WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Bard Masters of Art in Teaching Program
Academic Research Project
January 26, 2018

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Textbook Critique

The textbook chapters I chose to critique comprise the first two sections of Chapter 23, "The French Revolution and Napoleon, 1789-1815," from *World History: Patterns of Interaction* by McDougal Littell, Inc. published in 1999. The first section is entitled, "Revolution Threatens the French King," and the second section is entitled, "Revolution Brings Reform and Terror." Although the history of the French Revolution is complex and complicated, I feel that overall, the textbook does a nice job of covering the main points so that students can get an accurate picture of what happened. There is however a lot that is, understandably, left out. As my Academic Research Project focuses on women's history and gender in the French Revolution, I tried to read these sections with that in mind. What I found was that this textbook account leaves much to be desired with respect to the story of women's contributions to the Revolution.

Although these textbook sections do not leave women entirely out of the picture, they certainly do not feature heavily into the story. The main text sections rarely mention women except to say that they did not received any of the rights that men did. It also relegates them to side notes, literally, by placing most information about them into special boxes on the side on the page, rather than in the main text. One might argue that this was done in an effort to have this information stand out to readers. I would argue the opposite. The boxes for Marie Antoinette and Olympe de Gouges are both labeled "History Makers," which should imply exactly what the label says. However, each box gives only the briefest of descriptions of each woman and her achievements. If the textbook authors truly felt they were "History Makers," which indeed they are, they could have and should have devoted more text and more space to them in the main text instead of in boxes. The current view seems to make them more into mere footnotes on the periphery than anything else.

Since I've spent quite some time with my six monographs, it is difficult not to want to rewrite the entire section to be solely about women and all of the reasons they were denied political rights, but that would not be historically accurate. I must allow that men did play a significant role in the French Revolution. I have done my best to add in the information I felt was most pertinent which keeping the Revolution itself center stage. I made sure to point out the contradiction between Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau's views on equality and women. I did my best to flesh out Marie Antoinette and Olympe de Gouges a little more so that they appeared in the main text of the chapter sections, as well as to add in a bit about Charlotte Corday. If appropriate, I included anything that I could related to women. I was unsure whether a textbook was an appropriate place for discussions of discourse and patriarchy. I tried to stay closer to the facts.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (NEW OFFERING OF TEXTBOOK SECTION)

SETTING THE STAGE

France, in the 1700's, had a large population and a prosperous foreign trade. It was also the center of the Enlightenment. Thought to be most advanced country in Europe, France served as a model for the rest of the world. However, appearances were deceiving because high prices, high taxes, and difficult questions raised by Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Voltaire were causing unrest to grow.

THE OLD REGIME

In the 1770's, while the **Old Regime** - a system of inequality based on feudalism left over from the Middle Ages - was still in place, the people of France were separated into three social classes, known as **estates**.

The Privileged Estates

The First Estate, or clergy, numbered around 130,000 (out of a total population of 27 million) and owned about 10 percent of the land. There were sharp divisions among the clergy. The higher clergy - cardinals, bishops, and heads of monasteries - were from noble families and shared their outlook and interests. The parish priests were often poor and from the class of commoners. The First Estate provided education and relief services to the poor and contributed about 2 percent of its income to the government.

The Second Estate, the nobility, numbered about 350,000, owned about 25 to 30 percent of the land, and paid almost no taxes. Not all members of the Second Estate were wealthy, successful or prestigious.

Not all noble titles were of equal status either since the nobility, like the clergy, had its own natural hierarchy. The Court nobles (those closest to the monarch) were the most

prestigious. Then, there were nobles who earned their titles through military service, so considered themselves of greater importance. Finally, there were those who were granted their noble titles for non-military service, for their work as financiers, administrators, magistrates or court officials. Hundreds of men also acquired titles venally, by purchasing them from the crown rather than having them bestowed for service. **Venality** allowed wealthier members of the Third Estate to join the ranks of the Second Estate.

