Roundtable

Gendering French History: The Significance of Karen Offen's Books on the Woman Question

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Introduction

Karen Offen's companion volumes, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* and *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920* (both published by Cambridge University Press in 2017 and 2018, respectively), have received much praise from reviewers for their valuable contribution to the gendering of French history. Yet there had not been a session devoted to a detailed assessment of these important books at any meeting of French historians in the United States. Participants in this roundtable hoped to make up for some of that neglect, due in part to the COVID pandemic. We proposed this roundtable discussion to the Western Society for French History for its fall meeting in San Francisco in November 2024. The session was a hybrid of short presentations on different aspects of these important works, followed by a Q & A that included their author, who joined us for the occasion, and members of the audience.

The "woman question," according to Karen Offen, "encompasses the arguments for and against change in women's position relative to that of men" and appears in "the entire spectrum of political discourse."[1] Participants in the roundtable addressed a range of issues, particular and general. How has Offen enlarged historians' understanding of debates on women's roles in French culture, the family, and work, and the interrelatedness of such debates? Why were biomedical issues and educational issues also political issues? What was distinctive about the French debate on the woman question, as compared to that in other countries, and what was distinctive

[1] Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 13.

about French feminism? What are the implications of Offen's work for the traditional general narrative of French history?

On a personal note, I first met Karen at a Berkshire conference on women's history in the 1970s, after which she sent me a very early version of *The Woman Question*, then perhaps 100 pages in length. Since then, we've kept up contact, and I have found her work invaluable as a resource for contextualizing my own work on girls' education and women's careers in public administration and, most recently, in normal schools.

-LINDA L. CLARK

The Origins of the Woman Question in France

Karen Offen's *The Woman Question in France, 1400*-1870, illustrates how debates over the woman question were persistent and pervasive in France across the centuries.[1] While such debates were not unique to France, Offen argues that they held particular influence in France in ways that distinguished it from the rest of Europe.[2] Her book highlights the unique longevity, pervasiveness, scope, and influence of these debates. As an early modernist, I found myself drawn to questions about the origins of these debates while reading Offen's work.

A notable feature of the French debates on the woman question was their remarkable longevity and consistency. Offen emphasizes this durability in her introduction: "For six centuries, the woman question has occupied a central position in the political debates of the French state and its educated elite."[3] She later adds, "Indeed, few nations, east or west, can boast of such long-term visibility of women and disputes about gender."[4] Also, "the debate on the woman question surfaced in recorded form in virtually every era of French history since late medieval times."[5]

In addition to this persistence, Offen identifies five features of the woman question debate in France that made it distinct.[6] The first of these elements was the "extraordinary sociopolitical significance, or 'influence,' overtly attributed to women by both men and other women." This emphasis on women's social power was paired with a second element: the formal and repeated exclusion of women from political

[1] Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[2] Offen, *The Woman Question,* 1-2, n.2.

[3] Offen, *The Woman Question,* 2.

[4] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 3.

[5] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 5.

[6] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 9.

authority by men, beginning in the late 16th century.[7] These two elements created a paradox in France: while women were often celebrated for their social influence, they were consistently denied formal political power.

A third element identified by Offen is the "strategic political importance accorded to biomedical thinking in French society."[8] By "strategic," Offen refers to the persistence of misogynistic beliefs about women's nature, which remained widely accepted as "truth" even as knowledge institutions transitioned from relying on the authority of ancient authors to embracing the empirically-based claims of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment.[9] The fourth element is the "political and ideological emphasis on educated motherhood."[10] The last element is the distinctive nature of French republican national identity, which combined a Roman tradition of associating masculinity and the republic with the supposedly "universal" ideals of the French Revolution. This national identity was marked by a "fierce anticlericalism" and fueled by what appears to be a deep-seated cultural anxiety about France being perceived as "feminine"—a fear that intensified after Germany emphasized France's "femininity" following its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.[11]

Offen's first volume focuses on the debates and discourses surrounding these five elements. In doing so, her analysis provides insights into what scholars and intellectuals identified as the origins of these debates. For instance, when discussing the debates surrounding women's "extraordinary sociopolitical significance" in France, Offen references Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778), claim that women's power lay in "men's inability to resist women's seductiveness, their power of attraction."[12] She also cites Jules Michelet (1798-1874), who highlighted the role of kinship networks and the relatively advanced age at marriage as sources of women's empowerment. To reduce these sources of empowerment, Michelet advised young men to "choose much younger women with no families of their own" to be their wives.[13] Additionally, Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) and Jules de Goncourt (1830-1870) attributed women's power to their "emotional intelligence," while Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855) argued that women's influence over men stemmed from their persistence, perseverance, and cunning.[14] While these were modern perspectives, Offen

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[7] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 9.

[8] Offen, *The Woman Question,* 9.

[9] Offen, *The Woman Question,* 9. See also, Joan DeJean, *Ancients against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (University of Chicago Press, 1997); Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*(University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[10] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 9.

[11] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 9-10.

[12] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 31.

[13] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 32.

[14] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 34.

notes that these themes of women's beauty, sexual allure, virtue, and ruse echoed the criticisms voiced in earlier centuries.

