

Gender and revolution in Europe, 19th-20th centuries

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Abstract

The concept of revolution refers to periods of socio-political transformation brought about (or simply initiated) by militant action and centred on the paradigm of equality and liberty. All revolutions since the French Revolution in 1789 have been events in which gender relations have been negotiated and sometimes redefined. They left a deep imprint on nineteenth-century European history and marked the birth of bourgeois modernity as well as its conceptions of the gender order. The gender order that emerged in the late eighteenth century defined male and female roles by linking them to specific spaces of action: women were excluded from institutionalized politics, the sciences, and the army, while a family law inscribed within civil codes made them subordinate to men. The revolutions of the nineteenth century challenged these inequalities. While revolutionary militancy reinforced the male gender, uncountable legal discriminations that had persisted for women were abolished after revolutions of the twentieth century.

Article

The French Revolution: a revolution for women?

From the beginning of the revolution, the interpretation of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* [Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen] of August 26, 1789 emphasized the exclusion of women from this new principle of equality and liberty. While women obtained new civil rights (inheritance, divorce), the status of citizen was reserved only for adult French men. For all that, Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794) demanded that women be granted citizenship rights in 1790. The following year, in September 1791, Olympe de Gouges drafted her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* [Declaration of the rights of woman and of the female citizen], which was based on the model of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, and in which she called for full social and political equality. At the same time in the Austrian Netherlands, Jeanne de Bellem (1734-1793), a protagonist of the Brabant Revolution who was being hunted down, wrote and distributed pamphlets that were hostile to the emperor.

Revolutions offered men and women of all social positions new forms of political expression and contestation. While women from working-class backgrounds admittedly took part in the storming of the Bastille, they alone were behind the march on Versailles of October 5-6, 1789 to demand bread,

which led to the king's return to Paris. This action resulted in women either being celebrated as heroines or shouted down. Associations and clubs, which generally tolerated women only as listeners (Jacobin clubs), were created, while some women's clubs also formed. A space of political militancy, they also carried out social missions in the face of rising unemployment and organized the first public collective workshops. In 1792, the declaration of war issued on April 20 raised the question of women's participation in the defence of the endangered homeland. Pauline Léon (1768-1838), the founder of the Société des citoyennes républicaines révolutionnaires [Society of Revolutionary Republican Women] lodged a petition with the Legislative Assembly in 1792 in order to enable women's armed participation in the revolutionary struggle; it was rejected as being "against nature."

The first phase of the Revolution as it related to gender relations came to an end with the rise to power of the Jacobins in 1793. The army and politics became institutionally male spheres. In April, all women were discharged from the army. In June, the National Convention rejected Condorcet's bill on equal rights for women, and in September women's clubs were dissolved. A Girondist accused of being a virago, Olympe de Gouges was guillotined on November 3, 1793. The following year women were finally forbidden from participating in political meetings.

While the Revolution denied women political equality, it granted them civil equality and numerous rights, including the right to a divorce, family property, in addition to the equality of girls and boys in matters of inheritance and instruction. It also imposed on fathers the obligation to pay alimony for their illegitimate children. These rights were gradually challenged after the Revolution. The reign of Napoleon, and the proclaimed end of the Revolution in 1799, were followed in 1804 by the adoption of the Civil Code. Later rechristened the Napoleonic Code, it was the archetype for the gender policy of bourgeois modernity. It repealed uncountable laws concerning gender equality in family law and established an unequal and gendered division of spaces. The Napoleonic Civil Code of 1804 of course defined marriage as a civil contract, but also specified that it was a "sacred" bond. Then in 1816 divorce was repealed during the Bourbon Restoration. Finally, the Civil Code banned the father's obligation to pay child support for illegitimate children. All that remained was equality between girls and boys in matters of inheritance.

