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Gendered Nations: The French Revolution and Women's Political Participation

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Most theories of nationalism have taken a supposedly gender neutral approach that have resulted in a pattern of minimizing women's contributions to the nation in scholarship.¹ However, culturally specific conceptions of gender difference inform nationalisms and are produced by the nation as seen in the political exclusion of French women during the French Revolution. The nationalisms of the French Revolution were in part inspired by enlightenment philosophies and championed universal rights for the people of France.² The limits to these universal rights were made clear as women were systematically excluded from political participation. French understandings of gender differences at the time influenced the decision by the nation to prevent women from various forms of political participation and consequently, the nation reinforced certain expectations of femininity upon women. If gender differences and nationalisms are understood as being contingent then the exclusion of women from the full benefits of citizenship during the French Revolution henceforth is defined by conceptions of gender and interpretations of enlightenment values by the French nation. Furthermore, particular women who defied beliefs concerning the nature of their gender found ways to participate in politics during the French Revolution and not only became early voices for women's rights, but at times found themselves in a state of tension with the nation.

While society accepted that men and women were complimentary forces, the nationalisms of the French Revolution argued that the different natures of men and women determined which gender was fit for political activity. A combination of philosophical and medical theories attributed the male body with activity, liberty, freedom, politics, reasoning, speech, and educa-

¹ Mrinalini Sinha, "Gender and Nation." In *Women's History in Global Perspective*, edited by Bonnie G. Smith. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 231.

² Ross E. Dunn and Laura J. Mitchell, *Panorama: A World History* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 577.

tion.³ The female body was considered inherently passive, dutiful, dependent, private, domestic, maternal, and silent.⁴ Even though these characteristics were restricted to gender, they were not powerful enough on their own to exclude women from political activity. In *Gender and Nation*, Mrinalini Sinha claims that constructions of masculinity and femininity are processes “in which the gendered discourse of nationalism has played an important role.”⁵ The nation’s use of these characteristics creates a French nationalism that justifies the restriction of women from political participation as an extension of femininity. By focusing specifically on the female body as different and suited only for the domestic sphere it was more difficult for women to make claims to political rights, especially while the male body represented the aims of the Revolution.⁶ Women were to be mothers who educated their children in the principles of liberty and political participation was viewed as abandoning the care of their families.⁷ Instead of granting universal rights to men and women, the nation determined that women were suited solely for maternal roles, not the public and political spheres that men inhabited, thus exhibiting how crucial nationalisms are to perceptions of both femininity and masculinity.

An awareness of the process in which Enlightenment rhetoric allowed for the continued exclusion of women from political participation as a result of interpretations by the nation demonstrates the dependent nature of conceptions of gender and nationalisms. As a product of Enlightenment thinking and the French Revolution, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, underscores how a nationalism can determine masculinity and femininity. Citizenship is

³ Joan Wallach Scott, “French Feminists and the Rights of 'Man': Olympe de Gouges’s Declarations,” *History Workshop* 28 (1989): 4, accessed November 20, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288921>.

⁴ Scott, “French Feminists,” 4.

⁵ Sinha, *Gender and Nation*, 236.

⁶ Lisa Beckstrand, *Deviant Women of the French Revolution and the Rise of Feminism* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 23-24.

⁷ Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo, “The National Convention Outlaws Women’s Clubs and Popular Societies,” In *The French Revolution: A Document Collection*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 235.

in part derived from nationalisms as ideologies and works explicitly or implicitly to exclude various groups from citizenship.⁸ The *Declaration*, enacted August of 1789, expresses the will of the Revolutionary government in announcing that “the National Assembly recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and citizen.”⁹ In its most basic sense, the rights included freedom, equality, liberty, property, and resistance to oppression. However, the language used explicitly meant that men were considered citizens by the nation and could be extended “natural, inalienable, and sacred” rights. Men, as a result, could make claims to universal rights because they were presumed to be reasonable, active citizens. It also implied that women were not citizens of the French nation; they had no claim to the rights of the *Declaration*, and as such were not entitled to resist their oppression. In Article III, the *Declaration* states “the source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation.”¹⁰ If the nation retains the authority in France, then it is necessarily responsible for extending or denying women political rights. In a cyclic pattern, gender conceptions inform decisions by the government and the language of the nation confirms women’s exclusion from citizenship and their allegedly passive natures.

