FROM REBELS TO WRITERS
THE AWAKENING OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT IN FRANCE (1789-1914)

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> **"**Women, wake up; the tocsin of reason sounds throughout the universe; recognize your rights."[1] Olympe de Gouges, 1791
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> "All women, mothers or otherwise, married or not, must exercise their political rights so as to put order in the community and state."[2] Hubertine Auclert, 1908.

Though separated by more than one hundred years, these two women who both lived in France argued for women's rights through their political writings. "Women's rights" is often seen exclusively as the power to vote, and while women in France were not granted the franchise officially until 1946, the focus of this article is not on women's voting rights.[3] Instead it focuses on the awakening of women's political and social empowerment that began during the French Revolution and bloomed to maturity during the *Belle*

[1] Olympe De Gouges, "The Declaration of the Rights of Women," http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/477/

[2] Hubertine Auclert, "Le Vote des femmes," http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/whm2003/auclert2.html

[3] Though women were not granted the right to vote in 1945 under de Gaulle's Provisional Government, the vote was not formalized until the constitution of 1946. That same year women, regardless of class, voted in their first election and were also permitted to run for political office.

Époque (1870-1914). Political empowerment is defined here as the awakening of a marginalized group's need to participate in their government and society through writing, demonstrating, and advocating ideas ranging from the right to vote to the right to criticize their government. Social empowerment is defined as the awakening of a marginalized group to participate in their societies through the involvement in art and culture. This article will examine three major historical events that left a profound impact on France's social and political landscape, the French Revolution, the Paris Commune and the *Belle Époque*. I will also focus on the obstacles that these women faced, many of which were created by their government and culture.

Although the French Revolution occurred in the late eighteenth century, it still made an enormous impact on both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The French Revolution left a legacy of bread riots and women's political writings that continued well into the German occupation of France during World War II. For example, during the Paris Commune women evoked the Revolutionary tradition of rioting and violence in order to protect their provisional government. But it was not until the *Belle Époque* that feminists clearly outlined their strategies for social and political empowerment. This was due in part to the Industrial Revolution as well as a shift in cultural attitudes similar to the roaring 1920's in the United States. The strategies left by *Belle Époque* feminists, alongside the foundations of the Revolution and the Paris Commune, contributed forcefully to the modern Women's Liberation Movement in France that occurred after World War II through the 1970s. Images, first-hand accounts, government documents, and novels show the legacy of these three historical events on twentieth-century French feminism.

Years of starvation, poverty, heavy taxation, as well as a weak and ineffective government led to the unraveling of France in 1789. This culminated into outright revolution. Even during its infant stages, women actively participated alongside men in the revolution. Enraged about their inability to feed their children, the women of the Third Estate took to the streets in protest of sky-rocketing bread prices in October. The shortage of foodstuffs was well known to the king before October 1789. In a series of *Cahiers de Doléances*, or list of grievances that were written in March of 1789, demands such as, "That salt be fixed at a reasonable and equal price throughout the

kingdom" appeared.[4] In addition to the high price of salt, grain and other forms of food were also scarce and overpriced. This became evident in October of 1789 when a crowd of several thousand women marched to Versailles and demanded to discuss increasing the supply of grain with the king. Accounts of the era are quite consistent and show women actively participating in speaking out against their government.

Stanislas Maillard, a National Guardsmen present during the women's March to Versailles presented his account to a commission in 1790 that was established to investigate the events surrounding the March to Versailles. Maillard recalled, "Detachments of women [were] coming up from every direction, armed with broomsticks, lances, pitchforks, swords, pistols, and muskets. As they had no ammunition, they wanted to compel him to go with a detachment of them to the arsenal to fetch powder."[5] Another account by an unknown woman stated, "When the women were about to enter their majesties' residence, the bourgeoisie of Versailles, the Flanders Regiment, and the dragoons…clapped their hands, registered their satisfaction with shouts of joy, congratulated the women on their arrival and begged them to work for the general good."[6]