The Third Estate

The Third Estate had many different kinds of people in it, with vast differences in occupation, level of education, and wealth. About 98 percent of people belonged to the Third Estate and it was made up of three groups.

Peasants, the largest group, made up about 75 to 80 percent of the Third Estate and owned about 35 to 40 percent of the land. Middle class members of the Third Estate owned the rest.

Peasants owed certain duties to the nobles, which were a holdover from medieval times when serfdom was widespread. For example, a peasant had to pay a fee to grind his or her flour or press his or her grapes because the local lord controlled the flour mill and wine press. When harvest time came, the peasant had to work a certain number of days harvesting the noble's crop. Peasants fiercely resented these duties.

Urban craftspeople, shopkeepers, and workers - cooks, servants, and others - made up another part of the Third Estate. Paid low wages and frequently out of work, they often went hungry. If the cost of bread rose, mobs of these workers might attack carts of grain and bread to steal what they needed. These two groups both resented the clergy and the nobles for their special privileges and special treatment.

The last group was known as the **bourgeoisie**, or middle class, consisted about 2 million people, or 8 percent of the population. They owned about 20 to 25 percent of the land. The bourgeoisie included merchants, bankers, artisans, and industrialists, as well as professional people - lawyers, holders of public offices, doctors, and writers.

The middle class was also unhappy with the privileges held by the nobles. Some members of the bourgeoisie did not necessarily want to abolish the nobility, however, but to better their own position. Some bourgeoisie had managed to become nobles by being appointed to public offices that brought with it noble status. The bourgeoisie also shared certain goals with some nobles. Some member of both of these groups were increasingly upset with a monarchical system resting on privileges and on an old and rigid social order. These people were drawn to the new political ideas of the Enlightenment, such as liberty and equality.

The heavily taxed and discontented Third Estate was eager for change.

THE FORCES OF CHANGE

In addition to the growing resentment of the lower classes, there were other factors contributing to the revolutionary mood in France.

Enlightenment Ideas

Even though eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideas included increased criticism of the old order of society, the philosophes did not advocate Revolution. Their views about power and authority in government made people begin to question long-standing notions about the structure of society and using words like *liberty, equality,* and *democracy.* People were inspired by the success of the American Revolution, and the radical ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire. Their ideas, however, were widely spread among the literate middle class and noble elites of France.

While Rousseau is often credited with a view of human equality, the reality is that his thoughts on equality did not extend to women. For Rousseau, women were weaker and less rational than men, and must depend on men. Men, for Rousseau, desire women but do not need them; women, he wrote, both desire men and need them. Additionally, Rousseau believed that women had different educational needs than men since the main purpose in life, according to Rousseau, is for a woman to be a wife and mother. Rousseau's ideas on women were no less influential than his ideas on equality.

> "Is there a sight in the world so touching, so respectable, as that of a mother surrounded by her children...procuring a happy life for her husband and prudently governing the home?...A home whose mistress is absent is a body without a soul which soon falls into corruption; a woman outside of her home loses her greatest luster, and despoiled of her real ornaments, she displays herself indecently...Whatever she may do, one feels that in public she is not in her place..."
>
> -Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Economic Woes

An immediately pressing problem was the near collapse of the French budget. Rapid expansion was occurring in the population, trade, and production. However, the heavy burden of taxes made it impossible to conduct business profitably in France. The cost of living rose for everyone. Bad harvests in 1787 and 1788 and a slowdown in manufacturing led to food shortages, rising prices for food, and unemployment.

During this period, France's government sank deeply into debt. Despite this, the French king and his ministers continued to spend enormous sums of money on wars and court luxuries. The queen, **Marie Antoinette**, was especially known for her extravagance and this too caused popular resentment. France's government nearly doubled when Louis XVI, borrowed heavily to help the American revolutionaries in their war against Great Britain - France's chief rival - sending the budget into total crisis.

A Weak Leader

Strong leadership might have prevented the coming crisis, but Louis XVI was often indecisive and paid little attention to his advisors. He preferred to spend his time hunting or tinkering with locks rather than attending to the details of governing.

