

Francine Muel-Dreyfus. *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine: A Contribution to a Political Sociology of Gender.* Translated by Kathleen A. Johnson. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. x + 388 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-2774-5; \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2777-6.



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The Feminine Essence and France's National Revolution

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In *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine: A Contribution to the Sociology of Gender*, Francine Muel-Dreyfus locates the notion of the "eternal feminine," the belief in an unchanging feminine essence, at the center of Vichy France's National Revolution. Muel-Dreyfus traces the sociogenesis of this ideology from 1870 and the conservative repression following the Commune, through conflicts over differing ideals of femininity during the Third Republic, to the solidification of an ideology of femininity based on biological difference and a feminine culture of sacrifice with the defeat of 1940. Using the setting of disaster and upheaval at the initiation of the National Revolution as a laboratory to analyze the resurgence of mythic reason during periods of crisis, Muel-Dreyfus highlights the broad and apparently apolitical support for an ideology that seemed to belie the chaos of the democratic "lie." Returning women to their "natural" and "real" place in society was intrinsic to the Vichy Regime's project of creating an orderly society rid of the decadence and individualism of the Third Republic and firmly based on "le-

gitimate hierarchies," for which the masculine/feminine dichotomy was the cornerstone.

Following the armistice of 1940, conservative elements in French society asserted that the German victory was punishment for the sins of the Third Republic. Contrition and redemption were necessary for recovery, and Marshal Petain was accepted as a prophet by a population in a state of "believing expectation" and in search of salvation. In these despairing conditions, where "millennial balances" seemed to hold redemptive possibility, Muel-Dreyfus asserts, the seeming timelessness of the myth of the "eternal feminine" was appealing. The supposed ahistoricity of this ideology inspired collective amnesia of the debates of the Third Republic over women's place in society, education, and politics. Muel-Dreyfus examines these earlier battles over competing visions of femininity, the disparate producers of the "eternal feminine" that united under the National Revolution, and the political effects of the return to a supposed "eternal" social order.

In part 1 of *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine*, "The Hypnotic Power of Punishment," Muel-Dreyfus begins with

the examination of a wide range of work by intellectuals, writers, journalists, and politicians that united in support of the “eternal feminine” and the National Revolution. These advocates of a return to the “real” were, according to Muel-Dreyfus, a culmination of fifty years of ideological battle waged since the Dreyfus Affair. She cites a “vagueness of sympathy” (p. 34) toward the Action Française that united these ideas and intellectuals and made them “an effective transmission belt for the regime” (p. 34). The banality of these ideas about nature, femininity, and family allowed them to be presented as “apolitical.”

These “apolitical” ideas were eagerly accepted by the Catholic Church, embittered by over thirty years of battle with the secular Republic. Muel-Dreyfus states that even if the Church did not always support government policy, it wholeheartedly endorsed the regime’s ideas on women and the family, and “enriched the state-influenced rhetoric with their own language and translated it into the familiar language used by the many men and women who listened to them” (p. 57). This legitimated the regime in the eyes of the faithful, a very political consequence of adherence to a seemingly apolitical ideology. The morality of a particular social hierarchy was supported by the notion that the “demographic sin” committed by selfish individuals was cause for France’s defeat. The apparently neutral, consensual notion of a defense of the family was mustered in support of population growth.

In part 2, “The Culture of Sacrifice,” Muel-Dreyfus examines the propaganda and publications of the Vichy government as well as the genesis of the notion of feminine renunciation at the center of what she calls “the subculture of gender produced by the French State” (p. 170). The propaganda produced by the regime, Muel-Dreyfus explains, was distant from the reality of battles for women’s access to education and political power. The reinvention of “Mother’s Day” as a national holiday of grand proportions abetted the collective amnesia surrounding the battles of Republican and Social Catholic feminists over women’s access to employment. Competing visions of femininity were forgotten and it was the culture of sacrifice of the “Christian Feminist” movement that was mobilized by the Vichy government. The seemingly compatible goals of Catholic feminine culture and the Vichy government led to growth in the size and influence of the women’s organizations, like the UFCS (Women’s Civic and Social Union) that had steadfastly defended the patriarchal family in the decades preceding defeat.