One theme that stood out to me while reading Offen's book was women's power and authority in households. Michelet alluded to this power when advising men to marry younger women. Mary Hartman's work, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (2004), confirms that women in Western Europe married at age 26 on average—remarkably older than women in other parts of the world.[15] Hartman argues that women's delayed age of marriage gave them distinct advantages in Western Europe. By marrying later with greater maturity, experience, and financial resources, European women gained more power and influence in domestic roles and household decision-making. This advanced age at marriage strengthened women's power within the home and placed Europe on a unique developmental path, particularly regarding early capitalism and industrialization.[16]

Michelet's advice to marry women "with no family" took aim at another source of female autonomy: kinship ties.[17] Traditionally, kinship ties were reinforced by the dowries women brought into their marriages. Dowries were marriages endowments--properties set aside (they could not be sold or mortgaged) to support the marriage and intended to pass intact to the couple's children. If a husband mismanaged the dowry, a wife could take him to court. More frequently, if he mismanaged the household in ways that compromised the stability promised by the dowry (such as through abuse or infidelity), a woman could call on her male kin to intervene, as they had a vested interest in her marriage.[18]

This dowry system had deep ties to France's history as a land repeatedly subjected to conquest by Romans and Germanic tribes. While conquerors often took concubines temporarily, those intending to establish long-term colonies through alliances with local elites married local women who provided dowries to create stable bonds. This shift from concubinage to marriage through dowries established a property stake for both husband and wife, securing colonial governors' ties to the local community and ensuring a stable alliance. The laws governing these family arrangements varied by region, blending elements of ancient Germanic codes—such as the Frankish and Burgundian Codes—with Roman legal principles. Though rooted in France's ancient history, the dowry principles were revived in the seventeenth-century when France became a colonial power in New France. Jesuit missionaries

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[15] Mary S. Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[16] Hartman, *The Household*, 3.

[17] Offen, *The Woman Question,* 177.

[18] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 52.

promoted dowries to encourage intermarriage and assimilation between French settlers and Native American women and to curb concubinage. [19]

France's legacy as a conquered territory, its customary codes, and the legal rights of women had been closely intertwined for centuries. As Sara Melzer highlights in her book, *Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern French Culture*, France struggled with its national identity because at the same time that it was emerging as a centralized state and colonial power, it was contending with a complex legacy of laws and customs from when it had been conquered and colonized by others.[20] If the woman question in France was particularly long and pervasive, it appears to be due, in part, to France's long struggle to assert itself as a conquering power, not a conquered one.

While part of this struggle played out on the battlefields of Europe and on global maritime trade routes, the other part took place under the pens of jurists. One available strategy for jurists was to pick and choose between the various codes according to need and circumstances. A notable example was the invention of the Salic Law tradition by Jean de Montreuil in 1408.[21] Following the death of King Charles IV in 1328, Montreuil adapted a provision from the ancient Salian Franks to bar women from inheriting the French crown, diverting it from Charles's grandson, the King of England via his daughter over to his nephew through his brother.

Another strategy among France's legal intellectuals was to synthesize and "rationalize" France's laws according to common principles. Originally a response to a specific political need for keeping the French crown away from England, the exclusionary interpretation of the Salic Law gradually became entrenched as a legal principle. In this case, intellectuals justified removing women's legal rights under the Salic Law by pointing to how they could inadvertently transfer the French crown to a foreign power. Another victory in the struggle to unify French civil law was the implementation of the Napoleonic Code in 1804. Offen describes the Napoleonic Code, which instituted laws from the Roman tradition at the expense of the Germanic codes, as "the capstone to a process of transformative erosion in Medieval Women's legal status...".[22] Among other things, this Code abolished the dowry system as part of its larger agenda to subject women's property and their legal rights to the authority of men.

Offen's study of the woman question in France provides valuable insights into the origins of these longstanding and complex debates. While this discussion of women's age at marriage, their kinship ties, and France's legal codes represent a small

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[19] Sara E. Melzer, *Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern French Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 106.

[20] Melzer, *Colonizer or Colonized, 34.*

[21] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 259.

[22] Offen, *The Woman Question*, 54.

fraction of the topics covered in Offen's work, it highlights how these debates had deep roots in France's past, and at how France's anxiety over women was connected to its identity both as a conqueror, as it was under Napoleon in 1804, and as a land vulnerable to foreign invasion, as it was in the face of Germany in 1870-71.

In conclusion, Karen Offen's exploration of the woman question in France reveals how deeply interwoven debates about women's roles and rights have been with the evolution of French society and national identity. The woman question was—and continues to be—a powerful lens through which to examine broader issues of power, identity, and social change in France.

-DANIELLA KOSTROUN

Pronatalism and Women in the Third Republic: Empowerment or Oppression?

My discussion concerns two of five main themes that thread through Karen Offen's outstanding work in *Debating the Woman Question*:[1] the issue of population size and the biomedical understanding of sex differences, especially with respect to the female body. Debates about both issues intersected to shape concepts of motherhood. I am honored to be able to discuss them in the context of Offen's life-long work, especially because her pathbreaking 1984 article in the *American Historical Review*, "Depopulation, Nationalism and Feminism," was a major inspiration and framework for my own work.[2]

To restate Karen's broader argument: while excluded from the body politic over hundreds of years, French women exercised extraordinary power and influence. A primary reason for excluding women from as far back as the Greek polis was their childbearing capacity. By the early twentieth century, French women, including feminists, turned that reasoning on its head to give them a public role precisely *because* of their capacities as mothers. Karen portrays their success as wisely strategic and revolutionary. I will focus here primarily on developments from the 1890s onward, but shall briefly summarize populationist and earlier biomedical concerns noted by Offen.