On the European level, the family and conjugal rights adopted during the nineteenth century in various national codes took inspiration from the broad outlines of the Napoleonic Code. Throughout Europe, men were designated as the head of the family and as soldiers, by way of obligatory male conscription. In addition, the sciences and politics were legally established as spheres reserved to men. Women's sphere was the family. A politically engaged woman would be neglecting her family, thereby endangering the functioning of the state. Moreover, the erotic power of women would disturb the masculine and rational space of politics.

In 1830, the July days in Paris known as *Les Trois Glorieuses* [The Three Glorious Days] marked the alliance of the liberal (and Bonapartist) bourgeoisie with the proto-proletarian classes. They are familiar to us through Eugène Delacroix's painting *La Liberté guidant le peuple* [Liberty Leading the People], which simultaneously celebrates an allegory of liberty, and an emblem of the fighting woman of the people. Over fifty Parisian women were wounded at the time. This revolution galvanized liberal forces in various states of the Germanic Confederation, Italy, the Netherlands, and among rebelling Polish nationalists. The allegory of the heroine braving death and leading the masses subsequently personified the nation that was built during the revolution, a blueprint which had already proved effective during the Greek Revolution of 1821 against Ottoman control. These feminine allegories of the nation and revolution later took on different forms according to the country: Marianne in France, Germania across the Rhine, Italia across the Alps, and Slavia or Bohemia in Prague.

1848, placed under gender equality?

A new liberal and bourgeois revolution broke out in France in February 1848, after riots the preceding month in Italy, and spread like wildfire across the continent.

From the viewpoint of gender, the European revolution of 1848-1849 revealed how much the bourgeois gender order had taken root in ways of thinking a half-century after the French Revolution. While men as a group were differentiated depending on social position, age, and nation, women were homogeneously thought of as a gender. Civil liberties—the objective of nineteenth-century European revolutions—of course offered great liberty of organization, however political associations, electoral law and parliaments remained the exclusive affair of men, sometimes on the condition of wealth, although this time they included workers, as in France and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Even the national and bourgeois guards, which united under the banner of “the armed people,” remained closed to women. Those who fought in the ranks of the popular revolutionary armies of 1848 had to cross-dress and pass as men, or as isolated heroines they reinforced the hegemony of the virility of arms, as with the revolutionary liberation army in Hungary.

The various demands of women in 1848—the right to vote, bear arms, complete university studies, or peacefully frequent a cafe in the evening without male company—demonstrate to what extent they were aware of the inherent contradiction in the bourgeois and liberal conception of liberty and equality. The Saint-Simonian Jeanne Deroin (1805-1894), who founded the newspaper *La politique des femmes*, ran in the 1849 election to denounce “universal male suffrage.” In practice, the majority of 1848 participants nevertheless ratified the complementarity of the sexes by founding associations that were exclusively feminine. The names, “Women's Clubs” or Demokratische Frauenhilfsvereine [Democratic Women's Relief Associations], attest either to a desire to meet among women, or to the androcentrism of the political space. For example, alongside the Demokratischer Verein consisting of men, which had no need to point that fact out, there was the Wiener Demokratischer Frauenverein

[Democratic Association of the Women of Vienna].

In 1848, complementarity between the genders was also expressed through “social maternity,” as revolutionary women collected money, fed combatants, treated the wounded and embroidered flags. By adopting a broader concept of politics, gender and women’s history has revealed the political dimension of this commitment, and the porous nature of the public and private spheres. Far from the political institutions which excluded women, the celebrations of the revolution of 1848 extolled the complementarity of the militant couple; the bourgeois stereotype of the gentle and peaceful woman was called into question.

Other stereotypes were present in the gendered historiography of the revolution, which began with Jules Michelet’s *Les femmes de la Révolution* [The Women of the Revolution] (1854). This gave the revolutionary masses feminine attributes, thereby opposing the revolution with the rational and institutionalized male space of politics and the army. On the other hand, it posited that women engaged in the revolution reproduced the ideal bourgeois type of the loving spouse ready to sacrifice herself, who took part solely for apolitical reasons such as compassion.