Maillard's account highlighted the violence that these women exerted in order to get their demands met. What was fascinating about Maillard's account was that even though a mob of women stormed towards him with weapons, he used the word *compel* which suggested that the women urged him to give them ammunition in a non-violent manner. This also suggested that this demonstration had Maillard's sympathies and that it focused primarily on meeting with the king and not exerting violence on those who did not deserve it. Though this event was spontaneous, the women were unified in their mission. This unification showed the beginnings of a political awareness. The unknown woman's account reflected that those in charge of guarding Versailles were sympathetic to the women's cause. The most powerful aspect about this account was that those on guard begged the women to "fight for the general good." This shows that the guards saw the social impact of this demonstration.

[4] Laura Mason and Tracy Rizzo, *The French Revolution: A Document Collection* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 55.

[5] Darlene Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, Mary Durham Johnson, *Women in Revolutionary Paris: 1789-1795* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 38-39.

[6] Mason and Rizzo, 85.

The women challenged political authority and fought for themselves, their families, and fellow country women and men.

Initially, these women were marching to the royal palace to protect their families; however, this event had broader social and political implications. The burden of providing food for their families fell on the shoulders of the women of the Third Estate. With diminishing food supplies, women grew desperate about their inability to provide food for their families. The March to Versailles had far reaching social implications because it highlighted how crucial women were to the family unit. The march had political implications as well. The success of the march culminated in the women bringing the king and his family back to Paris. This action showed that women were actively engaged in their government through political demonstration. Political demonstrations, such as the March to Versailles, led to additional political empowerment because these women posed a threat to governmental authority. As the authors of a textbook on the subject note,

> [t]he demands of poor women-workers, market women, and the wives of *sans-coulettes* were less radical departures from past behavior, but paradoxically they were taken as a more serious threat by authorities because they dealt with the crucial political problem of supplying the Parisian populace with the means of livelihood.[7]

Demonstrations such as the March to Versailles were unique because it highlighted the influence of peasant women, which was often lost and forgotten among the myths, legends and realities of the Marie Antoinettes or the Charlotte Cordays of the French Revolution. Women during the Paris Commune and World War II followed this tradition of rioting in order to get their demands met.

The French Revolution also left behind the legacy of women expressing their need for political and social rights and empowerment through writing. The cultural and political landscape prior to 1789 was not conducive for women writers. Jean Jacques Rousseau expressed popular views towards educating women in his work *Emile*, "And since when is it men who concern themselves with the education of girls?" "There are no schools for girls, what a tragedy!"[8] Rousseau presented a harsh reality of the options that women had prior to 1789 and prevailed throughout the nineteenth

[7] Levy, Appelwhite, and Johnson, 4-5.

[8] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile,* trans. Susan Groag Bell and Karen Offen, *Women, The Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, 1750-1880*, eds., Bell and Offen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 48.

century. But the French Revolution left some enduring legacies by transforming the role of women writers in France. For instance, Olympe de Gouges, benefited from the more liberal posture of the government during the early years of the revolution. She placed her name freely on her published works, which was extraordinary for a woman living in the eighteenth century. Even more exceptional, de Gouges voiced her opinions about her government and gender issues of the day, such as women's lack of voting rights, without fears of being ostracized or persecuted.

A political and social awareness permeated de Gouges' political pamphlet, "The Declaration of the Rights of Women." She wrote, "The purpose of all political association is preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of woman and man."[9] Using the rhetoric of the Enlightenment, de Gouges argued that women's participation in government was not only "natural" but rational for both women and men. De Gouges' written commentary shows an awakening towards political empowerment. She continued forward with her argument by stating, "The communication of free thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of woman."[10] Freedom of speech through the spoken or written word was imperative because it gave women a voice in society. The written word gave their opinions a chance to be read by those in power. Unfortunately, de Gouges faced major setbacks and obstacles for advocating freedom of communication as the French Revolution progressed. In 1793 she was executed at the start of the Terror as a counterrevolutionary.[11] The Terror silenced de Gouges and her writings would be ignored until the days of the Paris Commune in the mid-nineteenth century. Her reputation as a political commentator was not taken seriously following her death. In fact, some men even used it as way to keep women out of the political and social spheres.

