's work lies in its capacity to deliver on its initial feminist promise to explore politics in its broadest sense, and in the breadth of material mobilized to that end. The authors thus provide chapters that survey the participation of women in the state—as legislators, cabinet ministers, municipal, departmental and regional councilors, mayors and senior civil servants, and in the major political parties (RPR, UDF, PS, PCF, LO-LCR, FN and the *Verts*). But they also give ample space to organizations and movements outside the realm of formal politics, organizations such as the trade unions, the feminist movement, and the new social movements, notably ecologist and various coordinations (temporary organizations that emerge in moments of social mobilization in order to represent and organize a particular occupational group at the national level). In the realm of formal politics, the analysis of women's slowly increasing participation is accompanied by the repeated refrain of inadequate and incomplete data. One typical disclaimer runs, "If the figures for women's participation in national assemblies and government are difficult to collate and obtain, then those relating to their presence in the state's local elected bodies are even more incomplete and, it is suggested, possibly inaccurate" (p. 35).

Allwood and Wadia nonetheless patiently have gathered every available statistic, around which they construct a portrait of French politics, local and national, as having constituted a kind of male club. Though women are steadily gaining a precarious toehold, their activity in this "club" is very much constrained by misogynist stereotypes and prejudices that have operated to confine women to the more "feminine" sphere of the social (health, the family, culture, education, social welfare), leaving men in charge of the more "political" domains such as finance, diplomacy, strategy, the economy. "Not a single (parliamentary) commission (other than on cultural, family and social affairs) opened its doors to me because I am a woman," complained H el ene Mistoffe of her period in the National Assembly (1974-8). "The Commission on finance tops the list you know, followed by the Commission on laws" (pp. 38-9). A quick glance over the list of ministerial positions held by women since 1958 confirms the impression. Aside from Edith Cresson (Agriculture, European Affairs, premiership), Elisabeth Guigou (European Affairs, Justice) and Martine Aubry (Employment), women have been overlooked for what are traditionally seen as men's ministerial portfolios (pp. 40-2).

Given this less-than-welcoming atmosphere, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that the few women who have attained positions of power have often been reluctant to assert a particular attachment to feminist principles. "Because of their small numbers in decision-making sites, the room for manoeuvre allowed to women to admit to being and saying they are 'feminist' ... is not vast," writes Mariette Sineau. "Seen as 'outsiders', the balance of power is not such that they can impose their ideas. Such a situation inevitably pushed [one] towards conformity of thought and alignment with the masculine norm." [2] Rather than focusing on women's issues *per se*, then, women in French politics have tended to identify with their party's ideology and program, or with their constituency, as in the case of rural

municipalities, where women mayors give priority to matters of local development: maintaining agriculture, promoting tourism, commerce, or local craft industries.

There is, nonetheless, some evidence to support the proposition that women in political office “draw on their gender identity to inform their work, and to ‘do politics differently,’” even though not all of them would describe themselves as feminist (p. 45). This perception, closely linked to the widespread belief that women are “closer to the daily life of the people and more concerned with everyday matters” has worked to engage a broad sympathy for the notion of gender parity in politics, not simply as a matter of justice to women, but also out of the perception that women do in fact “do politics differently” and will constitute a more responsive political *élite*, one that is in closer touch with the daily lives of ordinary citizens (p. 227). But this cannot happen until the parties themselves put forward significant numbers of female candidates for seats that they have some hope of winning. For as Allwood and Wadia point out, putting women candidates forward in constituencies where the party has little hope of winning has been a tried and true method used on both the right and the left for maintaining political parties as yet another male club. With the parties acting as the “gatekeepers” to political office, it is here that the revolution of parity must begin, overturning the traditional, and powerful resistance to women within parties that, whether right or left, have been dominated by a self-reproducing male *élite*. Campaigns for parity have thus focused on equalizing the numbers of male and female candidates put forward on party lists and ensuring that women candidates have equal access to winnable seats. The municipal elections of 2001 already hint at the potential of parity to upset local political fiefdoms, as the percentage of women in local office rose abruptly from just over 20 percent to nearly 50 percent. But whether time in local office will promote equal numbers of women to positions of national power, or whether women will in fact “do politics differently,” and so transform the political landscape simply by virtue of being women (or of not being men), remains to be seen.