In 1871, during the Paris Commune, the ideal gendered characters typical of the bourgeoisie were used by the rebels. Relying on the fact that soldiers would refuse to fire on the “weaker sex,” the majority of those who confronted government troops were women. They organized with men or in exclusively female committees, such as Louise Michel’s group (1830-1905) in Montmartre, which defended radical equality between the sexes. Referred to as the “*pétroleuses*” [fire-raisers] who set Paris ablaze, women did not escape the repression that came down on the Communards, including execution, imprisonment, and banishment.

The Russian revolutions and their epigones

The European revolutionary wave of 1848 had stopped at the gates of tsarist Russia. It took until January 1905, a winter of famine and the repression of a workers’ strike in Saint Petersburg (Bloody Sunday), to see the emergence of a movement demanding civil liberties, an eight-hour work day, and equal rights for women. The dynamic of empowerment for heretofore marginalized social groups expressed itself in the founding of women’s organizations, such as the Progressive Women’s Party or the Pan-Russian Union for Women’s Equality. The concessions granted by the tsar included civil liberties, although access to the future legislative assembly (douma), which would welcome the elected representatives of the people, was reserved to men. In other words, in early-twentieth-century Russian society, the creation of civic institutions translated for men as a group—with no consideration of its internal differences—into an extension of their spheres of action. Women, on the other hand, were excluded by virtue of their gender.

The empire, weakened by war, began to collapse in February 1917. The Russian Revolution, which began in February 1917 following a workers' strike in Petrograd (March 8 in the Gregorian calendar, which subsequently became International Women's Day), initiated the most radical attempt at societal transformation in favour of gender equality. The objective was to broaden women's sphere of political action, and to include them in the political space by creating sections reserved for women within the CPSU and the Women's Internationale (initially independent of the Komintern). At the same time, the calling into question of the primary institution of socialization (the patriarchal authoritarian family) and the power of the Church was at the heart of legislative measures and ideological campaigns: civil marriage and divorce upon request by one of the two partners were introduced, the hierarchy between legitimate and illegitimate children was revoked, homosexuality and voluntary termination of pregnancy were decriminalized, and maternity insurance was established. Collective kitchens, laundromats, and nurseries were created in view of socializing reproductive work, while public debates surrounding love, sexuality, and communal life sought to supplement laws on equal pay and (ongoing) training programs intended for both sexes. These measures were gradually cancelled in 1924, which marked the end of the phase of experimentation and the beginning of Stalinization, including with respect to gender policy. The process was completed in 1936 with the codification of the (bourgeois) family in the Constitution, and the reintroduction of the ban on abortion.

The revolutionary movements that spread through Central Europe from 1918 onwards, and that led to the establishment of councils or short-lived council republics in Bavaria and Hungary, were characterized in matters of gender by rivalries between bourgeois-liberal and socialist or communist conceptions of equal rights for women, or to use the terms of the period, the liberation of women. The innovative ideas of the Russian Revolution—connected to the names of Inès Armand and Alexandra Kollontai—left little trace. The society model of workers' and soldiers' councils ratified the gender order of bourgeois modernity by basing itself on the figure of the worker outside the home, in addition to the man bearing arms. The contradiction with the principle of equality which was being defended at the same time was patent. The Austrian revolution of 1918-1919, during which Parliament and councils rubbed shoulders, sought to fill in this yawning gap of democratic politics by including not just peasants and the bourgeois in the circle of electors, but especially housewives, who were defined as women active in the household. Yet the number of council members remained tiny.

The Bavarian Council Republic in Munich (April 7-May 2, 1919) bears witness to the activism of the Women's revolutionary league led by Anita Augspurg (1857-1943) and Lida G. Heymann (1868-1943), who demanded, in addition to female delegates, the institution of women's councils at all levels of power. However, there is no discernible theoretical reflection on gender policy in this movement of councils, understood as a kind of basic democratic organization relating to the Paris Commune. The disappearance of empires in Germany and Austria finally led to parliamentary republics, which

provided equal civil rights for women.