Population size had long been a concern in the Old Regime, and the state took measures to intervene in family formation: The Edict on Marriage in 1666 declared fatherhood an obligation, prohibited infanticide, and discouraged abortion or any efforts to prevent conception. The most important biomedical development was the

[1] Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1700* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); *Debating the Woman Question in France, 1870-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[2] Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 648-76.

emerging science of gynecology, which by the eighteenth century, led physicians to focus their knowledge of women's health almost exclusively on reproductive functions. Their treatises influenced Enlightenment philosophes, who enshrined sex differences in "Natural Law;" the infamous French Civil Code of 1804 codified women's legal inferiority.

The French birthrate had begun to decline noticeably by the end of the eighteenth century and continued to drop precipitously through the nineteenth century, a trend unique to France. By the 1890s, France faced a menacing demographic reality as it registered more deaths than births, and an absolute decline in population size. Pronatalists and some doctors blamed men for choosing to have few or no children. The Academy of Medicine's investigation pointed to abortion, stillbirths, wet-nursing, and malnutrition as causes of high infant death rates. What were women doing instead of caring for their children? The medical profession targeted women's work and advanced education, reflecting its understanding that such activities detracted from women's biologically determined function.

Feminists offered their own solutions to the population crisis: women would be able to bear healthier children and better care for them, and the need for abortion and infanticide would disappear, if their economic, legal, and social status were improved. Neo-Malthusianists offered a solution opposite to that of the pronatalists: in their view low wages, poverty, and war resulted from overpopulation. Birth control would raise the standard of living and prevent both abortion and infanticide. Many feminists initially shunned the pronatalists because their focus on fertility and infants ignored the plight of women. Women, including most feminists, also rejected birth control as a solution, indicating that they did not view reproductive control over their own bodies as a way to raise women's status. As Offen points out, pronatalist rhetoric had so much cultural influence that mainstream feminists eventually embraced motherhood as a strategy to improve women's legal, civil, and social standing, thereby manifesting their implicit acceptance of the notion that women are biologically meant to be mothers.

Offen notes a few exceptions to this maternally oriented feminist stance in the debate on women. In her early novels up to 1905, Marcelle Tinayre boldly questioned the existence of an innate maternal instinct. Marie Huot and Nelly Roussel each strongly advocated birth control, and the former also suggested that women, married or otherwise, practice abstinence, as did the vociferous Aria Ly. Madeleine Pelletier considered physiological differences between men and women to be insignificant and argued that motherhood offered no social status to women; the right to choose maternity and to have the free disposition of one's body would give women the same legal status as men. These women and their sympathizers had in common the separation of female identity from motherhood, and sexuality from reproduction. But their followers were relatively few, and their influence can be gauged in the opposition they incurred rather than in any impact they had on women's status. Their thinking

was marginalized and, for the most part, so were their voices either through self-silencing or official censorship.

To Offen's discussion I would add my own thoughts about how these exceptional women were silenced. By 1910, Tinayre appeared to reverse her views about the maternal instinct when she declared "woman is made, above all, for love, marriage, maternity, the education of children, the government of the household . . ."[3] What caused this sudden turnabout? Was it perhaps the growing international tensions and patriotism that permeated the culture, and further fueled pronatalist sentiment? Tinayre's reversal does suggest she fell under the influence of prevailing biomedical and populationist views.

Nelly Roussel, feminist and advocate of birth control, offers another example of dissembling rhetoric, self-silencing, and censorship. Like Pelletier, she advocated freedom of motherhood: the right of a woman to choose how many children she would have. But she measured her words carefully. Like the feminists who appropriated pronatalist language to their own ends, she understood the political importance of motherhood: she usually refrained from saying women had the right to freedom *from* motherhood, even though she believed strongly that they should be able to choose to be childless. Publicity for her speaking tours advertised her "happiness" as a mother with photos of herself flanked by her children and references to her family-centered home life. In fact, Roussel had a problematic relationship with her son from the day he was born, both her children lived with relatives, and she would spend months at a time without seeing them. The lie of her own happy motherhood would make her campaign for women's right to birth control more acceptable to her audiences.[4]

World War I further deepened the French population crisis through massive losses of young men and ever-lower birth rates. Advocates of birth control were censored and even imprisoned. In 1917, while the Academy of Medicine was seriously investigating contraception and abortion as causes for low birth rates, the Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes joined the pronatalists to campaign for more births. As Offen points out, this alliance is a stunning outcome, given the previous hostility between the two movements. Feminist cooperation did not end there. In 1920, the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises approved of articles the National Assembly passed into law that prohibited all advertising, advocacy, sale, or distribution of any materials relating to contraception or abortion, with stiff penalties for its violation. This law technically eliminated the ability for women to avoid pregnancy except through abstinence, the traditional method of withdrawal, or condoms, all of which were methods dependent on male behavior.

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[3] Offen, *Debating the Woman Question*, 383.

[4] Elinor Accampo, *Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), especially chapter 3.

Offen's work rightfully celebrates feminists' embrace of motherhood and their identities as mothers for its shrewdness and wisdom to exert power, influence, and authority even as women continued to be denied full citizenship. Her evidence leaves no doubt that these feminists helped achieve real benefits and protections for mothers and their babies. It is also understandable that most women were not ready, at least publicly, to support reproductive rights. But what concerns me is how effectively the more marginal feminist voices—those voicing reproductive rights—were silenced, first through the weight of pronatalist cultural influence, then through law.

