Nos amis étrangères: French Feminism and Foreign Women Between the Wars

By

Anya M. Lee
Graduate Student
State University of New York, Albany

Short Title: French Feminism and Foreign Women Between the Wars

Abstract: Reviewing French feminist activities, writing, and journalism during the 1930s, this article argues that frustration at home prompted French feminists to expand the purview of their activities beyond the borders of France and engage with women on an international stage. French values and republican ideals dictated the ways French women perceived and interacted with their foreign counterparts.

Keywords: French feminism, la femme moderne, international feminism, interwar period, gender, citizen, citizenship, Cécile Brunschvicg, Ida R. Sée, La Française, labor, colonialism

Following a 1932 trip to Spain Ida R. Sée, a contributor to the French feminist periodical La Française, observed that French women abroad received a universally flattering reception, but lamented that this was often only because French women embodied the latest fashions of Paris. She insisted that, upon closer examination, there was much more to French women than their excellent fashion sense. She pointed out that the women of France were just as educated as men and had much more to offer the world than their style. Unfortunately, despite the intelligence and culture of French women still, “foreigners… [asked] why feminism [had] gone so long without gaining civil and political equality for women?” For Sée and her colleagues “the
question [did] not cease to be very embarrassing!”¹ In her article, Mme. Sée revealed several concerns of the French feminist movement in the 1930s. The absence of civil and political equality for women in France was at the top of the list, but French women’s status in the eyes of foreigners was also clearly of interest to her. In many instances, increased cooperation between the nations of Europe following the Great War led women to evaluate their position in society in relation to that of their foreign counterparts, and French feminists often found such comparisons were not always flattering.

While Mme Sée was clearly concerned with the status of women within France, she also placed importance on foreigners’ perception of French women abroad. She pointed out that French women were more than mere fashion plates, they were sophisticated, multi-lingual “women of the world” who were educated as well as any man.² She was embarrassed that despite cultured French women’s sophistication, she was still confronted by questions from foreigners who enjoyed more equality than she did. The article clearly reflects Sée’s embarrassment not only at having to answer such questions, but also her vexation at the apparent standstill of the feminist movement as a whole. While women across Europe and beyond won the right to vote after the First World War, French women did not gain that right until after World War Two, and during the interwar years La Française’s contributors frequently expressed the frustration that they alone remained disenfranchised.³

During the 1930s, the international activities of French women covered in La Française

² Ibid.
³ Siân Reynolds points out that although France can be described as “on the late side” of obtaining suffrage, it is debatable to what extent women in other countries were really able to participate in elections and enjoy equal rights prior to the end of WWII. She also points out that in many cases the dates of enfranchisement are so close together, they can really be considered part of the same movement. These are valid points, and no doubt in retrospect the several decades when women were given the vote may appear as one era, but many articles in La Française express frustration with women’s lack of voting rights and there is frequent reference to the voting status of women in other countries, making it clear that French women at the time believed that they were behind the curve during the 1930s. Siân Reynolds, “Lateness, Amnesia and Unfinished Business: Gender and Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe”, European History Quarterly 32 (2002) pp. 88-91.

© 2014 The Middle Ground Journal

See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy
took several forms and served various purposes for feminists. An international community of feminists that gained momentum during the second half of the 1920s continued to grow in both size and importance during much of the 1930s. Numerous conferences dedicated to feminist concerns and other issues of international political, moral, and ethical importance were held in various countries throughout the decade. This community allowed women of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds and differing legal statuses to share their experiences, offer advice, celebrate advances, and lament setbacks. For French women, identifying with a unified international community of women provided them with a sense of forward motion that was still denied to them domestically. It also offered a modicum of perceived influence in international matters that directly affected French politics.

Meanwhile, humanitarian efforts in the “less developed” corners of the empire gave French women the opportunity to indulge their nationalism by acting as missionaries of civilization throughout the colonies. This also furnished them with an outlet for characteristically French feelings of superiority that were hampered by the perceived inferiority of their legal status in relation to the rest of Europe. French feminists applied their international experiences to their ongoing struggle for equality at home by using them as the basis of new arguments in favor of their own rights and as examples to counteract some arguments against those rights. Finally, while the international activities of French women led them to identify with their foreign counterparts as sisters in the same struggle, they continued to identify strongly with particularly French feelings of patriotism and national pride, colonial politics, and a sense of racial and cultural superiority that always placed firm limits on sisterly identification across national borders and cultural boundaries. At the same time, awareness that France lagged behind many other nations in advancing the cause of equality between the sexes complicated French feminists’
sense of superiority.

Some of the feminist movement’s efforts were chronicled in publications such as La Française. Which was a moderate bourgeois feminist newspaper established in 1906 by Jane Misme and designated the weekly organ of the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises in 1921. In 1924 Cécile Brunschvig, the general secretary of the Union Francaise pour le Suffrage des Femmes took over direction of La Française, targeting also the reformist members of her organization who were spread throughout the empire. Given the breadth of its readership, the newspaper maintained its moderate approach to appeal to feminists across the spectrum. Female suffrage was one of the main goals of La Française and its contributors during the interwar years, although equal employment was discussed almost as frequently. Despite the newspaper’s contributors’ commitment to making their goals a reality in France, it is clear throughout the pages of La Française that women felt they made very little progress during the decade leading up to the Second World War. Discouraged that “feminism had gone so long without gaining civil and political equality for women,” French feminists set their sights beyond their own borders.