Approximately a decade after the revolutionary crises of Central Europe, the Spanish Republic established in 1931 granted women rights (including the right to vote). From the beginning of the civil war against Franco, some women fought within army formations, but were quickly sent to the rear (*retirada*) in the name of military effectiveness and gender roles. This war also marked the end of the wave of revolutionary transformation that had flourished after the Russian Revolution and that collapsed in the face of fascisms.

The springtime of post-war gender equality?

Soviet policies for gender and women's condition resonated in the European democracies of the 1920s and 1930s. The Soviet Union indeed adopted laws that had been called for by feminist movements—both socialist and liberal—since the late nineteenth century. The enlargement of the resulting spheres of activity for women (and men) was discussed as much as legislation involving the family, the socialization of domestic tasks, or matters surrounding control over fertility. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the measures adopted in the USSR were extended to “Eastern bloc” countries. However, certain states favoured a restrictive natalist policy, such as Romania, which in 1967 introduced a special tax penalizing women over twenty-six without a child. Everyday life, in fact, remained difficult everywhere.

Insurrections and attempts at reform characterized the history of socialist republics throughout their forty-five years of existence: in Czechoslovakia before the communists seized power in 1948, in Yugoslavia with the declaration of non-affiliation with the Eastern bloc the same year, in GDR in 1953, in Poland and Hungary in 1956, and once again in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1980. Liberty and equality linked here to independence from the Soviet Union and the CPSU—no demands were expressed in matters of gender policy. The protagonists, for example in Hungary in 1956, admittedly situated themselves within the tradition of the revolution of 1848, but with a few rare exceptions this exclusively involved men. The historiography subsumed these movements to the vision of a single “youth” revolt and its students, who were thought of as being males.

However, among the movements of 1989 that sounded the death knell for the Eastern bloc, the aspiration for greater gender equality was once again expressed. This demand was led during the transition phase by feminists directly inspired by the independent women's movements of Western Europe, for instance in the GDR with the *Unabhängiger Frauenverband* [Independent Association of Women], which took part in the *Runder Tisch* [Round table]. The gendered examination of the transformations and revolutions of 1989 nevertheless still remains to be completed, from both a comparative and national perspective.

In the West, despite the spread of women's right to vote, traditional gender relations did not change profoundly until the 1960s. The protest movements that erupted in Western Europe starting in 1967 did not translate into changes in the political system, but youth pressure triggered a deep transformation of habits. During the 1970s, a feminist revolution contested and disrupted patriarchal domination. However, the only political transformation designated as a revolution in Western Europe after 1945 was the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974. It brought an end to fifty years of dictatorship (Salazar, Caetano) and the colonial empire (Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique), and was in keeping with the global wave of "national" revolutions or liberation movements against the colonial or postcolonial powers of the time. It was the masculine arena of the army that rose up, with the support of major protests. The red carnations tied to the machine guns of soldiers by female protesters bear witness to an iconographic language that (re)produced a gendered and dichotomous nature, and its division into spheres of activity—even though the Portuguese Republic granted the same civil rights to men and women.

Revolutions stand out through the sudden temporal gaps they provoke, as well as by the ambivalence in matters of continuity and breaks. From the French Revolution until the late twentieth century, they have shown how much ideas regarding gender roles and the practices of women and men alternated between breaks and moments of stabilization. This is no less true for the enlargement of the feminine sphere in matters of politics, education, and the family, or for the persistence of a militancy with masculine connotations. The latter continued a major gender division as pertains to action, one that considerably shaped the twentieth century. The gender policy of the revolution(s) of bourgeois modernity was moulded, like the latter itself, by what the American historian Joan W. Scott has called the paradox of feminism: a policy seeking to break the unchanging nature of concepts thought of in bodily terms—such as gender—cannot prevent itself from systematically calling on them, thereby contributing to their reproduction.

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