Offen's volumes could not be more relevant for our present world. France has ironically become the poster child for making abortion a constitutional right. What changed in the French cultural configuration to make this possible? How fragile are the outcomes of debates in any given cultural configuration when politics dramatically change? In November 2024, Americans awoke to the stunning realization of just how fundamentally the political culture—including gender politics—had changed in the United States. Pronatalism is a growing global phenomenon. We now have a pronatalist Vice President who famously mocked and condemned "childless cat ladies" in terms similar to those of Third Republic pronatalists. In choosing JD Vance, Trump brought declining birthrates to the forefront. Elon Musk, who played an unexpectedly large role in the first several months of the Trump administration, also advocates large families and has become a hero among right-wing pronatalist world leaders, including Vladimir Putin who has made it a crime in Russia to advocate childlessness. This new pronatalist movement is underway both at the grassroots level and among the nation's most prominent political and corporate leaders. Whose voices are going to be silenced, and what can we learn from Offen's important work on the woman question and women's enduring influence that will help us navigate the uncertain times ahead?

-ELINOR ACCAMPO

Thematic Reflections on the Issues of Women and Work in Karen Offen's Woman Question Books

Readers of Karen Offen's magisterial woman question books discover that over six centuries in France, there was a dense history of debates on the question of women's socio-political condition and the struggle for equality between the sexes. These debates challenged masculine domination on all fronts, which in turn led to efforts to *subdue* such challenges. The advancing of egalitarian claims was met with frequent backlash, yes, but there were also moments when the feminist arguments were persuasive and created new "converts." When my undergraduate students read some of Karen's shorter publications, they come away impressed by the relevance of the older feminist

claims, and they recognize the similarity between their own experiences and those faced by previous generations. Most salient among these issues are the tensions around the gender division of labor in the household as well as gender discrimination in the work world. My older students already know the burden of the double day, of doing unpaid labor after their full day working for a paycheck, and what inequality can mean for the duration of a happy marriage. My traditional-age undergraduates are familiar with anti-feminist backlashes, including the policing of women's sexuality and the unequal burden of its unintended consequences. Most people also now recognize the divisiveness of cultural debates on gender norms. Above all, my students remain astonished by the modernity of the logical core of feminism—whether they are reading Condorcet's plea for equal citizenship, Olympe de Gouges' egalitarian social contract for marriage, or Flora Tristan's vision for workers' utopias.[1]

Reflecting on issues of women, paid work, and the professions is my task in this forum. In this regard, I want to offer three ways in which Karen's woman question books are especially insightful for thinking deeply about these topics in no small part because her volumes are encyclopedic and should be essential reading by all historians of early modern and modern France.

First, we learn that at the heart of the historical debates about women's paid work is a controversy over the societal value of women's dependence on men and the potential consequences of reorganizing institutions around the needs of *two* autonomous individuals. Especially striking in the first of the woman question volumes (1400-1870) is the vehemence of the arguments by lawyers and liberal economists against women's paid work during early industrialization. They claimed that French civil society not only benefited from but also required women's *dependence* for societal stability. Yet the prevention of women's free participation in the economy reduced resources for average families, stunted women's expertise, and limited their access to advanced knowledge. Simultaneously, the obligation that women engage in *unpaid* labor, especially as wives and mothers, may have played a *determinant* role in the rise of capitalism itself.[2] The responsibility for the unpaid work of the household remained a feminine responsibility, even as the economic rewards of women's paid labor increased. Thus, any historian interested in the history of France should pay attention to the campaign for women's rights because of its practical implications as well as its role as "a signifier of modernity based on a vision of the individual as autonomous."[3]

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[1] Condorcet, "On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship" July 1790; Olympe de Gouges, "The Declaration of the Rights of Woman" September 1791; Flora Tristan, *L'Union Ouvrière* (Prévot and Rouanet, 1843).

[2] Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400–1870* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 183.

[3] Offen, *The Woman Question in France,* 183.

In this roundtable, Jean Pedersen addresses the theme of feminism at greater length but suffice it for me to say that nineteenth century feminists claimed fundamental individual rights to work. In 1850, Pauline Roland argued that "woman is a citizen by right, if not in fact," and is "entitled to work" like men, to secure her own independence.[4] In the next generation, Aline Valette and Eugénie Potonie-Pierre campaigned for an "economic right to life" for women.[5] Their program included a minimum wage; equal pay for equal work; and equal access to professions, careers, vocations, public services, and administrative functions.[6] Antifeminists were saddled with the difficult task of suppressing women's right to work in well-paying jobs in order to defend the continuity of the male bread winner model and the ideology of domesticity in France.[7]

My second point is that the argument for women's economic enfranchisement was a springboard for many feminists who supported more comprehensive changes that were intended to dismantle male dominance in French society. Karen writes that it became "abundantly clear that what most feminists thought family should and could be, or marriage could be, was not in accord with the French family as defined either by the Civil Code or the Catholic Church. It was clear, too, that the rights and plights of children and their mothers were importantly on their minds."[8] Furthermore, although socialism and feminism are often misconstrued as always in conflict, Karen, like Marilyn Boxer, shows us that this was not always the case.[9] Maria Bonnevial, a socialist feminist, prioritized problems of women's employment at the women's rights congress of 1900 as she questioned the "selfishness" of employers under the capitalist regime, criticized convent labor, and demanded: "Who gave men the right to say to us 'The domain of your activity extends only to here; mine encompasses everything'?"[10] Karen describes the daylight that separated the socialists and republican feminists when she wrote: "In contrast to their more radical socialist contemporaries, they [republican feminists] were less apt to engage in critiques of private property, or to prioritize class issues over sex issues…. For most republicans…the limits of change were located precisely…where private property itself seemed threatened."[11] Instead of attacking capitalism, republican feminists advocated and engaged in projects to improve

[4] Pauline Roland quoted in Offen, *The Woman Question in France,* 208.