During the interwar period French women struggled to be recognized as French citizens equal to men in politics and society, but they were hindered by a definition of French citizenship that seemed designed to exclude them. The new French Republic, born out of the 1789 Revolution, built on Enlightenment ideas when defining the individual upon whom to bestow the natural rights of man and the citizen. This definition evolved in direct opposition to the order of the ancien regime, which was based on the hierarchy and privileges of the monarchy, aristocracy, and the church. In order to counteract the old system, the revolutionary philosophers

---

4 National Council of French Women and the French Union for Women’s Suffrage, will be referred to as CNFF and UFSF, respectively.
5 Centre des Archives du Féminisme, Angers (CAF) Fonds Cécile Brunschvig (FCB), 1AF (selected documents and summary online at: http://www.archivesdufeminisme.fr/).

© 2014 The Middle Ground Journal Number 8, Spring 2014
See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy
devised a system of universal inclusion that sought an essential human commonality on which to base their new political community. Thus arose the concept of an individual abstracted from all social statuses and natural inclinations attributed to things like wealth, occupation, and religion, which differentiated one person from another. These revolutionaries intended abstraction to create a universal sameness on which to base political and social equality. While they conceived this concept of the citizen as an abstract individual to neutralize the differences between men and make them equally deserving of rights, its fundamental flaw lies in its oppositional nature. Because they based the original definition more on what a citizen was not than on what it was, subsequent attempts to adapt this definition to modern conditions continue to require the presence of an oppositional “other,” “whose so-called natural tendencies precluded their ability to live up to the individual prototype.” Thus, as Joan Scott puts it, a definition that was designed to be inclusive becomes exclusive when applied to women.

From its inception French citizenship was an exclusively masculine concept. At the turn of the nineteenth century the men who codified the new French Republic argued that women’s sex was one of those “natural tendencies” that could not be abstracted, which made them ineligible for citizenship. In order to become citizens, women first had to become abstract individuals, but their overt sexual difference prevented them from achieving the universal sameness citizenship required. Feminists rarely challenged this definition in the twentieth century, but instead argued that the system itself failed to live up to the republican ideal. At the

---

8 Ibid., 7.
10 Scott, Paradoxes, 12.
same time, organizations like the UFSF and the CNFF often attempted to argue for women’s right to be recognized as citizens by virtue of specifically feminine traits, such as their reproductive capacity. In this way they “argued in the same breath for the irrelevance and relevance of their sex,”11 creating a “paradox” that plagued French feminism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to do so into the present.12

Some scholars have argued that the decade or so following the First World War was a turning point in the struggle for women’s equality in France. The war necessitated women’s transition into traditionally male jobs, which gave them more independence and freedom of movement within the public sphere. The 1920s witnessed new forms of female identity that defied the traditional image of “la mere du foyer” in very visible ways. Men who returned from the war expected to find the demure wives and sisters they left behind, but instead confronted the short skirts and short hair of la femme moderne, who looked nothing like their mothers. Monique Lerbier, the heroine of Victor Margueritte’s 1922 novel “La Garçonne” was the prototype for this image. Monique seemed to embody French Women’s rejection of the idyllic image of prewar France that reassured men during the war. She was socially active and sexually promiscuous, and she immersed herself in a world of vice that had long been men’s exclusive domain. According to her critics, la femme moderne was decidedly less feminine than previous traditional notions dictated and she infringed on French men’s already bruised masculinity. In the process she, blurred gender categories and prompted some to declare la crise du foyer.

According to such critics, the modern French woman not only challenged accepted norms of

11 Scott, Paradoxes, 11.
12 Joan Scott explains the nature of this paradox and more specifically the status of difference as it operated throughout most of the Third Republic in Only Paradoxes to Offer more thoroughly than I have here. She also explains how conflict between the abstract individual and sexual difference was addressed in France at the end of the twentieth century in Parité where she discusses the 1996 law of the same name. The subject continues to be relevant in France where recent laws passed in response to the perceived threat to secularism posed by Islam have made an issue of the headscarves and veils traditionally worn by some Muslim women. Scott thoroughly addresses this issue and its connections to the same concepts that have impeded gender equality in France for over two centuries in The Politics of the Veil.
gendered behavior, she shirked her most precious reproductive duties and threatened the future of la patrie.\textsuperscript{13}

French men’s perception of a threat to their masculinity resulted in anxiety that was compounded by national worry over declining fertility rates and depopulation. Their concerns about depopulation had been on the rise since 1870 when defeat by the Prussians convinced some French elites that the future power of the nation was going to be contingent upon increasing the birthrate. Many awarded the issue a sense of urgency in the aftermath of the Great War, which dealt a huge blow to the national demographic. The debate surrounding dénatalité garnered much attention in the post war years fingers often pointed at la femme moderne and her supposed failure to accept her natural role as a mother. Some pronatalists interpreted the feminist movement, the increasing visibility of women in the public sphere, and the perceived blurring of gender roles as a sign of women’s refusal to bear children. According to her critics, the modern woman was an egoist, concerned with frivolous matters and unwilling to endure the pain of childbirth or premature wrinkles.\textsuperscript{14} This attitude contributed to the rise of a pronatalist movement that attempted to glorify motherhood as an expression of nationalism and to popularize the idea that it was every French woman’s duty to raise a large family. In the decade after the war the pronatalist movement focused heavily on women, as evidenced by a 1920 law that criminalized abortion and the circulation of birth control propaganda. The law purportedly intended to stimulate the birthrate by limiting access to methods of birth control, but it specifically targeted female methods of contraception and made no mention of popular male prophylactics.\textsuperscript{15} As Chamber Deputy Paul Morucci pointed out at the time, the law also did not make any provisions


