

Christiansen on Offen (2018)

Offen, Karen. *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870–1920*. Cambridge UP, 2018, Pp. xvi + 694, ISBN 978-1-107-18804-4

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This hefty companion to Karen Offen's 2017 volume (*The Woman Question in France, 1400–1870*) aims to “reconstruct and interrogate [...] the explosion of debates on the woman question” during the first five decades of the Third Republic (ix) while emphasizing the interconnectedness of myriad issues (contraception, abortion, paternity suits, suffrage, depopulation, education, work, prostitution, the women's press...) fueling those debates. The titles of the main sections—Familiarization, Encounter, Climax, Anti-Climax—correspond to what Offen considers the four stages in a sexual relationship (x). The book departs from earlier treatments of feminism and women's history that are structured by long periods, an approach which to her mind “foreclosed the possibility/opportunity for the rich, deep contextualized reconstruction and analysis that the investigation of shorter periods can allow” (xi). Offen is adamant that her study is not about images of women, masculine stereotypes of women, or women as muse for male creativity, but rather about “a ‘war’ whose weapons were words” fought by the men and women “who spoke up, who engaged in polemics for and against the emancipation of women in French society” (x).

Drawing on the work of Anne Cova, Geneviève Fraisse, Elinor Accampo, Mary Lynn Stewart, Stephen Hause, and Mary Louise Roberts, to name but a few, Offen openly encourages dialogue, regularly underscoring where her conclusions differ from those of others, in the hope that readers themselves will participate in the debates about how to interpret evidence (in this spirit of collaboration, Offen has deposited copies of her primary materials in the Special Collections archive of the Stanford University libraries). She laments, for example, the emphasis on suffrage in the scholarship on French feminism between 1900 and 1914, since feminists in fact worked tirelessly toward effecting a plethora of changes in the institutions and laws of the Third Republic; for them, getting the vote was never an end in itself, but the means to attain a range of reforms (338). Similarly, Offen wonders why debates on the woman question do not figure prominently in discussions of the Great War, even in those purportedly offering a women's history of that cataclysmic event (547). Finally, she challenges feminist scholars' use of the term *power* (which, she maintains, French women have always had, along with influence) when they actually mean *authority*, denied to them for centuries (624). “[H]aving ‘power’ and ‘influence’ is a very fine thing,” Offen declares, but exercising authority, particularly in political life, “is even more desirable” (624).

Offen's lengthy discussion of the origins of feminism (starting with the word itself) and of the efforts to define it (as evidenced by the many adjectives used to qualify it: familial, integral, Christian, socialist, bourgeois, radical, male-feminists), provides a context for the *mise en scène* of the key events between 1870 and 1920. Offen showcases the principal feminist players such as Nelly Roussel (“the integral feminist who performed her femininity as no other had before her,” with “magnetism, theatrical ‘star power,’ [and] eloquence” [397–98]), Madeleine Pelletier (who believed that physical sex is not as important as psychological sex [376], that a fetus is not a person until born [429], and that women could not be emancipated without renouncing feminine dress and behavior [377]); Arria Ly (who argued for complete female autonomy and lifelong virginity, and who, when a journalist intimated that she was a lesbian, challenged the editor of his paper to a pistol duel in the name of feminism [381]), not to mention Marguerite Durand, Hubertine Auclert, Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix, Maria Vérone, Jane Misme, Maria Deraismes, and Louise Compain, among many others.

Offen gives meticulous accounts of the activities of women's congresses and organizations, pausing to discuss various scandals which captured the public's attention (including the case of a woman who murdered the man who, after seducing and impregnating her, refused to help her during her pregnancy; and that of a man expelled from the *Fédération du livre* for allowing his wife to work). Memorable tidbits abound. *Surmenage*—overworking the brain—during adolescence was thought to endanger girls' reproductive capabilities (92); a feminist who wanted to shake upper-class readers of *La Fronde* out of their complacency wrote that the handkerchiefs and dishtowels sewn by imprisoned prostitutes infected with venereal diseases were not washed before being sold (240); motherhood was viewed as women's equivalent of men's military service, even before World War I decimated the population (295); patriotic postcards featuring images of a bayonet and a repeating rifle meant to evoke a thrusting penis were used to encourage soldiers on leave to make babies (570); public debates on the woman question began earlier and continued longer in France than in any other country (621). Of particular note are Offen's discussions of the seemingly constant attempts by men to define and/or limit women's roles. Théodore Joran claimed in a prize-winning book that “good households are those where the man considers the woman as an object made for his own personal pleasure and well-being” (qtd. 362). Paul Flat insisted that women not only need but demand to be dominated by men (371). Dr. Charles Burlureaux, author of the first French tract on sex education for girls, recommended that women bear three children “in order

to attain flourishing health” (402), while Fernand Boverat set the number higher, calling women who did not give France at least four children deserters (430).

To say that the book is thoroughly documented would be an understatement; on many pages, lengthy footnotes encroach rather aggressively upon the real estate of the narrative proper. This is in part due to Offen’s decision to forgo a formal bibliography in favor of bibliographical/historiographical notes. As convenient as these are, readers may well bemoan the lack of a comprehensive bibliography. There are occasional errors in the French, including numerous missing or incorrect accents. These slight glitches aside, it is hard to overstate the importance of Offen’s rigorous and engrossing study, described in the publisher’s blurb, with very good reason, as “magisterial.”

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