[5] The French phrase: *le droit à la vie économique*.

[6] They also claimed a right to participate in decision-making on the civic and governmental levels.

[7] Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 213.

[8] Offen, *Debating the Woman Question,* 173-174

[9] Marilyn J. Boxer, "Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept 'Bourgeois Feminism,'" *American Historical Review*, 112, no. 1 (February 2007): 131–158.

[10] Offen, *Debating the Woman Question,* 290.

[11] Offen, *Debating the Woman Question,* 26

women's chances for advancement such as improving work conditions, establishing publicly-financed maternity leave policies, and establishing a role for government in addressing competition in the workforce.[12] Their advocacy also affected debates on protective labor legislation based on sexual difference, solidarism, and other interventions into the organization of labor and the family.

We should also recall that competition between the sexes at work and in the professions was possible only *after* the expansion of women's access to education. The Ferry reforms of the 1880s making primary schooling mandatory for boys and girls, and in public schools, free and secular, catalyzed a slow-moving societal revolution. Public schools introduced girls to a concept of republican nationalism built on individual civic participation within a greater collective. Women learned to identify with the priorities of the nation-state and their productive place with in it, a shift in the conception of the self with profound consequences. Civic and public contributions became part of the individual consciousness of the modern citizen. While textbooks offered different lessons to students according to their gender, as we know from Linda Clark's research, educational institutions and their faculty contributed (unwittingly or no) to these transformations.[13] Educated women's confrontations with employment discrimination and other inequalities then sometimes prompted them to join the ranks of the women's rights movement.

My third point is that Karen has provided insights into why French republican "male feminists" became supportive of women's emancipation. She writes: "Male feminism was, in fact, a 'genre' that developed substantially during the Third Republic, encompassing significant political and intellectual figures" and "the growth of male feminism under the Third Republic in particular provides an important and overlooked counterpoint to the claims made in support of the fundamental misogyny of 'the republic'."[14] Male feminism found expression in the French press notably with the campaign to support women's access to the professions and reforms in the civil code. Married women's inferiority seemed increasingly incompatible with the modern republic. By the 1890s, feminists became "determined to bring the institutions and laws of the Third Republic into harmony with its stated principles." This meant forging a single moral standard, abolishing state-regulated prostitution, and letting women be individuals, not "a satellite that revolves around man but [as] a 'free star'."[15] Women who worked as journalists, novelists, "literary amazons," scientists, doctors, lawyers,

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[12] Offen, *Debating the Woman Question,* 97.

[13] Linda L. Clark, *Women and the Politics of Education in Third Republic France* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

[14] Karen Offen, "Is the 'Woman Question' Really the 'Man Problem'?" in Christopher Forth and Elinor Accampo, eds., *Confronting Modernity in Fin-De-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), qt. 47-48.

[15] "*L'astre libre*" is Jules Bois's term.

clerks in public administration, or teachers were often, in practice, akin to "free agents," accomplishing out-of-the ordinary things, and sometimes "talking back to power." Karen's work reminds us to look for the diversity in the arguments *and* in the identity of the authors of feminist texts, as well as the interplay of their ideas in the transformation of modern France.

Finally, Karen's depth of research reveals the extraordinary variety and influence of intellectual contributions made in the Francophone world to the study of women and gender relations over the *longue durée*. There are so many texts she cites that are worthy of closer analysis and integration in our research narratives, no matter our subfield.[16] *Féminisme* was not an import to France, as Maria Vérone rightly declared on the radio in 1933, and as Karen's work thoroughly documents.[17] Spanning over 900 pages, Karen's volumes illustrate the influence of French intellectual history globally.

Broadly speaking, Karen's work teaches us that "Few other countries (nation-states) in the world can claim a debate on the woman question as extensive or enduring as that of France."[18] These debates began in the early 1400s with Christine de Pizan and continue today. Offen argues that "women in France have always had influence and power but for centuries they were deliberately excluded from wielding public authority."[19] Exercising authority, especially in political life, is highly desirable for reshaping society around republican principles, such as by reducing the conflict between the basic needs of children within the family and the economic necessity for mothers to work. In contemporary France, Karen notes, "women have the right to work and to obtain equal pay for equal work—and that married women can take employment, open bank accounts, and transact business of various kinds without the written permission of their husbands….It took an enormous effort to arrive at this point."[20] The French now recognize the rights, duties, and needs of both men and women but it was not always so.

The history of masculine privilege and the counterarguments in favor of women's rights remain vividly relevant today. As such, we have an opportunity to teach our students about these intellectual contests on the woman question, which is

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[16] The French once taught the Americans how to analyze "big data," such as when Madame Pégard sent graphic panels of statistical analysis of French women's economic participation for the 1893 Columbian World's Exposition in Chicago. Marie-Joséphine Pégard, *La Statistique générale de la femme Française* (1893). See Hélène Périvier and Rebecca Rogers, "Women and the Language of Statistics in Late-Nineteenth-Century France," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 37, no. 3, (2019): 1-26.