\textsuperscript{14} Emile Goy and Auguste Isaac as quoted in Roberts, \textit{Civilization}, 121.

to “prepare the cradle before demanding the child” and had little actual impact on the birthrate.\textsuperscript{16} The law did succeed in undermining women’s control over their own bodies, which Mary Louise Roberts argues indicated that the pronatalist movement in the 1920s was as much about gender anxiety as it was about \textit{dénatalité}.\textsuperscript{17} Emphasis on the importance of motherhood in the lives of French women also served to complement and bolster the role of men as breadwinners, which underscored the need for men returning from the war to be able to resume work and support his family in order to confirm his manhood.

Although the 1920s appeared to indicate a turning point for women in France, historian James McMillan contends that “contemporaries greatly exaggerated the extent of women’s progress” in the postwar years and the “impact of the First World War reinforced rather than weakened the cult of domesticity.” Some people in France interpreted the supposed disruption of gender roles caused by the war as a blow to masculine egos, which prompted efforts to secure male dominance in both public and private. According to McMillan, any progress observed in the postwar years can be attributed to trends that existed prior to the war. Motherhood remained the generally accepted goal for women and the double standard of morality continued to prevail among French women as well as men.\textsuperscript{18}

In this same vein, Mary Louise Roberts argues that the fashions of \textit{la garçonne}, which symbolized for many the liberation of \textit{la femme moderne}, were also less liberating than they initially appeared. The straight lines required excessive dieting and complicated, often restrictive undergarments, while the pageboy haircuts that were touted to be low maintenance required frequent trips to the beauty salon. Countless other beauty routines called for any number of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Ibid., 94.
\item[17] Ibid., 107-109.
\end{footnotes}
creams, teas, pills, and masks offered by the fast growing beauty industry.\textsuperscript{19} While it may be true that little structural change occurred during the interwar years, the postwar debate about change and the efforts to cope with that change revolved around gender more than any other period in the history of the Third Republic.\textsuperscript{20} The impact of the war was articulated in terms of women’s role in society and for the remainder of the interwar years this role occupied a central point in political discourse even though women themselves continued to be excluded from the political arena. By the end of the 1920s, the visibility of \textit{la garçonne} began to fade. Just as Monique Lerbier eventually gave into her maternal instincts at the end of \textit{La Garçonne}, many women in France accepted their proscribed roles as wives and mothers.

After the turbulence of the 1920s, gender perceptions began to stabilize and the image of \textit{la mere de famille} reasserted its cultural primacy during the 1930s. Women accepted this image, and even though they continued to pursue political and economic equality, they did so while maintaining the importance of traditional domestic values. Feminists working for change in France were impeded not only by the limitations of cultural gender norms and their own failure to challenge them, but also by social, political and economic turbulence specific to the decade leading up to the Second World War. The First World War left some European nations with a sense that nineteenth-century liberalism had failed to provide the security and stability people desired after the devastating impact of the war. The introduction of Italian fascism in 1922 was the first indication that Europeans were looking to the right for answers the left was unable to provide. The menace of fascism became far more prevalent in the 1930s with the Nazi takeover of Germany and the Spanish Civil War. The threat of fascism in these countries was made more acute in France by shared borders and right-wing agitation following the Stavisky Affair, which

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 82-83.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

© 2014 The Middle Ground Journal

See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy
revealed the existence of fascist elements in France and led to the formation of the Popular Front. The remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 confirmed the aggressive nature of Nazi Germany, bringing it to the forefront of French anxieties. It was not uncommon for French feminists to also be pacifists; prominent members of the CNFF spoke out against war as early as 1914 when most people still regarded the First World War as justified. Pacifism became a more urgent concern for feminists in the 1930s as it became increasingly clear to them that “German militarism in its Nazi form was not amenable to peace overtures.”

Some people’s concerns about low fertility and depopulation that garnered attention in France immediately following the First World War seemed even more urgent in light of political developments in the 1930s. From early in the decade the influence of the pronatalist movement on French policy was apparent. In 1932 the French government passed the family allowances law that Susan Pedersen called “the single most important piece of social legislation … in interwar France.” While that assertion is certainly debatable, the law clearly indicated early on the level of credence given to dénatalité in France. Echoing demographic competition that originated in the nineteenth century, pronatalist organizations like the Alliance Nationale pour l’Accroissement de la Population gained increasing favor in response to the seemingly successful natalist policies of the Italian and German states. Pronatalists feared falling birthrates would lead to military and national decline and leave France vulnerable to aggressive and demographically superior neighbors, and they also believed that a stronger population in France

---

23 Cheryl Koos, for example would probably argue that the 1939 passage of the *Code de la famille* was a much more significant indicator of widespread acceptance and implementation of the pronatalist agenda, and that it indicated a clear shift towards conservativism that would propel France towards Vichy. The latter law was likely more significant symbolically, while the family allowances were more significant as policy. Cheryl A. Koos, “Gender, Anti-Individualism, and Nationalism: The Alliance Nationale and the Pronatalist Backlash Against the Femme Moderne, 1933-1940,” *French Historical Studies* 19 (1996).
could have prevented the Great War.\textsuperscript{24} Leaders of the movement like Fernand Boverat and Paul Haury adopted rhetoric similar to that of the fascist states, which promoted nationalism and anti-
individualism, and further vilified \textit{la femme moderne} and her increasingly visible independence.\textsuperscript{25} Government support gave credence to pronatalist policies, making female
domicity the ideal both socially and legally.