The book’s most interesting chapters without a doubt are those which take the reader outside the arena of formal party politics and peer into the heart of those social movements and trade union organizations where women have militated in increasing numbers since the late 1960s. The section on women and trade unions, for example, allows the authors to explore more fully the relationship between the socio-economic changes of the period 1960 to 2000, when women’s labor force participation rate rose from an already high 38 percent to 45 percent, and pressures for greater representation of women and women’s issues in politics. The chapter closely traces the rising and falling fortunes of feminist analysis in CFTC/CFDT and CGT union circles. It underscores in particular how, after a decade of rising attention to the specific forms of oppression faced by women workers at home and at work, both unions re-marginalized the rights and demands of working women in the years of crisis after 1982, when organized labor in France faced falling membership and the pressures of rising unemployment (thanks to neo-liberal economic policies that led to market deregulation and massive cost-cutting operations, which generally were carried out under the guise of modernization). Moreover, the gradual dissolution of the feminist movement at this time and the appropriation of certain of its issues by Mitterand’s new Socialist Ministry of Women’s Rights arguably reduced the level of direct pressure exerted throughout the 1970s by feminists (union members and otherwise) to integrate a gender dimension in their thinking and strategy. The result has been a re-marginalization of women’s rights and demands within the unions and a growing gap between leaders and women activists.

The chapter on the feminist movements of the 1970s confronts head-on the problem of French politicians’ longstanding ambivalence toward any real support of women’s rights, a problem that has been at least as evident on the left as on the right and has played no small role in shaping women’s political action in France. As Andrée Michel and Geneviève Texier pointed out in 1964, “How can you ask women to differentiate between the left and the right when the former, claiming to be ideologically opposed to the latter, sometimes shows the same indifference or even hostility when it comes to taking concrete steps in favour of women’s liberation?”[3] Less than ten years later, the Women’s Liberation Movement (MLF) would respond in kind to the masculinist bias of traditional party politics by

developing an anti-political form of politics that insisted on the importance of struggling from outside the political arena against the allied forces of patriarchy and capitalism. After all, the goal of overthrowing the system precluded any possibility of engaging with it on its own terms through, for example, choosing to elect a representative from one party rather than another.

While the feminist movement as such would finally dissolve in the mid-1980s, feminist action around specific issues—defending the right to contraception and abortion, solidarity with the women of Algeria, campaigns against genital mutilation and male violence—continues unabated. More important, perhaps, feminist re-definitions of the political to include issues of domestic power and violence (abortion, rape, sexual harassment, domestic labor)—relations of power that lead to the systematic domination of one sex by the other—have left a lasting imprint on popular conceptions of politics. If the feminist refusal to enter the political game in the name of subverting the system has since been abandoned in favor of a more pragmatic reformism (in order to change the system, it is necessary first to enter it, so as to change it from within), the feminist expansion of the bounds of the political endures and, arguably, has changed the shape of politics in 1980s and 1990s France.

The richness of these two chapters' discussions of women's activism, highlighting as they do the intersection of social and economic militancy with various political demands, serves to underscore one of the book's greatest weaknesses, and that is the generally dull quality of its narrative. For in the effort to provide a full survey of women's relationship to political life in Fifth Republican France, the authors keep their narrative at a fairly general level, with one fact or bundle of statistics following hard upon the heels of another, and the whole bound together with a fairly restrained analytic overview. While this restraint is perhaps wise, given the fact that they are writing about events even as they unfold, the monotone quality of those chapters which analyze party politics, electoral behavior, and the slowly shifting fortunes of women in national office stands in stark contrast to the variety of registers rung in the chapters on feminism, trade unionism, and the new social movements. They leave the reader wishing that Allwood and Wadia had found a way to make space in their more traditionally political chapters for the kind of varied analysis that so enlivens the "movement" portion of their story.

NOTES

[1] The introduction also takes pains to point out that the book has nothing much to say either on the subject of immigrant women, nor on those right-wing women militants for movements such as the Front national.

[2] Mariette Sineau, *Des femmes en politique* (Paris: Economica, 1988), quoted in Allwood and Wadia, p. 44.

[3] Andrée Michel and Geneviève Texier, *La Condition de la française d'aujourd'hui*, Volume 2. Genève: Éditions Gonthier, 1964, p. 108, quoted in Allwood and Wadia, p. 128.

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