Louis had married his wife, Marie Antoinette, when he was 15 and she was 14. Marie Antoinette, was a member of the royal family of Austria, France's long-time enemy. For that reason, she became unpopular as soon as she set foot in France. Artist Elisabeth Vigee-Labrun, who was painting Marie Antoinette for the first time in 1779, described her as being, "in the heyday of her youth and beauty." She also said of the Queen:

> I do not think that Queen Marie Antoinette ever missed an opportunity of saying something pleasant to those who had the honour of being presented to her, and the kindness she always bestowed upon me has ever been one of my sweetest memories.
>
> -Elisabeth Vigee-Labrun

As queen, Marie Antoinette spent so much money on gowns, jewels, and gambling, that she earned the nickname "Madame Deficit" from the French people. Indeed, Marie Antoinette became a symbol upon which the revolutionaries would heap all of their fury and hatred against the monarchy and the old regime.

With France on the verge of financial collapse, Louis attempted to tax aristocrats. The Second Estate forced Louis XVI to call a meeting of the Estates-General, an assembly of representatives from all three estates. This was the first meeting of the Estates-General since 1614.

REVOLUTION DAWNS

The National Assembly

Louis XVI called a meeting of the Estates-General at Versailles on May 5, 1789. In the Estates-General, the First and Second Estates each had about 300 representatives. The Third Estate had almost 600 representatives. Most of the Third Estate wanted to set up a constitutional government that would make the clergy and nobility pay taxes, too.

From the start, there were arguments about how the voting in the Estates-General would be organized. Traditionally, each estate had one vote, meaning that the First and Second Estates could outvote the Third Estate two to one. The Third Estate demanded instead that each deputy have one vote: one person, one vote -- not one vote per whole group. Under the one -person one vote proposal, system, with the help of a few nobles and clerics, the members of the Third Estate would then have a majority vote. The king, however, stated that he favored the existing, one-vote-per-Estate system.

On June 17, 1789, the members of the Third Estate, frustrated that their proposal was ignored, boldly voted to declare that they, as a group, were the **National Assembly.** They stated that the only legitimate law-making body in France was the National Assembly, and that they would draft a constitution. This vote was the first deliberate act of revolution.

Three days later, on June 20, the deputies of the National Assembly arrived at their meeting place, only to find that the doors had been locked. They then moved to a nearby indoor tennis court and swore that they would continue meeting until they had a new constitution. The oath they swore is known as the **Tennis Court Oath**.

Storming the Bastille

Louis XVI prepared to use force against the Third Estate. In Paris, rumors flew that foreign troops were coming to massacre French citizens. On July 14, 1789, about 900 Parisians gathered in the courtyard of the Bastille - an old fortress used as a prison and armory. They stormed the Bastille, and after four hours of fighting, the prison warden surrendered. The rebels cut off the warden's head and demolished the Bastille brick by brick.

When King Louis XVI, returned to his palace at Versailles after a day of hunting, he was told by a duke about the fall of the Bastille. Louis is said to have exclaimed, "Why, this is a revolt?" "No Sire," replied the duke. "It is a revolution."

Ever since, July 14 has been a French national holiday, similar to the U.S. Fourth of July.

The king's authority had collapsed in Paris. Meanwhile, all over France, revolts were breaking out. Popular hatred of the entire landowning system, with its fees and obligations, had finally spilled over into action.

Peasant rebellions became part of the vast panic known as the Great Fear. Rumors spread from village to village that foreign troops were on the way to put down the revolution. The peasants reacted by breaking into the houses of the lords to destroy the records of their obligations.

End of the Old Regime

The National Assembly reacted to news of peasant rebellions and rumors of possible foreign invasion. On August 4, 1789, the National Assembly voted to abolish all legal privileges of the nobles and the clergy.

Declaration of the Rights of Man

On August 26, the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Inspired by the English Bill of Rights of 1689 and by the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution, this charter of basic liberties began with "the national and imprescriptible rights of man" to "liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression."