Economic developments and employment instability during the 1930s seemed to validate
a greater emphasis on the importance of male employment. During the economic depression that
followed the American stock market crash women were frequently blamed for unemployment
problems. According to Laura Levine Frader, the depression magnified existing gender divisions
in the labor force. In some industries, employers would replace male workers with women to
whom they paid significantly lower wages, and when they were forced to cut wages, women
often received larger pay cuts than men.\textsuperscript{26} In the metalworking industry male workers frequently
replaced married women, and layoffs usually favored men with families. Overall, the depression
confirmed the primacy of the male breadwinner model. Employers tended to recognize that men,
and particularly fathers, had a right to work in order to provide for their families.\textsuperscript{27} While the
official unemployment rates for women remained relatively low throughout the decade, the
gender division of labor, which concentrated women in unskilled, low-paying jobs, was
amplified by the Depression. It is also likely, as Frader points out, that historians have
underestimated the extent of unemployment for both men and women and the numbers were
actually much higher.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} Pedersen, \textit{Family}, 359.
\textsuperscript{25} Koos, “Gender, Anti-Individualism, and Nationalism,” 701.
\textsuperscript{27} Frader, \textit{Breadwinners}, 204-205.
\textsuperscript{28} Frader asserts that there were problems inherent in a definition of unemployment that did not include certain types of industrial
homework or the domestic garment industry – which both employed primarily women – in its calculation of joblessness. She also
Regardless of the actual statistics, women’s claim to economic rights was highly contested during the Depression. Some groups, like the metalworking unions in Paris and textile workers in the Nord, accepted the inevitability of female employment and campaigned for equal pay for equal work in order to combat wage competition with male workers. Frader acknowledges that organized labor was generally less inclined than Catholic and pronatalist organizations to insist on relegating women to the domestic sphere.29 However, emphatic opponents of women in the work place argued that female employment was contrary to women’s instincts, it led to gender confusion and instability, and forced the state to take responsibility for the home care work that was neglected by working wives and mothers. During the Depression, these objections were coupled with the argument that working women took jobs from men who were then unable to support their families. This reflected popular sentiments that it was a man’s “sacred duty” to provide for his family and thus men had a natural right to work that women did not.30 Men’s performance of the breadwinner role and women’s maintenance at home was touted as “one of the essential elements of a stable and fertile family life… designed to insure the education and care of children.”31 Producing and educating the next generation of French citizens was continually upheld as women’s primary function, and some in France, including even some women themselves, believed their employment jeopardized their ability to perform this function properly.

Even feminists who wrote for La Française acknowledged, “in times of crisis, the ‘earners’ have the primary right to work,” and it was logical that “women [would] withdraw

---

points out that many statistics were based on self-declaration, which women might sometimes be hesitant to do, especially married women who were encouraged not to work in Frader, Breadwinners, 206-208.

29 Frader, Breadwinners, 211-213.
30 Frader, Breadwinners, 214-217.
31 Quoted in Frader, Breadwinners, 216.
before them (men) to safeguard the dignity of the head of the family.” Feminists continued to argue for equality in the workplace throughout most of the 1930s, but the crisis posed by the Depression and their own admission of its special circumstances undermined their arguments and further reinforced conventional perceptions that women belonged in the home. The conditions resulting from political instability, economic depression, and depopulation anxieties, along with the failure of feminists to challenge the narrowly defined gender roles that emerged following the war, prevented any real progress towards equality for French women in the 1930s. Frustrated by the domestic standstill of their movement, French feminists expanded the purview of their activities beyond the borders of France and identified with foreign women as women to a greater extent than ever before.

During the interwar years French women participated in an international community of feminists that brought them into contact with women of varying ethnicities, cultures and legal statuses. Associating with these women gave French women the opportunity to engage with a larger feminist movement that advanced throughout the decade, and gain a sense of progress denied to them at home. Support for this international sisterhood appeared frequently in La Française throughout the 1930s. The newspaper’s contributors attended and extensively covered numerous international conferences that took place throughout the decade. In 1933 editor Cécile Brunschvicg reported that “many of our foreign friends who ... kindly agreed to celebrate once again ... their willingness to work together for causes they hold dear” convened in Marseille to discuss “the four big questions” that were the subject of most international feminist conferences during the interwar period: “women’s suffrage, women’s right to work, the fight against women’s work, and peace.”

32 Cécile Brunschvicg, “A propos du travail feminine,” La Française, 11 February 1933.
33 Cécile Brunschvicg, “Le congrès de Marseille,” La Française, 18 March 1933.
women from all over the world to share their experiences, discuss issues important in their own countries and abroad, and develop bonds as women engaged in mutual struggle.