In a speech by a local official, Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette, women's political activism was denounced and de Gouges was placed at the center of a cautionary tale. Chaumette warned women about the inappropriateness in discussing politics. The document stated, "Remember the shameless Olympe de Gouges, who was the

[9] de Gouges, ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] It is important to note that de Gouges was not guillotined because she was a female writer, but a counter-revolutionary. She dared to speak out against the brutal oppression of Maximilian Robespierre.

first to set up the women's clubs, who abandoned her cares of her household to involve herself in the republic, and whose head fell under the avenging blade of the laws."[12] Chaumette's commentary illustrates the social landscape of the Revolution well throughout the nineteenth century. Chaumette's message was quite clear. Any woman who did not know her proper place in society would be killed. The speech also showed the push to relegate women back into the home and off of the streets of Paris.

Catherine R. Montfort offered provoking commentary about the legacy of de Gouges as well as why she was ultimately seen as a danger to French society. Montfort wrote, "Olympe de Gouges 'failed' to be a woman and 'threatened' to be a man. In her case, however, she not only lived this new gender identity, but she also theorized a place for it in society."[13] However, de Gouges helped lay the foundations for the political and social empowerment of women by breaking the traditional boundaries of gender. She wrote and fully participated in political activities that were considered "masculine" by French society at the close of the eighteenth century, even after an incident as pivotal as a revolution.

A second major example of women carving out a place for themselves in the political sphere occurred in 1871 during the Paris Commune. Prior to the Commune's formation, the summer of 1870 proved to be one of the great blunders for the French Emperor Napoleon III. The Prussian Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck coaxed Napoleon into war over the issue of who would ascend the Spanish throne.[14] This blunder propelled France into a year of warfare, civil strife, political experimentation, and tragedy.[15] Paris became the center stage of a conflict known as the Paris Commune. The Commune was and still continues to be hotly debated. For over a century, it has been a touchstone for political theorists and activists, for conservatives and reformers, and for our understanding of concepts ranging from class and revolution to femininity and

[12] Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette, "Speech at City Hall Denouncing Women's Political Activism," http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/searchfr.php?function=find&keyword=chaumette&x=15&y=14#

[13] Catherine R. Montfort, ed., *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publication, 1994), 7.

[14] Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Paris Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 14.

[15] Ibid.

masculinity.[16] This article examines the impact of the Commune on shaping female political and social empowerment through its challenge to conventional ways of thinking about femininity. The images of women involved in the Commune varied drastically and were contradictory. In order to understand the complexities of the women in the Paris Commune it is important to examine popular perceptions of femininity in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century stressed keeping women in the home and out of the public arena of society and politics. France was still coming to grips with the Revolutions of 1789 and 1848. Disturbed by the social and political disorder caused by these Revolutions, those ruling the country attempted a return to pre-Revolutionary France. One of the pre-Revolutionary ideas that remained engrained in French society involved a continuation of traditional gender roles. Vicomte de Bonald, who defined the societal views of women at the start of the nineteenth century said, "Women belong to the family and not to political society, and nature created them for domestic cares and not for public functions."[17] Women throughout the nineteenth century followed this advice and devoted their lives to the domestic sphere. They remained absent from the social and political spheres. In 1789, France was an agrarian society with a rigid class system of estates but in the 1800s the landscape of France was transformed into one of factories. In these factories women of the new working class toiled alongside males. The image of women remaining solely in the home contradicted the realities of working-class women working in the factories.