When the discussion of women’s rights was left to the public, gender differences formed the basis of arguments against inclusive universal rights. Louis-Marie Prudhomme, founder of the newspaper *Révolutions de Paris*, discussed women’s citizenship in an article titled “On the Influence of the Revolution on Women.”¹¹ Published in 1791, the article describes how many women have complained about the revolution in “numerous letters they report to us that for two

⁸ Sinha, *Gender and Nation*, 234.

⁹ Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo, “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen,” In *The French Revolution: A Document Collection*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 102-104.

¹⁰ Mason and Rizzo, *Declaration*, 103.

¹¹ “Prudhomme, ‘On the Influence of the Revolution on Women,’” Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Accessed December 15, 2014. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/483/>.

years now it seems there is but one sex in France.”¹² His article acts as support for the idea that French women wanted to enjoy the same revolution as men. Prudhomme, however, proclaims that nature determines the “functions” of men and women, stating “when the father of a family leaves to defend or lay claim to the rights of property, security, equality, or liberty in a public assembly, the mother of the family, focused on her domestic duties, must make order and cleanliness, ease and peace reign at home.”¹³ Since women are “endowed with private virtues” he believes they have no use for civil and political liberty. Instead they are destined for a purely domestic life. Prudhomme’s argument is defined by the French nationalisms and conceptions of gender as he characterizes women as passive and dependent, supporting the patriarchal social hierarchy that affirms men’s status above women. He continues his article by specifying that “the tumult of camps, the storms of public places, the agitations of the tribunals are not at all suitable for the second sex.”¹⁴ Despite not being recognized as citizens, French women were active participants of the French Revolution from the beginning. On October 5, 1789, Parisian women marched to Versailles to demand bread from the king and escort him back to Paris.¹⁵ An illustration depicting the march shows women armed with cannons and weaponry ready to defend themselves.¹⁶ The image contrasts with that of the docile mothers portrayed by Prudhomme and others. Regardless of their voices and actions, French nationalisms continued to deny the extension of political rights to women.

¹² Prudhomme, “On the Influence of the Revolution on Women.”

¹³ Prudhomme, “On the Influence of the Revolution on Women.”

¹⁴ Prudhomme, “On the Influence of the Revolution on Women.”

¹⁵ Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo, “The Woman Cheret, The Event of Paris and Versailles, by one of the Ladies who Had the Honor to Be in the Deputation to the General Assembly.” In *The French Revolution: A Document Collection*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 84-85.

¹⁶ Mason and Rizzo, “The Women Cheret,” 85.

Although a majority of society explained and portrayed Enlightenment values as strictly gendered, there were in fact appeals for true universal rights for women voiced by men. Marquis de Condorcet, a French philosopher active during the Revolution, writes that the violation of natural rights has “escaped the philosophers and legislators when...establishing the common rights of the individuals of the human race and to making those rights the sole foundation of political institutions.”¹⁷ Condorcet recognizes the relationship of citizenship and modes of exclusion within nationalisms. In his article “On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship” he asks why half of France’s population has been denied their natural rights and explains that women are just as capable of exercising their rights as men. He argues against accepted conventions, saying it is social structures and a lack of educational opportunities that have delegated women to the private sphere, not their natures. Condorcet states “the rights of men follow only from the fact that they are feeling beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning about these ideas. Since women have the same qualities, they necessarily have equal rights.”¹⁸ If inconsistencies within the application of Enlightenment ideals were noticed by both men and women, then the gendered nationalisms incorporated into the nation cannot be viewed as reflective of all opinions. France’s nationalisms, and thus citizenship, were rooted in the difference of men and women, but the writings of Condorcet, as well as others like him, show that understandings of gender are specific to time and place and possess the ability to evolve.

One woman who shared Condorcet’s belief in comprehensive universal rights was Olympe de Gouges. When de Gouges published *The Declaration of the Rights of Women and of Citizen* she not only became a politically active woman but found herself and her ideas in contest

¹⁷ “Condorcet, ‘On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship,’ July 1790,” Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Accessed December 2, 2014. <https://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/292/>.