[17] "Maître Maria Vérone parle du féminisme," audio recording 1933, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Audiovisuel, NC Polydor 522473. A digital version of the recording can now be accessed online via Gallica, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k10818985.

[18] Offen, *Debating*, 621.

[19] Offen, *Debating*, 624.

[20] Offen, *Debating*, 627.

interwoven in all history. There is no better place to start than with the texts authored by Karen Offen whose work provides us with encouragement to ask challenging questions, a map to sleuth out answers, and a framework for organizing the material as a form of debate.

-SARA L. KIMBLE

Focusing on Feminism

Thinking about Karen Offen's work on the woman question as it relates to French feminism, I would like to begin by reviewing some of her most important earlier contributions to the history of this exceptionally important and engaging topic.

Her pioneering 1988 *SIGNS* article, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," still stands as a landmark in the field.[1] Taking issue with those scholars who had defined feminism solely in terms of women's fight for sexual equality and individual autonomy in the name of their potential similarities with men, Karen used this article to stress the importance of expanding our definitions of feminism to include women's fight for a broad array of additional women's rights in the name of their important differences from men. Pushing back against scholars of the Anglo-American tradition, who had focused primarily on the importance of what she called "individualist" feminism, she highlighted the potentially even greater historical importance of an alternative French tradition that she called "relational feminism." She closed her article with the following capacious definition of who counts as a feminist:

> I would consider as feminists any persons, female or male, whose ideas and actions (insofar as they can be documented) show them to meet three criteria: (1) they recognize the validity of women's own interpretations of their lived experience and needs and acknowledge the values women claim publicly as their own (as distinct from an aesthetic ideal of womanhood invented by men) in assessing their status in society relative to men; (2) they exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at, or even anger over institutionalized injustice (or inequity)

I thank Linda Clark for organizing the roundtable that occasioned the first version of this essay, chairing the conversation at the Western Society for French History, and editing our essays for their subsequent submission to the *Journal of the Western Society for French History*. I also thank Roxanne Panchasi for shepherding our essays through the entire editorial process at the *JWSFH* from beginning to end.

[1] Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (1988): 119-157, https://doi.org/10.1086/494494.

> toward women as a group by men as a group in a given society; and (3) they advocate the elimination of that injustice by challenging through efforts to alter prevailing ideas and/or social institutions and practices, the coercive power, force, or authority that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture.[2]

Karen was the first to discover and teach us all that the words "feminist" and "feminism" were themselves French inventions that started out as the words "féministe" and "féminisme," words that were initially used by the iconic French suffragist Hubertine Auclert starting in 1882 and subsequently popularized by the lesser-known French socialist feminist Eugénie Potonié-Pierre starting in 1891.[3] Auclert followed up her new usage of the term "féministe" in her suffrage journal, *La Citoyenne*, by making a dramatically gendered contrast between an undesirable "minotaur state" and a desirable "motherly state" when she put forward her "women's electoral program" in Paris in 1885.[4] Potonié-Pierre created a new Fédération française des sociétés féministes in 1892 and reported the increasingly frequent usage of the term "féminisme" when she spoke at the meetings of the International Congress for Women's Work and Women's Aspirations in Berlin in 1896.[5]

Karen's *European Feminisms: A Political History*, which appeared both in English in 2000 and in a French translation with an expanded bibliography in 2012, explored the complicated patterns of cross-cutting French and other European feminisms over the entire period from 1700 to 1950.[6] Her two new volumes on the related topic of the woman question, *The Woman Question in France* and *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*, return to her earlier focus on French history and establish a

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[2] Offen, "Defining Feminism," 152.

[3] See Karen Offen, "Sur l'origine des mots 'féminisme' et 'féministe'," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 34, no. 3 (1987): 492-496, https://doi.org/10.3406/rhmc.1987.1421; and Karen Offen, "On the French Origin of the Words 'Feminism' and 'Feminist'," *Feminist Issues* 8, no. 2 (1988): 45-51, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685596. For the most recent version of Karen's work on the history of these two key words and their meanings, see Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 157-181, 339-382.

[4] Offen, "Defining Feminism," 126; Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*, 49. On the significance of Auclert's positive usage relative to Alexandre Dumas *fils*'s earlier pejorative usage, see Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*, 157-160.

[5] Offen, "Defining Feminism," 126-127; Offen, "On the French Origin of the Words 'Feminism' and 'Feminist'," 47-48; Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*, 160-162, 170.

[6] Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford University Press, 2000); Karen Offen, *Les féminismes en Europe, 1700-1950*, trans. Geneviève Knibiehler (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012).

history of French feminism that goes all the way back to Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* in 1405 and reaches its fullest elaboration in the first fifty years of the French Third Republic from 1870 to 1920.[7] *European Feminisms* established the history of feminism as a political history, and Karen's two new volumes on the woman question in France go far to establish the history of feminism as an intellectual and cultural history as well. Her sources include not only legal treatises and parliamentary debates, but also novels, plays, pamphlets, and press coverage.

By approaching both the depth and the breadth of French debates over the woman question in this way, Karen's work gives us an unparalleled sense of both the depth and the breadth of French feminism itself. Reaching as far back as 1400, it has included women's demands for inclusion in monarchies, republics, and empires alike. Coming into its own in the organized women's movement of the French Third Republic, it has encompassed debates over every possible dimension of men's and women's lives: education, inheritance, marriage, motherhood, labor conditions, professional possibilities, the presence or absence of social welfare supports, and the very nature of citizenship itself.