La Française encouraged its readers to associate progress abroad with their own struggle for equality and appreciate the advancement of the women’s movement as a whole. When the recently established Spanish republic announced the drafting of a new constitution in 1931, the newspaper published excerpts from the document that outlined, “the equality of rights for both sexes.” These developments were heralded by the author as being “without a doubt, the greatest victory of the feminist movement.”34 When the sections relating to female suffrage were voted on a month later, La Française published a witness’s blow-by-blow account of the proceedings. The author gave an emotional description of the events, building up anticipation until the very end, finally announcing the results with an exclamation: “we triumph by 39 votes!” The article was followed by a short piece, presumably by the editor, declaring that, “we greet with joy the triumphant victory of Spanish women.” The article goes on to assure readers that:

as for us, French women, we should rejoice without reservation at this happy development, not only for our Spanish sisters, but for ourselves. It seems impossible to us that the great liberating wind passing over Spain, that this gesture of confidence in women so spontaneously developed from the foundation of the republic, will not have repercussions for us [in France].35

Interpreting the developments in Spain in a global context created the impression of progress for an international women’s movement that French women felt they were a part. Contributors to La Française made efforts to associate France even more closely with the Spanish victory by drawing readers in with the dramatic recount of events and by making specific reference to the republican foundation shared by the two countries. Another article referred to Spain as “the first

35 Pilar Seneprun, “Les Cortès Constituantes votent le Suffrage Féminin,” La Française, 10 October 1931. (The note at the end is unattributed, but it was likely written by Cécile Brunschvicg.)
of the four Latin nations of Europe” to grant political rights to women. By placing Spain and France in the same small group of Latin nations the author drew geographical as well as racial parallels between the two. Drawing attention to similarities between France and Spain helped French women to identify more closely with their Spanish counterparts, which allowed them to rejoice in the same achievements and accept the implication that there would be positive repercussions for France.

The bonds of international feminism seemed to transcend even the notorious rivalry between France and Germany. At the beginning of the decade French and German women interacted regularly in efforts to understand “[the] reciprocal fears that feed both our nationalisms,” and “to work to bring together the two peoples” in the hope of maintaining peace. French feminists tried to communicate to German women “the need for them not to go to extreme parties … which … threaten the future existence of the people and the State.” While the quote referred specifically to the German people and state, the danger posed by extremist parties was equally pressing for France, and without the right to vote French women had little influence on how their own country addressed extremist politics. Cooperation with German women like Mme Dorothée von Velsen, president of l’Association des Femmes d’Etat Allemandes and others like her, gave some French women hope they could influence their German counterparts to vote against extreme right-wing parties with the potential to lead the neighbors into another devastating conflict. Unfortunately, their influence failed to prevent the ascension of the Nazi party, but it was not for lack of trying.

38 “Ce que font les Femmes Allemandes,” La Française, 31 January 1931.
Although French women were highly suspicious of National Socialism from the beginning, they maintained support for “[their] German friends, victims of current events.”\textsuperscript{39} As Hitler consolidated power and increasingly infringed upon the rights of women in the Third Reich, French feminists lamented the condition of their German sisters through the pages of \textit{La Française}. One headline even announced “the end of feminism in Germany” when the Nazis dissolved \textit{l’Association générale des Femmes allemandes}, but the newspaper continued to express hope that the feminist movement would recover and “resume … a useful and productive collaboration for progress and international understanding.”\textsuperscript{40} Despite their contempt for fascism and the obvious threat it posed to France, \textit{La Française} continued to criticize the treatment of German women within the Third Reich and extol the benefits of pacifism even after the war began.\textsuperscript{41} This ongoing support for women in Nazi Germany implied that French feminists’ identification with them as women transcended traditional antagonism between the two nations. However, their involvement with German women during the interwar period stemmed from a desire to protect France from further damage like that of the Great War. Thus, their involvement with German women may have provided them with the support of international sisterhood, but it was born out of concern for the well being of France.

While the French contributors to \textit{La Française} expressed feelings of solidarity and genuine interest in the conditions of foreign women, they also applied their international experiences to their fight for equal rights at home. In a 1931 interview with \textit{People} magazine José Laval, the daughter of Prime Minister Pierre Laval, expressed her admiration for Ishbel MacDonald, the British Prime Minister’s daughter. She was “certain that [MacDonald’s] work [would] prove valuable in showing the public the importance of the role of women in public

\textsuperscript{39} “Les pérsecutions hitlériennes contre les Associations féministes allemandes”, \textit{La Française}, 1 July 1933.
\textsuperscript{40} “La fin du féminisme en Allemagne,” \textit{La Française}, 21 October 1933.
\textsuperscript{41} “A travers le monde: Le travail des femmes, Allemagne,” \textit{La Française}, 4-11 March 1939.
life,” and she hoped to do the same kind of work at home in France.  

An article in *La Française* expressed hope that Mlle Laval would use the foreign example to change “the humiliating situation in which French women still find themselves.”

That same year, editor Cécile Brunschvicg reported on the first British election in which women voted according to the same conditions as men. According to Brunschvicg, the elections showed that “there is no specifically female vote: women vote with men, with the same reflexes, following the same currents of opinion.”