Primary sources, especially those dating to after the Revolution of 1848, showed a heightened anxiety towards women in the work force. In the 1860s, Jules Simon, a French politician, expressed great anxiety about married women in the factories declaring, "There is a horrible vice in our economic organization that generates misery and must be vanquished at all cost if we do not want to perish: the suppression of family life."[18] Simon focused on the moral decay of French society if married women continued working in the factories. Though historians have shown that a surprisingly high proportion of the women employed in textiles were young and single, Simon discussed their work in terms of married women, the

[16] Ibid., 2

[17] Susan Bell and Karen Offen, eds., *Women, the Family and Freedom: A Debate in Documents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 89.

[18] Ibid., 457.

implicit assumption (a common one at the time) was that every woman was either a prospective wife or a mother of a large family whose work-force participation not only actively prevented the acquiring and practice of her domestic skills but also threatened her virtue.[19] In spite of Simon's criticisms of the working woman, these factory workers continued to make themselves visible in the public sphere. They worked because they had to in order to survive. They were not trying to break out of the traditional roles of housewife and mother. The Industrial Revolution forced them unintentionally to break with tradition.

The image of women functioning solely as virtuous wives and mothers versus the reality of their working in society collided during the Paris Commune. In September 1870, the women and men of the Commune proclaimed, "Make way for the people! Make way for the Commune."[20] After the established government fled from Paris, the Commune's leaders took matters into their own hands and set up the first government ever made by workers.[21] The Commune was a product of the abuses perpetrated by factory owners on their workers during industrialization. Women, just like in the Revolutions of 1789 and 1848, were actively engaged in the Commune. Louis Michel, reflecting on the events of March 18, 1870 when the French government attempted to regain control of the city through military force, [22] stated, "The women threw themselves on the cannons and machine guns…[while] the soldiers remained immobile…[because of this the] Revolution was made."[23] Michel's comments echoed those about the March to Versailles. In his account, women gained social empowerment by throwing themselves in the line of fire.

In contrast, Arthur Chevalier's report is strikingly different. Chevalier wrote that when "women and the children screamed.… The men reformed immediately into a column,' this time without

[19] Ibid., 456.

[20] http://www.marxists.org/history/france/paris-commune/documents/make-way.htm

[21] Robin W. Winks and Joan Neuberger, *Europe and the Making of Modernity: 1815-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 302.

[22] Communards are the supporters of the Paris Commune. Historian Gay L. Gullickson notes that this term is gendered in French. Commuardes applies to female supporters whereas Communard replies to a male supporter. Gullickson uses the non-gendered English term of Communard. The non-gendered term of communard is used in this article.

[23] Gullickson, 43.

the women and the children.[24] In Michel's account, women were the heroes of the day, actively engaging in what he dubbed a "revolution." On the other hand, Chevalier recalled that only men stood up to the soldiers, while the women and children simply screamed. These conflicting accounts might lead one to argue that the events of March 1870 did not help women's social empowerment because no one knows for sure what happened. Gay Gullickson addresses this issue by pointing out that, "In some pro-Commune histories women disappear into the *peuple* (people); in anti-Communist histories, into the *canaille* (rabble) and the *foule* (mob)…the reconquest of cannons [was often given] to the National Guard" or male citizens.[25] By commenting on the activities of women, pro-Communard histories indicated how women could begin the process of achieving political and social notoriety. The Paris Commune showed not only that women could actively engage in politics, but also that they could defend their city from outside threats. However, their participation in the Commune would be used against them by their enemies. As a consequence of making themselves publicly visible, they were charged with setting the city on fire.

The negative image of *les petroleuses* or gasoline girls gave life to the argument that women who involved themselves in society and politics were a public threat. This created obstacles for those women who wanted to be included in the public sphere. When the former government returned in 1871, the Communards desperately attempted to set up barricades. When this failed, chaos broke out in the streets. Alongside the bloodshed, fires broke out across the city. An anonymous American woman living in the city at the time recounted her experience about the Paris fires, "I do not remember anything more terrifying than the fires."[26] Although no one knew for sure who started the fires, women who supported the Commune were blamed for them. How women came to be held responsible for the fires is intriguing, since there is clear evidence that "while women may have participated in the burning of Tuileries Palace, the vast majority of fires were set by men."[27] Despite evidence to the contrary, *les petroleuses* were used to support putting women back into the home. Images of *les petroleuses* were highly ideological