Linda Clark, who organized this roundtable, asked us to speak to the question of how Karen's findings could affect our general understanding of French history. I would say that one of the chief things I always take away from Karen's work myself is the clear assertion that women have always been a part of history. Speaking to French history more specifically, I would say that Karen's work also proves once and for all that there have always been some women who were ready and willing to write and fight in support of expanded opportunities for all women. Christine de Pizan's vision of a city of ladies united under the queen of heaven in 1405 is very different from Olympe de Gouges's Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizen in 1789, and Jeanne Deroin's campaign for public office under the Second Republic is very different from Nelly Roussel's campaign for women's reproductive rights under the Third Republic – but all of these women shared a consciousness of women as women, all of these women fought for improvements in women's condition, and by Karen's own definition I would say that all of them were feminists. This means that we can tell a history of French feminism that goes all the way back to the fifteenth century, and this has the potential to challenge many of our understandings about the distinctions between those separate periods of history that we so often name as the medieval, the Renaissance, the early modern, and the modern.

It is hard for me to imagine a history of French feminism that is more comprehensive than the one that Karen has already laid out for us here, especially for the first fifty years of the French Third Republic that are her special strength, but I also know that some of the best work is work that encourages and inspires even more work.

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[7] Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic*.

Here, then, are a few places where I hope that scholars will build on Karen's solid foundation to teach us even more about the history of feminisms past and present:

1. I would like to learn more about cooperation and conflict between feminist activists on different sides of the imperial divide that separates national citizens from colonial subjects. What happens if we take an intersectional approach to gender here?
2. I would like to see an extensive comparison and contrast between the period after World War I and the period after World War II. What accounts for the denial of French women's vote in the first case and the extension or achievement of French women's vote in the second case?
3. I would like to hear more about how French feminists moved from a focus on pronatalist politics to a focus on reproductive rights. How did demands for abortion and birth control move from the feminist margin of the women's rights movement in the 1890s to the feminist center of the women' liberation movement in the 1960s?
4. I would like to hear more about comparisons between France and other countries. In a world where the United States and many other countries have started restricting women's reproductive rights, how has France just successfully expanded the constitution of the French Fifth Republic to include women's reproductive liberty?

No two volumes could ever answer all these questions, but we can all be grateful to Karen for all the work she has done to make it easier to ask them.

-JEAN ELISABETH PEDERSEN

Response from the Author

I feel so deeply honored to have had my work discussed by these dear colleagues. My thanks go to Linda Clark for her initiative in organizing the original roundtable and to the four participants who journeyed to San Francisco to present their remarks in November 2024.

Writing this book—these two volumes on the woman question debates in France—took me some forty years, at the end of which I was sure I could ascertain what was particularly French about them. I now claim that these debates began earlier in France than in any other country in the world. There is a significant difference between remarks about women by learned men, of which there were plenty (mostly nasty) throughout history, and the beginning of actual debates in print. The latter only began around 1400 (still then in the form of illuminated manuscripts), but with the advent of printing took

off in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and exploded during the first fifty years of the Third Republic. These 500-plus years witnessed an extraordinary development in what we now call the "sexual politics of knowledge": once women began to read and write and analyze the society they lived in, some began to call for fundamental changes in the status quo governing the relations of women and men in any given society—to challenge masculine domination in matters religious and secular, legal, economic, educational, social, political, cultural, intellectual and intimate. Along the way they also recruited some thinking men who agreed that women, especially wives and mothers, faced serious problems. Ultimately this critique acquired the label "*féminisme*."[1]

When I began researching this topic in 1971, I was a newly minted Ph.D., married and expecting our first child (who is now 54 years old). I was determined to explore a new topic at that point; after nine years of graduate school, I knew very little about French women (except for Madame de Staël) and nothing about these debates in French history, though I had some suspicions about their existence. When I finally finished and submitted the book manuscript in 2016, both our daughters were already married and mothers themselves; my dear, supportive husband was quite ill by then—but he was able to hold the two volumes in his hands (and read my heartfelt dedication to him in volume one) before he died in August 2018. In the years in between, there were many adventures, especially in locating the sources, the earliest ones in manuscripts that were subsequently published and the later ones in publications of every sort from newspapers and pamphlets to novels, plays, medical treatises, law books, and government documents. It bears pointing out that these books are based on public debate, printed materials, not on private archival sources such as letters or diaries (though some of the printed materials were found in archives). The more I searched, the more I found, to the point of being quite overwhelmed at the volume of text available in the public sphere. Not only did I scour libraries (big and small) and archives in France, but I also consulted libraries and archives in Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, and the Netherlands. I went through a period of producing documentary books, writing comparative history, including global history of feminisms before circling back around and concentrating on France.[2] I found male feminists as well as female feminists, whose revelations laid bare the foundations in France of what Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), has called the "dominator model" of social organization. I found evidence that even Simone de Beauvoir had only cursory knowledge of this vast body of documents when she wrote so confidently in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) that "women have no history." And, of course, I found abundant evidence of the backlash against even the first tiny steps French women took toward their emancipation.

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[1] Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 119-157.

[2] Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford University Press, 2000), and *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789-1945*, ed. Karen Offen (Routledge, 2010).