Five years later Brunschvicg made a very similar argument following the 1936 Spanish elections. She directly addressed “radical French newspapers” who claimed prior to the elections that “the feminine element, more numerous than the masculine element would assure the success of parties on the right.” She stressed that the Spanish elections were largely successful for the left, in order to counteract these radical newspapers and left-wing French politicians who “[tried] to use the Spanish experience to refuse French women their political rights on the pretext that all women [were] reactionary and clerical.”

French women tried to take advantage of the precedents set by other Western nations where women were already enfranchised to advance their own movement. For Brunschvicg and her peers, these foreign examples definitively refuted the claims of French politicians who stood in the way of women’s political equality. Opponents of women’s rights were not as convinced, and feminists found themselves making the same arguments year after year. For the most part, French feminists related easily to other European women who looked like them and shared their values, so it seemed natural for them to view Spain as an example or to empathize with the plight of German women. However, the international feminist community extended beyond European

---

42 As far as I can determine, Ishbel MacDonald did humanitarian work that we have come to expect from a first lady. She took on this role since her mother was deceased when her father became Prime Minister of the U.K. A newsreel from 28/4/1932 shows her opening “real homes” for the working class in Lower Edmonton. [http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=2957](http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=2957).


borders and problems of difference that French women found difficult to navigate confronted them at the intersection of “orient and occident.”

Uniquely French ideas regarding race and religion developed primarily from colonial experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and immigration during the interwar years and influenced how French women interacted with non-European women during the 1930s. From the beginning, providing justification for colonialism presented a particular challenge for France. As republicans in a nation founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the French could not very well embark on colonial conquests with economic or political aims that were obviously contradictory to the Enlightenment values upon which their national identity was supposedly based. Fortunately, Napoleon set a convenient precedent for spreading those values to the outside world via colonial conquest in Egypt and this *mission civilisatrice* to bring the light of the Revolution to “uncivilized” peoples in Africa and East Asia remained a stated goal of the French Empire throughout colonial presence there.\(^{46}\) The civilizing mission attracted many scholars, administrators, and laypeople interested in ethnographic study who traveled through the colonies, especially those in North Africa, to observe and better “understand” foreign cultures, and hopefully to discover the key to spreading civilization.\(^{47}\) This attraction was also apparent in the particular attention *La Française* devoted to women in the North African colonies of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria.

Early ethnographies often identified Islam as the defining cultural factor in North Africa and cast Muslims in the role of dark, dangerous “other.” Administrators and ethnographers also commonly projected the known onto the unknown in their attempts to understand Muslim culture.

\(^{46}\) Juan Cole A thorough examination of Napoleon’s foray into the Middle East and North Africa can be found in: Juan Cole, *Napoleon’s Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

in the colonies. It was in this way that French anxieties stemming from the confrontation between the Third Republic and the Catholic Church over secularization became associated with Islam.\footnote{During the Third Republic the struggle to find a universal definition of France took the form of aggressive secularization. The state sought to “republicanize” the French landscape and they took measures to remove all the trappings of the Catholic Church from public life. The goal of the Republic was to establish universalism and thereby create true equality by decreasing the influence of the Church in French society. This conflict led some in France to react with suspicion to what they perceived as Islam’s excessive influence over North African societies. See: Birnbaum, Idea of France, 117-138, and Olivier Roy, Secularism Confronts Islam, trans. George Holoch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 18-22.} This had the effect of sometimes making the “egalitarian deviant and the apolitical subversive,” making Islam a central target of the civilizing mission.\footnote{Trumbull, Empire, 131.} These early ethnographies contributed significantly to preliminary French impressions of Muslim culture as “primitive” and backwards, and in direct opposition to a progressive and “civilized” European society.\footnote{Trumbull, Empire, 149.} The perception of Muslims as the dangerous “other” planted seeds of racism during the early colonial years, and a surge of immigration during the interwar years fertilized those seeds.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the government relaxed regulations on migration from the colonies. French employers recruited impoverished colonial subjects for cheap labor or as strikebreakers, and the government conscripted them as soldiers and laborers during the First World War. French authorities encouraged immigrants to retain their Islamic identity, in part because it provided a means of social control, but it exacerbated the visible difference of North African immigrants.\footnote{Niel MacMaster, Colonial Migrants, and Racism: Algerians in France 1900-62 (New York, St. Martins Press, 1997), 50-52, 104-106.} The overt difference of Muslims made some in France uneasy because it defied the universal sameness that French citizens were expected to embody.

The increased visibility of colonial subjects in the metropole did not go unnoticed by French feminists and the pages of La Française devoted generous attention to the condition of North African women. But these French women’s preconceptions about Islam and their status as colonizers dictated the maternal way in which they interacted with Muslim women. French
feminists’ relationship with North African women was not characterized by the same mutual struggle that united them with their fellow Europeans. Instead, they pitied “the veiled ‘moukères,’ archaic ghosts” who were “slaves of tradition and of ancestral beliefs.” Contributors to La Française expressed their indignation that women were kept cloistered inside their homes and were not allowed in public without la voile, “[the] emblem of her servitude.”