[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 44.
[26] Ibid., 168.
[27] Ibid., 170.

like much of the debate on the Paris Commune. One image titled, "The Emancipated Woman Shedding Light on the World" showed a *petroleuse* with a gasoline tank. She did not look human, but supernatural, like a witch or even a ghostly apparition reeking havoc on the streets of Paris. Though this was intended as a negative image of *les petroleuses*, it contained the word "emancipated." This marks a difference from images dating from the French Revolution that did not show or mention women as being emancipated in any form. The recognition of the emancipated woman, though negative, showed that cracks in traditional gender roles were beginning to appear by 1871. The poster evoked fear towards this new woman, portraying her as a spiritual force that could not be avoided. She was a force to be reckoned with. Cracks in the traditional feminine role were a legacy of the Paris Commune. Because of them, the women of the *Belle Époque* would finally create a place for women in the political and social sphere, which led to the emergence of modern Feminism, the modern woman, and the emergence of the Realist literary movement.

Since industrialization did not stop in France, neither did the female workforce. In spite of the engrained negative images of women in the Revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune, a modern French woman was born by the end of the nineteenth century. A product of the working-class, these women rejected domesticity and the passive roles assigned to her.[28] They defied convention by using birth control, smoking cigarettes in public, riding bicycles and postponing marriage.[29] These women were a product of both the second Industrial Revolution and the *Belle Époque* or Beautiful Era. The *Belle Epoque* can be compared to the Roaring 1920s in the United States. In the wake of a humiliating defeat in war against Germany and tensions of another war on the horizon, the French, like their American counterparts, let go of tradition and manners and indulged in a period of decadence and new ideas. Finally, women found an environment where they could shape and define ideologies for social and political empowerment. Hubertine Auclert and the entertainer turned writer Colette thrived during this period of history and helped redefine women's role in society and in politics.

[28] Winks and Neuberger, 400.
[29] Ibid.

In 1872, when Auclert read a speech given by Victor Hugo at the first great banquet organized to promote the "emancipation" of French women, she was shocked to learn that women were not citizens. [30] At that moment, she became a devoted suffragist, not merely a woman's rights activist or one who worked to ameliorate the conditions of women. She wanted to be an instrument by which women became French citizens.[31] The *Belle Époque* differs from the prior historical events because women now had a clear plan for achieving political and social empowerment. This plan revolved around obtaining political and social power through the vote. During the French Revolution de Gouges wanted equal rights for women, but her writings were more theoretical than practical. Then the women of the Paris Commune had to battle the public's fears of emancipated women. However, because of the openness of the *Belle Époque,* feminists like Auclert were able to use the lessons of history and devise an exact plan to insure the political and social participation of women as citizens within their nation.

Auclert's plan for social and political empowerment began with a recitation of how women had been denied their rights in the past, "Frenchmen are imploring French women not to try to become citizens. They tell them nothing would be gained by universal suffrage and that their superiority lies in remaining enslaved."[32] In this way Auclert used historical examples to show that the same old arguments were being used to keep women out of the political and social spheres. Yet Auclert did not confine her arguments to theorizing or suggesting political empowerment. She asserted that, "The voter's registration card, of which Frenchwomen are deprived, is a certificate of honorability that guarantees consideration to the person who carries it."[33] For Auclert, the only way women could achieve total political and social empowerment was through the ability to vote. Because she died in 1914, Auclert never lived to see this. However, feminists not just in France, but also across Europe used her arguments for the political and social empowerment of women in the twentieth century. The *Belle Époque* helped set the foundations for the modern women's liberation movement in France throughout the twentieth century. Because of it, women were able to achieve political and social empowerment by demanding the right to

[30] "Hubertine Auclert," ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

vote and by defying traditional gender roles. In this way they became modern women.