¹⁸ Condorcet, “On the Admission of Women.”

with the prevailing French nationalisms. De Gouges calls upon French women to “wake up... the tocsin of reason is known throughout the universe: know your rights.” In the *Rights of Women*, de Gouges offers her own version of the declaration adopted by the French nation that explicitly extends political rights to women in asserting “woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights.”¹⁹ When read as a parallel to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, de Gouges’s *Rights of Women* acts as an addition and a replacement.²⁰ From her perspective, France’s nationalisms needed to interpret Enlightenment philosophies as necessarily belonging to men and women, and subsequently grant active citizenship regardless of gender. De Gouges recognizes gender differences, but instead of maintaining the idea of the separate natures of men and women, she claims “everywhere they cooperate in this immortal masterpiece with a harmonious togetherness.”²¹ Her rhetoric seeks to accentuate the equality of men and women in order to justify women’s citizenship and political participation. Because the *Rights of Women* finds its foundation in the natural rights of the Enlightenment, de Gouges only requests that women acquire the rights granted to men by the Revolution.²² She conveys her frustration over the unequal distribution of rights in stressing “[man] claims to enjoy the revolution for himself alone and reasserts his rights to equality.”²³ To de Gouges, the Revolution represented a transformation of France into a nation that could include women as citizens, but instead strengthened traditional conceptions of gender.

As an individual, Olympe de Gouges becomes an interesting figure in relation to the gendered Revolutionary nationalisms for more than her writing. De Gouges wrote in order to influ-

¹⁹ John Cole, trans. “Declaration of the Rights of Women and of Citizen.” In *Between the Queen and Cabby*, 31.

²⁰ Scott, “French Feminists,” 7.

²¹ Cole, trans. “Declaration of the Rights of Women and of Citizen.” 30.

²² Claire Goldberg Moses, “‘Equality’ and ‘Difference’ in Historical Perspective: A Comparative Examination of the Feminisms of French Revolutionaries and Utopian Socialists.” In *Rebel Daughters*, edited by Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine. (New York and Chicago: Oxford University Press, 1992), 236.

²³ Cole, trans. “Declaration of the Rights of Women and of Citizen.” 30.

ence public opinion and therefore her participation in political discourses defied the expectations of her gender.²⁴ Even though French femininity portrayed women as silent, passive, and inhabiting only the private sphere, de Gouges publicly protested the oppression of women. By acting outside the limits of French conceptions of gender, among other reasons, de Gouges came into conflict with the Revolutionary government and was executed on November 3, 1793.²⁵ Following her death the nation held her life as a public example of the types of behaviors French women should avoid. Pierre Chaumette, a Revolutionary politician, asked women to “never forget that virago, that woman-man, the impudent Olympe de Gouges, who abandoned the cares of her household, to get mixed up in politics...forgetting the virtues of her sex led her to the guillotine.”²⁶ De Gouges was portrayed to the public as being executed specifically for her political efforts and for acting outside the domestic realm. In doing so she obscured the boundaries between masculinity and femininity; hence he refers to her as a “woman-man.” Women who did not uphold their natures were characterized as “desensitized, unfeminine, and ultimately deviant.”²⁷ While speaking for the French nation, Chaumette emphasized that de Gouges’s death was a direct result of forgotten virtues. In this way Revolutionary nationalisms work to reinforce the strict conceptions of gender that allowed for the continued refusal to grant women citizenship.

Though one of the most vocal women, De Gouges was certainly not the only woman to become politically active during the French Revolution. In order that she might satisfy her personal political interests while preserving her sense of femininity as defined by the nation, Manon Roland converted her home into a salon for members of the Girondin faction of the National As-

²⁴ Beckstrand, *Deviant Women*, 11.

²⁵ John Cole, *Between the Queen and Cabby* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 202.

²⁶ Pierre Chaumette, “La Feuille du Salut Public.” (1793), in *Deviant Women of the French Revolution and the Rise of Feminism*, by Lisa Beckstrand (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 15.

²⁷ Beckstrand, *Deviant Women*, 11.

sembly. As the wife of a man who held a position in the French government, Roland used her husband's role to quietly influence political change during the Revolution.²⁸ The mode of participation Roland chose was directly influenced by her gender as she was careful to keep herself from appearing overtly active. In her memoir Roland comments on the meetings of the Girondins, saying "these conferences interested me a lot, and so as not to miss them, I never deviated from the role appropriate to my sex."²⁹ She would write letters or sew during the meetings because such tasks were viewed as suitable for a women's nature, yet she could still listen to, in her own words, the "discussion [that] little suits women."³⁰ Roland sought to exemplify the traditional virtues for women as preconceived by French nationalisms, however, she defies these same expectations through her commitment to the Revolution and interest in politics.³¹ Her activism, though more covert than de Gouges's, was sufficient to draw the attention of those in power and she faced the guillotine on November 8, 1793.³² Also like de Gouges, her public execution served to demonstrate that attempts to change gender-based nationalisms would be quelled. Chaumette references her as well in his warning to the women of France, "remember that haughty wife of a foolish and treacherous spouse, the Roland woman who thought herself suited to govern the republic and raced to her death."³³ Chaumette's comment stresses that women should not concern themselves with the affairs of the government and in doing so, Roland brought her death upon herself. He asserts "it is contrary to all the laws of nature for a woman to want to make herself a man," suggesting that a woman interested in politics is not a woman at all. As a

²⁸ Beckstrand, *Deviant Women*, 19.

