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HIST 635/French Revolution

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Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution

The writing of history is a constantly changing exercise. Cultural re-applications of history seem to be the current rage; events long considered analyzed to the ^{slang} n^{th} degree are now being addressed in completely new ways. Modern historians have discovered that there are more aspects to, for instance, the French Revolution than class consciousness and conflict between the bourgeoisie and the elite ruling class. Political, cultural, and social aspects of historical events take on a newly important meaning in the face of ~~this style of~~ historical revision.

It is in one of these revisionist veins that Joan Landes wrote *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988). Landes approaches the Revolution from a feminist perspective, analyzing and critiquing the practices, institutions, and rhetoric of revolutionary France in a tight, concise, and well-documented book. The scope of her book runs from 1750 to 1850 – past the context of a class on the French Revolution but acceptably so for a more socially-oriented ^{cultural} approach to the causes and effects of the Revolution.

Landes' central argument ties the beginning of the feminist movement in

^{upheld} revolutionary France to the end of the political influence of a few women in the Old

Regime. The collapse of the patriarchal Old Regime left society susceptible to feminization,

thereby leading to both the benefits of gendering and the complaints against it. (1, 2) The representations of revolutionary women resulted from how the Revolution shifted the cultural aspects of women between the public and private spheres; for Landes, the elimination of women's rights, and therefore the exclusion of women from the public sphere, were an integral part of the Revolution. (2, 7)

I don't understand.

Unfortunately, Landes fails to aggressively pursue and prove her theme. She relies on Habermas and writers contemporary to the Revolution, namely Rousseau and Montesquieu, to present the evidence that Revolutionary men were sexist and bent on excluding women from politics. This is where Landes falls into the trap of revisionism. She applies modern values – the concept of sexism – backwards onto a culture in which women had a specific, widely accepted, and non-political role.

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transit < With Montesquieu, Landes finds an Enlightenment thinker aware of the difficulties women faced in late 18th century France. She uses his *Persian Letters* to show his small measure of sensitivity to women's issues. After showing his sympathy to these issues, though, Landes proceeds to negate Montesquieu by implying he did not go far enough in his criticisms of anti-feminism. There is no doubt that Montesquieu is a forward-looking thinker, envisioning a society where women have a clearly defined role somewhere between their position in 1750 and total equality; it is unreasonable for Landes to nullify his efforts simply because he does not advocate total equality for women in 18th century France. (32-8)

Even though Landes criticizes Montesquieu, she under-analyzes the material she presents,

leaving the conclusion that Montesquieu was a sexist to the reader and not explicitly stating that as her position.

Unlike her treatment of Montesquieu or Habermas, Landes devotes an entire chapter to Rousseau. She is more sympathetic to Rousseau's position and shortcomings and, in the context of her feminist treatment of the Revolution, fails to adequately criticize his writings. Rousseau believed that women would eventually find their position in society, that women would be powerful entities in that position, and that society would be unhealthy without powerful women functioning in their position. (66-7) Rousseau also considered sexual inequalities reasonable and entirely natural and, because of those apparent inequalities, felt justified in denying women even the lowliest of public posts. Landes should have sharply criticized Rousseau as she did Montesquieu. Landes soft-pedals criticism of Rousseau and lays blame at the feet of the true reason men negated women and tried to force them out of power during the Revolution.

Landes' most impressive critique of Revolutionary sexism is sharp-edged and completely accurate. Instead of tearing Rousseau down, she turns to language as the cultural culprit. The most ill effect women have on men is on their language. (88) Because words shored up the Revolution, women show their power in the Revolution by affecting the language of the men. In the changing language Landes pinpoints the sin of the salon women: their attempt to change the social language. The rhetoric of the Revolution was dependent on a new vocabulary, a revolutionary language. The influence of outspoken

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women threatened the revolutionary thought-process in activist men because the women were trying to do exactly the same thing – change the language. This served to threaten men's hold on power and prestige, and at least in the eyes of the men, thereby threatened the Revolution itself. (30-1)

By using Habermas as a base, the salons should have been considered a positive influence for the Revolution, yet they were not. For Habermas, free political discourse and the revolutionary atmosphere fed each other in a symbiotic relationship, bolstered by new systems of communication (books, newspapers, letters, etc.). Landes uses one of Habermas' own confessions against him, that because of the stilted social order, only propertied people could participate in unrestricted political debates. (42-3) The rights extended to women of the Old Regime were strictly intended for "loophole" women, women who by some accident came to be property owners. (151) The Revolution in the form of The Terror removed these rights from women and then eliminated the loopholes. Removing these rights from women was not a result of, but an essential part of the abrogation of all clubs and many other freedoms as well. The question raised by the lack of women's rights is this: if women were required to die for the Revolution (and many did), why were they not allowed to participate? As an answer, Landes applies sexism in the 20th century sense backwards through two hundred years of time to imply that the Revolutionaries were misogynists extraordinaire.

As Part II of the book draws to a close, Landes' accusations begin to take on a conspiratorial tone. She writes, "The Republic was constructed against women, not just

the Revolution in support of women's rights, and Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer that fully supported French women, and the symbolic nature of women to French men becomes apparent. To the men, the only virtuous women were private women or symbolic women that could not disagree with the Revolution at any level; society idealized these women. Somewhere between Eve, Marie-Antoinette, and Olympe de Gouges, Landes loses sight of the irony of the inequality. Men idealize the private women around them, their wives, mothers, and daughters, and excoriate the public women in their purview. This is not fair, but it certainly is part of the Revolution.

As feminist literature, Landes' book is a valuable piece of feminist revisionism. Simply to disagree with her is no reason to discount her views; she is entirely correct in her *denunci at* denouncement of the French Revolution as anti-feminist. Indeed, it was. Landes would be more at home in a upper-level social or feminist history class; in the context of a straight French Revolution class, she breaks no new ground nor does she contribute to the scholarship of the Revolution in a significant way. As feminist literature, her book is appropriate, important, provoking, and a scathing criticism of the misogyny of the French Revolution. As Revolution literature, however, her book is accusatory, conspiratorial in tone, and while not entirely inappropriate, not entirely appropriate either. Landes could be an integral link between past historiography and that of the future; only time will tell.

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date the book again?

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NO effort to check the historical response or to link this to other works. Very solid otherwise.