Muel-Dreyfus asserts that by 1940, the “eternal feminine” had won out over any competing notions of femininity and seemed to be “an essential precept for all time” (p. 170). Having detailed the femininity propounded by government and Catholic women’s groups, Muel-Dreyfus analyzes efforts to legislate this notion in a society of “family imperialism and feminine subjection.” Legal attempts to remove women from jobs, financial rewards for families who had children within the first two years of married life, and severe restrictions on divorce were instated as attempts to restore order and nature. The state enlisted family and women’s organizations to contribute to national regeneration and a Family Charter was created to encourage family influence in the nation. Muel-Dreyfus emphasizes the importance of the family model for the inegalitarian, hierarchical state.

“Men and women are not equal, and in the family community, which endures only in the complementarity of their skills and functions, they are even less equal than elsewhere. The family is thus a society in which each contributes his or her know-how; it is the model of all societies” (p. 190). The “eternal feminine” supported the “legitimate hierarchies” which were central to the regime.

In her final section, “Biological Order and Social Order,” Muel-Dreyfus continues with an explanation of the political uses of the “eternal feminine” and the family order it inspired for the state. Educational reform was necessary to reestablish hierarchy and order and masculine/feminine opposition was the cornerstone of the “hierarchical representation of the social order and of the correlative disqualification of social advancement through the school” (p. 209) that sought to maintain “legitimate hierarchies.” The control of bodies by the government included both the regeneration of the ill social body and the medical legitimation of “natural” differences and inequalities between sexes, classes, and races.

Vichy and the Eternal Feminine is an extremely useful analysis of the place of gender at the center of the Vichy regime’s ideology. Muel-Dreyfus both elucidates how this ideology inspired the development of state policy on family issues and analyzes the ways that an ideology of gender and femininity based on biological difference and inequality served as the model for a hierarchical, patriarchal state. The analysis would be more complete, however, if one had a fuller sense of how these ideologies affected people in their everyday lives. While she does examine various laws and policies concerning the family, Muel-Dreyfus’s reliance on discourse analy-

sis leaves little insight into how these laws were received, how effectively they were enforced, and how they affected individual families and women. The desire for contrition and redemption experienced after defeat existed alongside death, hunger, and the absence of many fathers of families who remained in prisoner of war camps. Miranda Pollard's *Reign of Virtue* is helpful in exhibiting how the physical conditions of defeat and occupation made many of the Vichy Regime's goals for the family unenforceable.[1] In addition, the absence of a link between discourse and social history makes it difficult for the reader to determine change over time. Historians of Catholic intellectuals, in particular, have asserted that many of the people who supported the National Revolution in 1940 grew disillusioned as the Vichy government became more authoritarian and collaborationist, an issue that is not addressed in Muel-Dreyfus's analysis.[2]

It is perhaps unfair to offer too much criticism of Muel-Dreyfus considering that *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine* was first published in French in 1996 and has provided historians of gender in the United States and France an exhaustive analysis of discourse from which

to move into other areas of research. Having this work in English makes Muel-Dreyfus's work useful to historians of other geographic areas. As she states, "In fact, to speak of women is to speak of something else" (p. 5), and the example of the resurgence and general acceptance of the notion of the "eternal feminine" at this moment of crisis in French history can be useful to scholars of other nations and moments of crisis as well.

Notes

[1]. See Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[2]. While work on Catholic thought under Vichy is lacking in attention to gender, it does show change over time in other areas of thought. See Michael Kelly, "French Catholic Intellectuals During the Occupation" in the *Journal of European Studies* 23 (1993): 179-191, and John Hellman, *The Knight Monks of Vichy France: Uriage, 1940-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

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