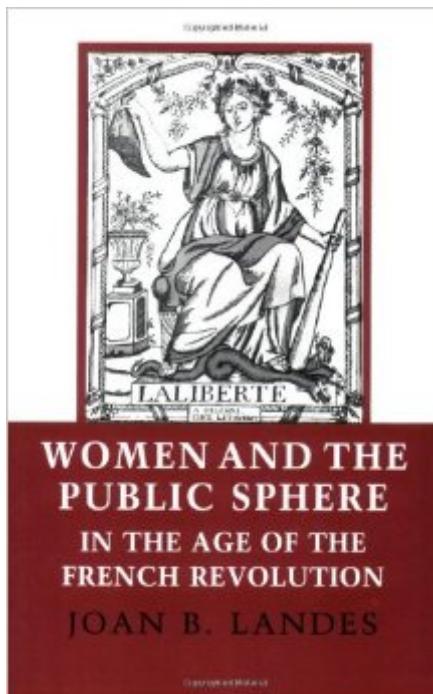


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Women And The Public Sphere In The Age Of The French Revolution



Synopsis

In this provocative interdisciplinary essay, Joan B. Landes examines the impact on women of the emergence of a new, bourgeois organization of public life in the eighteenth century. She focuses on France, contrasting the role and representation of women under the Old Regime with their status during and after the Revolution. Basing her work on a wide reading of current historical scholarship, Landes draws on the work of Habermas and his followers, as well as on recent theories of representation, to re-create public-sphere theory from a feminist point of view. Within the extremely personal and patriarchal political culture of Old Regime France, elite women wielded surprising influence and power, both in the court and in salons. Urban women of the artisanal class often worked side by side with men and participated in many public functions. But the Revolution, Landes asserts, relegated women to the home, and created a rigidly gendered, essentially male, bourgeois public sphere. The formal adoption of "universal" rights actually silenced public women by emphasizing bourgeois conceptions of domestic virtue. In the first part of this book, Landes links the change in women's roles to a shift in systems of cultural representation. Under the absolute monarchy of the Old Regime, political culture was represented by the personalized iconic imagery of the father/king. This imagery gave way in bourgeois thought to a more symbolic system of representation based on speech, writing, and the law. Landes traces this change through the art and writing of the period. Using the works of Rousseau and Montesquieu as examples of the passage to the bourgeois theory of the public sphere, she shows how such concepts as universal reason, law, and nature were rooted in an ideologically sanctioned order of gender difference and separate public and private spheres. In the second part of the book, Landes discusses the discourses on women's rights and on women in society authored by Condorcet, Wollstonecraft, Gouges, Tristan, and Comte within the context of these new definitions of the public sphere. Focusing on the period after the execution of the king, she asks who got to be included as "the People" when men and women demanded that liberal and republican principles be carried to their logical conclusion. She examines women's roles in the revolutionary process and relates the birth of modern feminism to the silencing of the politically influential women of the Old Regime court and salon and to women's expulsion from public participation during and after the Revolution.

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Customer Reviews

This is an outstanding scholarly work by a well-respected scholar of Old Regime France and the role of women in history. To criticize her work because her definition is loosely based on a term which refers to an often nebulous group or phenomenon that is historically impossible to nail down is cheap. As to any criticism of her methodological sloppiness (here in using modern films to exemplify points she makes in her book and draw the reader into the story in an engaging fashion or to show the longevity of historical memory), you ought first to be clear in your examples and then to justify your criticisms for the reader. Your "critical" review is much sloppier and gives little information besides your negative opinion. One of the purpose of this book is to explore the power of rhetoric and the (lack of) influence women were able to exert in pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary France. Landes has been criticized for a weak sense of coherency in the way she deals with her text and a lack of hard evidence to back up her claim that the dominant ideology of "equality, liberty and fraternity" developed and instituted by the "bourgeois" Republic necessarily limited women. Her evidence is in the weight of rhetoric to influence politics, an important debate in French Revolution historiography, from scholars like Furet and Chartier to historians like Joan Landes. Her methodology is not exactly sloppy and there is little evidence to suggest that she doesn't understand the methodological models she uses. The confusion here must come from that fact that she is combining Habermas' sociological theory with a postmodernist emphasis on the importance of an even more abstract and difficult to document force, the power of language.

Joan Landes' "Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution" consists of several essays loosely united by the theme of women and their place in the "public sphere" of activity during the late 18th century-- and specifically during the French Revolution. This is an important and exciting topic-- and it's one that has not yet been researched to exhaustion. Sadly,

Landes' book is flawed in several ways. Some of these flaws are forgiveable, but a few are fatal. One of the most obvious faults of this book has to do with one of its central concept-- the idea of the "public sphere". Landes specifically states that she is using this term as the philosopher Habermas used it in his famous "Public Transformations of the Public Sphere". However, that is not what she does. Habermas's conception of the public sphere is that the idea of the "public" emerged as a term for referring to the collective sets of feelings arising from private individuals engaged in private activities-- and *NOT* as something that exists in opposition to private interests and activities (which is how Landes uses it). Now, the truth be told-- I don't think it's really a *problem* that Landes uses a different model of the public sphere than Habermas... after all, there's no reason to say that Habermas definition of it is any better than hers. However, the fact of the matter is that Landes claims she really IS using Habermas' model of the public sphere. In other words, it's not that she prefers another model-- it's that she misunderstands the model she's trying to use! While this fact does not necessarily invalidate the whole book, it is, nonetheless, a bit troubling.

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