²⁹ Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo, "Manon Roland on the Meetings of the Girondins in Her Home," In *The French Revolution: A Document Collection*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 158.

³⁰ Mason and Rizzo, "Manon Roland," 158.

³¹ Beckstrand, *Deviant Women*, 16.

³² Mason and Rizzo, "Manon Roland," 157.

³³ Pierre Chaumette, "La Feuille du Salut Public," In *Deviant Women*, 15.

consequence of French conceptions of gender and interpretations of enlightenment ideals, Roland's life and death were determined by Revolutionary nationalisms.

Although the nation remained relatively ambiguous on women's citizenship and political participation towards the beginning of the Revolution, the government affirmed the denial of universal rights for women in 1793. Preceding the executions of de Gouges and Roland by a few days, and in response to their actions as well as the similar actions of other women, the rejection of women's rights was officially and explicitly incorporated into France's nationalism.

The government addressed the issue of women's rights in their discussion regarding women's clubs and popular societies. In order to "unite for the general good," many women gathered in clubs where they read the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* as well as the decrees of the nation and discussed the events of the Revolution.³⁴ These clubs provided French women with access to the public world of politics despite the fact that they were not considered active citizens. However, the established social structure allowed for the prohibition of such clubs. The members of National Convention asked if women could "exercise political rights and take an active part in affairs of government" and "deliberate together in political associations or popular societies."³⁵

The National Convention answered both questions in the negative, saying "we believe, therefore, and without a doubt you will think as we do, that it is not possible for women to exercise political rights."³⁶ This decision was directly influenced by France's conceptions of gender with the resulting nationalism also working to reaffirm the continuation of certain expectations of femininity. If "morals and even nature have assigned her functions for her," as the speaker of the National Convention claims, then the rhetoric of the nation supported the traditional understandings

³⁴ Dominique Godineau, *The Woman of Paris and Their French Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 101-102.

³⁵ Mason and Rizzo, "The National Convention Outlaws Women's Clubs," 234.

³⁶ Mason and Rizzo, "The National Convention Outlaws Women's Clubs," 235.

of gender in arguing that women belonged in the private sphere.³⁷ In excluding women from all political activity, Dominique Godineau suggests that “from this natural and unchanging order [of femininity],” the Revolutionary government created social order.³⁸ Not only were French women denied citizenship by the National Convention; they were simultaneously banned from other forms of political participation as well. Political activity was viewed as deviating from women's “natures” because it meant they were not preoccupied with domestic interests.³⁹ Women possessed the characteristics suited to mothers and wives, not enthusiastic citizens and therefore women’s participation in the public sphere meant they were acting against the dominate French nationalism.

Like all nationalisms, those of the French Revolution were influenced by and informed popular conceptions of gender. The rhetoric of the Revolutionary government relied on the belief in the different natures of men and women to support interpretations of enlightenment philosophies that allowed for the continued exclusion of women from political rights and participation. These nationalisms were in no way supported by the entire nation as people like Condorcet, de Gouges, and Roland sought the extension of truly universal rights. Women’s political activity, at times, brought them into conflict with the nation because they were not upholding certain expectations of femininity. While the Revolution promoted universal rights, the women of France would not achieve the right to vote until 1944, when the political climate of the country and understandings of gender finally allowed for such a development within its nationalisms.⁴⁰ Future scholarship holds the potential for “recasting the study of gender and of the nation” when nations

³⁷ Mason and Rizzo, “The National Convention Outlaws Women’s Clubs,” 234.

³⁸ Godineau, *The Woman of Paris*, 169.

³⁹ Godineau, *The Women of Paris*, 168.

⁴⁰ R. B. Rose, “Symbols, Citizens, or Sisterhood: Women and the Popular Movement in the French Revolution: The Beginning of a Tradition,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 40 (2008) Accessed November 20, 2014, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8497.1994.tb00106.x, 314.

are understood as inherently gendered.⁴¹ Considerations of the interactions between gender differences and nationalisms will provide new insight into the larger workings of historical events, like in the case of the French Revolution.

⁴¹ Sinha, *Gender and Nation*, 266.

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