While French women blamed outdated traditions and the proclivity of Muslim men to uphold them for the condition of Muslim women in the colonies, they also criticized French men for allowing the situation to continue. Brunschvicg accused France of “[lacking] the courage and energy” to defend Muslim women who were being abused by their men. She asserted that “a civilized country” should not respect “the barbarous and cruel customs that existed before their arrival.” The solution offered by Brunschvicg and others was to improve education in the colonies and actively apply the French Civil Code so the next generation benefitted from the same liberties as women in the metropole. While contributors to La Française argued for the diligent application of the French Civil Code in Algeria to liberate “slaves of tradition,” they simultaneously argued that revision of the code was necessary at home to liberate “the French woman, slave of the French code.” Problems of national identity posed by the visible racial and cultural difference of colonial subjects resembled those posed by the visible sexual difference of women. The concept of universal sameness French national identity was based on, biologically excluded “gendered and racialized subjects” from citizenship. Rather than relate to colonial subjects as partners in similar struggles for equality, French women regarded colonial indigènes

52 C. Fel, “La situation sociale de la musulmane d’Algérie,” La Française, 5-12 April 1931.
with the same parental attitude they themselves experienced in France, apparently unaware of the irony.

*La Française* also made efforts to dispel beliefs that “the [Muslim] woman is not allowed to leave the home [because] the Coran does not allow it.” Many articles addressing the condition of North African women made a point of mentioning that “when the prophet Mohamed founded his religion he had no intention of reducing Muslim women to slavery,” or that “the Coran does not object to [women’s] education.” These points were reasserted frequently during the 1930s, which implied they were probably common misperceptions about Islam, but also that feminists committed to their eradication. The newspaper consistently tried to shift blame away from race and religion and identified outdated traditions as the source preventing civilization in the North African colonies. One article even likened the situation in Algeria to previous periods in France: “the error is to attribute to race those things that we could see here in France prior to the vigorous campaign which culminated with … the efficient organization of schools.”

According to this argument, education was the most effective method of breaking future generations away from antiquated customs. Feminists advocated the position that education in the home and in the classroom for both boys and girls was an essential part of bringing civilization to the colonies. They argued that their sex enabled them to extend the civilizing mission “into the homes of indigenous women who have avoided contact with European civilization.” Women were able to open “the door that appeared to be heavily closed for eternity on the lives of Muslim women.” Furthermore, because “all for the child” was “a feminine principle,” their unique capacity as women made them indispensable to the *mission*

---

57 C. Fel, “La situation sociale de la musulmane d’Algérie,” *La Française*, 5-12 April 1931.  
civilisatrice. They argued that the role they played in civilizing the colonies was grounds for the extension of equal rights to women, but as with most arguments of feminists in interwar France, this fell on deaf ears.

Although French feminists wrote repeatedly in *La Française* during the 1930s that neither race nor religion was the cause of backwardness in North Africa, their continued insistence implied that this was likely a common misperception that persisted in France throughout the interwar years. Although feminist contributors conveyed an air of tolerance towards race and religion, they sometimes betrayed the presence of underlying prejudices towards Islam and stereotypes of non-white races in their own belief systems. Traces of these prejudices were especially apparent in the newspaper’s coverage of some predominantly Muslim nations that fell outside the French empire.

French women’s presumptions about Islam dictated their maternal approach towards women in the North African colonies, but these preconceived notions left little room for the independent feminist movements of Muslim women in places like Egypt and Turkey. Having identified Islam as “the part of the world that is most hostile to the liberation of women,” French feminists especially struggled with how to reconcile this view of Islam with Turkish women’s procurement of “complete equality in all fields.” Contributors to *La Française* made sincere efforts to applaud the achievements of their Turkish sisters, but it was clear that Turkish women’s equality embarrassed them far more than German or Spanish gender equality. Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, president of the Paris chapter of the UFSF and a frequent contributor to *La Française*, expressed her surprise over the extension of equal rights to women in the Republic of Turkey, but she nonetheless attempted to cite it as an example for the possible

---

future of the North African colonies where she was working to educate Muslim women. In response she was told that Turkey was an exception that could not be duplicated in other (presumably Muslim) countries.63

Instead of offering any further support for the potential of the Turkish model in the colonies, Mme. Malaterre-Sellier went on to describe the rapid progression of the Egyptian women’s movement towards equal rights. While she did not fail to commend the gains for women in Turkey, she ended her article with a warning for French women and all of Europe:

Yes, feminism is on the march on the Islamic world, and if French women are not careful, it is not at all impossible that Egyptian women will have political rights before them. ...Our Europe, which claims to bring the torch of superior civilization to other countries, should understand, first, that the mark of true civilization is to give women as well as men the means to develop one’s personality in all areas and activities.64

Assessments of women’s progress in Turkey and Egypt faintly echoed similar evaluations of Germany or Spain, but generally the overall tone and message were drastically different. Where Spanish equality inspired hope and offered an example for France, Turkish equality inspired fear and appeared as a threat to French civilization. The Turkish example, and to some extent the Egyptian, stood out for Mme. Malaterre-Sellier and her feminist peers because they did not conform to French ideas about Islam or republicanism. In their estimation, the overt visibility of the Muslim religion conflicted with secular French values, making them two incompatible concepts. Feminists did deem the Turkish and Egyptian examples useful as support for arguments that France was not living up to its claims of civilisation supérieure unless women were given equal rights. But these examples were rarely, if ever, seriously considered as appropriate models for gender equality because they did not embody all the republican values glorified in France since the Revolution and fully embraced by French feminists in the 1930s.