Reflecting Enlightenment thought, the declaration proclaimed that all men were free and equal before the law, that appointment to public office should be based on talent, and that no group should be exempt from taxation. Freedom of speech and of the press were affirmed. The declaration raised an important issue. Should equal rights include women? Many deputies agreed, provided that, as one man said, "women do not [hope] to exercise political rights and functions."

Olympe de Gouges was a playwright and a journalist whose writings reached a large audience. As a strong supporter of all-inclusive democracy, she refused to accept that the Declaration of the Rights of Man excluded mention of women. She demanded the same rights for French women that French men were demanding for themselves. In 1791, she challenged the oppression of male authority and the notion of male-female inequality in her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen. De Gouges later got in trouble with anti-monarchist revolutionaries, who objected to the fact that she addressed her "Declaration" to Queen Marie Antoinette. She was eventually sent to the guillotine due to accusations that she was a monarchist. Echoing the words of the official declaration, she wrote:

> "Believing that ignorance, omission, or scorn for the rights of woman are
> the only causes of public misfortunes, and of the corruption of governments,
> the women have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable,
> and sacred rights of women in order that this declaration, constantly exposed

before all the members of the society, will ceaselessly remind them of their rights and duties."

- Olympe de Gouges

The King Concedes

In the meantime, Louis XVI remained quiet at Versailles. He refused to accept the National Assembly's decrees. However, another problem was about to force his hand. Due to a poor harvest and famine, bread was scarce and the prices were high. On October 5, 1789, about 6,000 Parisian women armed with broomsticks, pitchforks, pistols, and other weapons marched met at City Hall to demand bread. When they were refused there, they marched the 12 miles to Versailles to confront the royal family. Some of the women then met with the king to demand that bread be made available in Paris and for a reasonable price. After relating their need to Louis, he promised the women that he would send grain to Paris.

This was not enough for the crowd however, and they insisted that the King and his family return with them to Paris. On October 6, they did so. They were escorted by women who chanted: "We are bringing back the baker, the baker's wife, and the baker's boy." The king, queen, and their son were virtual prisoners in Paris.

On October 6, the royal family returned to the city that was the heart of the revolution escorted by women carry pikes, some of which held the heads of the King's guards. This was extremely significant because the king displayed that he was subject to the pressure of the people.

The October Days - The March on Versailles

The period during which the March of Versailles occurred is known as the October Days. Fueled by high bread prices and the Revolution, the women who marched were part of a long

tradition of women's participation in popular protest, especially during times when subsistence was an issue.

Revolutionary leaders would later honor these women as heroes of the Revolution. In spite of this, however, there is evidence that there was also an ambivalence about women's participation in politics. Male witnesses expressed a fear of women as hysterical furies, while women witnesses did not want to be associated with or identified as those furies in any way. Some of these women were labeled "assassins" or "savages" by some observers and commentators, or likened to beasts by others. These views can be observed in works of art from the period. It seemed that these women had lost their femininity and with it their very humanity. **Edmund Burke**, one of the earliest historians of the French Revolution wrote:

> "[W]hilst the royal captives who followed in the train were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women."
>
> -Edmund Burke

The changeable quality of women's response to Queen Marie Antoinette can also be found in this event. Before leaving Versailles, the Queen made an appearance before the crowd on the palace balcony holding the hands of her children, but the crown protested. They cried for her to appear alone.

Motherhood was a category that was sacred to most of these women. By asking the Queen to show herself without her children, the crowds of women were refusing to accept her or see her as a mother. When the Queen obeyed the crowds' demands, reemerging without her children, they chanted, "Vive la reine!" or "Long live the Queen!"

Marie Antoinette had become a symbol upon which the hatred and fury of many of the revolutionaries had been placed. The hatred that some of these women displayed for the Queen can be explained by a desire to show signs not only of national loyalty, but of personal purity.

There are countless other examples of women's struggles with gender issues to be found throughout the history of the French Revolution.

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