Like Auclert, the writer Colette would also advocate for the social empowerment of women, but she did so in strikingly different ways. During her lifetime, Colette's rather unconventional, and at times controversial, lifestyle helped to guarantee a place in the public eye for both women and her writing.[34] In her fiction, Colette supported the liberation and empowerment of women's sexuality in the midst of a depopulation crisis in France. The French government and society during the *Belle Époque* pressured women to focus less on their political and social empowerment and more on repopulating the nation. Nelly Roussel summed up the sentiment of the time by stating, "Rights? What would you do [with] them, oh woman? Have you any need for rights? Accomplish without a murmur the sole task that suits you; the task that is your sole reason for existing. Make citizens and soldiers for us; give birth; give birth without pause."[35] According to Roussel, this was the sole function of women.

Colette presented a contrasting argument on marriage and motherhood in many of her short stories. She described their dark side in "Secrets" where she wrote about a woman who suffered in silence throughout her marriage and then had to watch her daughter suffer too. She remarked that "the mold that grows on married life, the refuse a man's character leaves behind the border between childishness and dementia…"[36] This mother was recalling an unhappy married life of enslavement and was bitter about the future her daughter would have to endure. Colette helped to empower women by redefining gender roles and by giving women sexual identities. Her efforts were aided in part by the Realist literary movement that was beginning to flourish in France. While the traditional modes of writing about the picturesque or the aristocracy crumbled during the *Belle Époque,* Realist writers focused on the interior minds of their characters. Colette seized on this and described the private thoughts of women and their sexuality.

Much of Colette's focus was on the sexual empowerment of women in spite of society's restrictions. In the short story, "Landscapes and Portraits" (1898) Colette evoked graphic sexual details to empower women. She wrote, "I see only graceful bodies

[34] Dana Strand, *Colette: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1995), xi.

[35] Bell and Offen, 177.

[36] Ibid., 15.

united, sculptured beneath thin dresses by the wind of the waltz, two long adolescent bodies…They waltz like the habitués of cheap dance halls, lewdly, sensually…"[37] In this passage, the intertwined male and female bodies were equally beautiful, sensual, yet lewd. Colette suggested that women like men, could be sexual beings, not simply the vessels of population increase for the country. Colette advocated that the enjoyment of sex was not only empowering but should be available to both genders. Colette's argument for sexual empowerment was juxtaposed against the emergence of the Modern Woman, who dared to use birth control and chain-smoked in public. These women were not merely demanding social empowerment, but rather running towards it and claiming it as their own. Colette contributed to sexual empowerment by helping women realize that they could and should create and define their own sexual identities regardless of society's expectations.

On October 5, 1943, the 154th anniversary of their ancestors' March to Versailles, French women demonstrated for bread during the German Occupation.[38] History appeared to have come full circle as women once again found themselves at the forefront fighting for bread, and engaging in all out revolution and resistance. However, these efforts in the 1940s would have a very different outcome than the one in 1789 because the women's war efforts were rewarded in 1946 when they finally gained the right to vote. This, in turn, propelled them into the political sphere, where, through the rest of the century, women moved forward and worked towards liberation from traditional female roles.

Events in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries helped lay the foundations for voting rights and the liberation of women. The hopes of women in the French Revolution for a world where they could achieve political and social empowerment were defined by women of the nineteenth century, and seized by women in the twentieth century. Empowerment did not include just voting rights, it also involved raising the inner consciousness of people so that they would demand change and break with tradition. Looking at the historical progression of women's participation in the public and social spheres over the span of two centuries is important because it reminds us that the past continues to have a hold over the present in society. Events do not occur in isolation, but in a series of stages. It

[37] Ibid., 33.

[38] Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France: 1940-1945* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 286.

took French women over one hundred years to achieve political and social empowerment. Yet the achievements of French women in the twentieth century would not have been possible without the foundations laid out for them by women during the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, and the *Belle Epoque*.