By 1938 the tone of *La Française* and the French feminist movement as whole began to shift. The *mere du foyer* section, which usually monopolized the inside back page of each issue, disappeared, and short snippets headed *a travers le monde* took up entire pages tracing the march towards war that occurred throughout Europe. The newspaper paid less attention to colonial developments while closely scrutinizing events in Germany. The newspaper’s contributors did not completely abandon their feminist goals, but they clearly recognized the storm gathering on Europe’s horizon and acknowledged a need for national unity.

Women’s lack of progress during the interwar years came to a head at the end of the 1930s when the Daladier government adopted the *Code de la Famille* in July of 1939. The Family Code solidified the primacy of pronatalist and family concerns and legitimized women’s domestic role as political imperative. Anticipation of war and domestic political turmoil secured consensus around right-wing, traditionalist ideas and ushered them into law. In the last years of the decade, issues of *La Française* became less frequent, reflecting the standing of feminists concerns, until it suspended publication altogether during the Nazi occupation and the Vichy regime.65 The Vichy government’s family policy built on the developments of the 1930s, and essentially made the “femme au foyer” a captive of the “rénovation nationale.”66 Liberation and suffrage, however welcome, did not necessarily release women from the confines of *le foyer*. The Fourth Republic included several collaborators – some of whom had pioneered the Family code in 1939 – who enacted family policy very similar to that of Vichy. Furthermore, suffrage was described as a “gift” from Charles de Gaulle that merely reaffirmed women’s dependant status.67

66 Ibid., 194.
67 Ibid., 200.
Louise Weiss, a well-known radical feminist of the interwar period, conceded that “Frenchwomen [would] have obtained their political rights at [that] moment,” regardless of their fight for the vote during the 1930s, but she insisted that the struggle of feminists was necessary for defining enfranchisement as a response to the “aspirations” of feminists in the Third Republic rather than a “gift” from the men of the Fourth Republic. While the women of the postwar era might have been able to celebrate suffrage as the outcome of their interwar campaigns, until recently history has mostly perpetuated what Siân Reynolds has called “amnesia,” and subsequent generations generally accepted the myth of generous men who “invited to the ladies to vote” after the war. In France, women were just as prone to this amnesia as men, and many were quick to forget the cross-cultural identification as women with their foreign counterparts during the interwar period. Feminism did not disappear after the war, but in the rapidly changing atmosphere of post-war Europe, it often took a back seat to more “French” concerns.

While women did not necessarily achieve the goal of complete social, political and economic equality following the Second World War, they finally ceased to be the definitive “other” against which French identity was conceived. Following World War Two French men and women alike witnessed the power and influence of their nation decline rapidly as the world settled into a Cold War mentality and the United States became a domineering presence across the globe. At the heart of the Cold War was an ideological conflict between the capitalist and communist economic models, and American efforts to assert the primacy of their model

68 Scott, Paradoxes, 163-164.
69 According to Reynolds this was a Europe-wide phenomenon following the decision to enfranchise women. She argues that this post-suffrage amnesia operated on several levels. First, it made the assumption that enfranchising women had no major residual effects on men. Second, it enabled people to ignore that systems were essentially undemocratic prior to universal suffrage and avoid questions as to why a particular group of people was singled out in the first place. Third, it gave those men who “granted women the vote” a chance to congratulate themselves for being so generous and avoid acknowledging that it was not their gift to give. Finally, it enabled people to ignore that many of the current political structures were established without the consent of at least half of the population who were obliged to accept the existing structure they had no say in developing. Reynolds, “Lateness,” 92-94.
throughout Europe allowed them to easily step into this role of “other” among French consciousness. Meanwhile, the 1954 Algerian Revolution and the subsequent decolonization gave rise to an image of France as “race-free” prior to the emergence of twentieth-century immigration, and spotlighted racial difference among the spectrum of things antithetical to the republican universalist tradition.

Feminists, and to a large extent women in general, continued to ascribe to the universalist definition of French national identity during the Cold War Era. It is unfair, of course, to hold interwar French feminists entirely responsible for their inability to recognize cracks in the foundation of a system they were raised to venerate or to claim that the conditions of the 1920s and 1930s were even amenable to such a realization. Regardless of the blame, the feminist movement insistently revered a French republican ideal of universal citizenship, which merely had yet to be realized by the Third Republic. Without recognizing that “universalism gains its meaning by contrast to particularism,” they were mostly content to allow others to “permanently resist abstraction” and inhabit the “obscene underside” of the universalist ideal in their place.

To some extent this apparent mollification was a result of French feminists’ failure to take full advantage of the free exchange of ideas between women across national, cultural, and racial borders during the interwar years. The cooperation of foreign feminists presented the chance to identify with other women as women united by similar struggles for gender equality. And while this did occur at a certain level, French women’s association with the international feminist movement does not appear to have evolved beyond superficial levels in the years leading up to

---

the Second World War. While French feminists did develop sisterly bonds with their foreign counterparts, they rarely used the success of other models to challenge or even reevaluate the foundations of the French republican model. They ignored, or at the very least failed to recognize, the masculine bias inherent in that model or the racial and religious prejudices it fostered.