The result of this prodigious excavation was a manuscript of some 1100 pages. I submitted it to Cambridge University Press (CUP) through my friend Lewis Bateman, who was about to retire; Michael Watson, the history editor for CUP took it on when Lewis left. Now here's a story that few of you know: the manuscript went out to multiple readers, who did an extremely conscientious job of reading and critiquing it—and came to the conclusion that my manuscript needed to be cut by at least thirty percent. When Michael and I discussed this on a transatlantic phone call, I dug in my heels. I said "I'm not cutting. This is my magnum opus, my life's work." I added, "Do you have any suggestions?" I was prepared for war, or rejection. Michael responded: "How about two volumes? Is there a good break point?" I was delighted! Yes, there was an obvious breakpoint with the advent of the Third Republic. So, we have today two volumes, the shorter one covering 480 years, and the longer one covering only fifty years, in depth, given there was so much more public debate. Note to younger historians: only well-established scholars can get away with this maneuver; don't try this if you are still attempting to publish your first book.

The irony here is that I then had to add a conclusion to the first volume and an introduction to the second volume, which effectively added about thirty additional pages to the manuscript!!! The earlier chapters were actually written later than the first versions of the Third Republic chapters; it had become obvious halfway into the book that none of these debates on the woman question had begun with the Third Republic, or even with the French Revolution. They began with the Roman de la Rose and Christine de Pizan's rebuttals. The major arguments (outlined in this roundtable by Daniella Kostroun) about power and influence vs. authority, the biomedical fixation, the importance of the women's employment issue, and national population anxieties are elaborated in the shorter volume and carried over into the longer one.

The tributes from the contributors to this roundtable are so positive, so intelligent—thank you so much Linda, Daniella, Elinor, Sara, and Jean for your thoughtfulness and your caring words. As you know (certainly from the footnotes), my work stands on the shoulders of many sister and brother scholars, whose own earlier contributions—and encouragement—have helped me to complete these two volumes. You rank high among them. And thank you to the audience who attended the original roundtable in San Francisco for their insights and tributes.

What I would hope is that further/future attention will be paid to this work in "gendering" French history as a contribution to what I (and others) call the "sexual politics of knowledge," particularly as concerns the historiography of France itself and will influence how we convey it to future generations. How does such a focus change how we think about France as a society, as a nation-state, as a cultural entity of long standing? How does the debate format interrupt the prominently male-centered linear narratives that we encountered in undergraduate classes and in graduate school to the point where we grew accustomed to them? How, and in what ways, can the gendering of history (by looking specifically at the varying, often conflicting views, on the optimal relations of the

sexes as a central fulcrum in the evolution of a given society, and by bringing women's voices and opinions in, help us to understand how histories (local, regional, national, even continental, global, and comparative) can and indeed *must* be written differently when they are aligned with foundational societal issues, and women's as well as men's voices and activities are taken into account. It helps, of course, in the French case, that the invention of printing and the expansion of literacy came early in Europe; these developments were necessarily fundamental to the flowering of these debates over the relations of the two sexes (and for these five centuries under study, it has to be said that there were only two sexes under consideration). In closing I want to share with you the good news that the French translation of my two volumes is nearly completed. Hopefully these will be published within the next year or so.

-KAREN OFFEN

Linda L. Clark is Professor of History emerita, Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Her publications include *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne* (SUNY Press, 1984), *The Rise of Professional Women in France: Gender and Public Administration* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Women and Achievement in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and *Women and the Politics of Education in Third Republic France* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

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Elinor Accampo is Professor Emerita of History at the University of Southern California. She is author of *Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) and *Industrialization, Family and Class Relations: Saint Chamond, 1815-1914* (University of California Press, 1989). She also co-authored (with Rachel G. Fuchs and Mary Lynn Stewart), *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870-1914* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

Sara L. Kimble is an Associate Professor at DePaul University (Chicago). Her recent publications include: "Women's Rights and The Rights of Man: Women's Status Under Law as the Measure of 'Civilization' in French Political and Legal Discourse, 1869–

1914," in Raphaël Cahen et al., eds., *Relations internationales et droit(s): acteurs, institutions et législations comparées* (Pedone, 2024); "The Genocide Convention is 'Our Cause': International Women's Advocacy for the Criminalization of Genocide, 1945–1952," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (2024); "Political Engagement by 'apolitical' Female European Lawyers: The International Federation of Women Judges and Lawyers, 1928–1956," *Clio@Themis* (2023); and "Internationalist Women against Nazi Atrocities in Occupied Europe, 1941–1947," *Journal of Women's History* (2023).

Jean Elisabeth Pedersen is Professor of History, Humanities Department, Eastman School of Music, and History Department, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Rochester. She is the author of *Legislating the French Family: Feminism, Theater, and Republican Politics, 1870-1920* (Rutgers, 2003); the editor of "War, Occupation, and Empire in France and Germany," special issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* (2014); and the editor of "Representations of Women in the French Imaginary: Historicizing the Gallic Singularity," special issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society* (2020). Her most recent articles include "French Feminists at the International Council of Women, 1888-1914," *French History and Civilization* 10 (2021): 113-129; and "French Perspectives on American Women: Michel de Chevalier, Alexis de Tocqueville, and American Democracy," *French History and Culture* 12 (2025): 31-43.

Karen Offen is a historian and independent scholar, affiliated with the Michelle Clayman Institute for Gender Research (initially the Center for Research on Women) at Stanford University. Her research has benefitted from fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Her extensive publication list can be consulted on her website: https://karenoffen.com. A lifetime member of Western Society for French History, she attended the first meeting of the Society in Flagstaff, AZ in 1974, and served on its Governing Council in the 1980s.