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# “Europe,” Women, and the American Political Imaginary

The 1790s and the 1990s

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“America,” that mythological place of simplicity and natural equality, occupied an outsized space in early modern European thought.<sup>1</sup> The same might be said of that similarly mythological place “Europe” in the social and political imaginary of the early American republic. This geographically unspecified site—referring sometimes to England, sometimes to France, and sometimes to anywhere between the British Isles and the Urals, up to the borders of Ottoman lands—was above all a political construct, a synonym for “civilization,” but also for aristocratic and monarchical displays of power. Ideas of Europe in the early republic were thus always inextricably bound up with ideas about the status and function of women in the public realm.<sup>2</sup>

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1. There is an enormous literature on this topic, including Durand Echevarria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (Princeton, NJ, 1957); Fred Chiappelli, with Michael J. B. Allen and Robert L. Benson, eds., *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (Berkeley, CA, 1976); Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); James Ceaser, *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (New Haven, CT, 1997); and Thomas K. Murphy, *A Land Without Castles: The Changing Image of America in Europe, 1780–1830* (Lanham, MD, 2001).

2. On the long history of the idea of Europe, see H. D. Schmidt, “The Establishment of ‘Europe’ as a Political Expression,” *Historical Journal* 9, no. 2 (1966), 172–78; Denys Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh,

This was especially the case, Fredrika Teute and David Shields show us in a series of fascinating, interconnected essays mostly from the late 1990s, when it came time to forge a new American republican political culture and, more specifically, to define the role that the wives and daughters of key (male) political actors, including so-called First Ladies, would play in it. In this extended conversation, “Europe” came to stand for all that had to be avoided in republican manners as well as institutions: an obsession with status, rank, and the maintenance of hierarchy; overly elaborate or formal ceremonies; high fashion, luxury, and ostentation; bodily indulgences that led potentially to indecency or indolence; and not least, the excessive influence of women on public life—even as it was understood that women were vital to the maintenance of civilized decorum.

Jeffersonians from the 1790s into the new century, we learn, relentlessly pursued these themes, melding them together (along with the threat of male effeminacy) in speeches, letters, published texts, and finally, a refusal to establish new protocols for manners in the new capital at all. Earlier circles around George and Martha Washington and then John and Abigail Adams, even as they tried to create social rituals in New York and Philadelphia based on recognized European models, took considerable pains to define those rituals and social practices in contradiction to European courtly *and* salon ways, whether by serving lemonade in place of wine or by encouraging plain if dignified styles of dress. For the first First Ladies, Europe was at once a source of aspirational prototypes and, at least for show, a subject of anxiety lest its pernicious influence infiltrate foreign shores.

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1968); Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (Basingstoke, UK, 1995); Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Idea of Europe from Antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge, UK, 2002); and Michael Wintle, *The Image of Europe: Visualizing Europe in Cartography and Iconography throughout the Ages* (Cambridge, UK, 2009). On the history of North American conceptions of Europe, see the much smaller literature: Daniel J. Boorstin, *America and the Image of Europe: Reflections on American Thought* (Gloucester, MA, 1976); Kumkum Chatterjee and Clement Hawes, eds., *Europe Observed: Multiple Gazes in Early Modern Encounters* (Lewisburg, PA, 2008); and Leonard Sadosky, Peter Nicolaisen, Peter S. Onuf, and Andrew J. O’Shaughnessy, eds., *Old World, New World: America and Europe in the Age of Jefferson* (Charlottesville, VA, 2010). See too for comparison Peter Beardsell, *Europe and Latin America: Returning the Gaze* (Manchester, UK, 2000).

No matter that England and France were very different places at the end of that century and that "court society" in the feudal sense had long been in decline in much of the west. The scandalous pro-British "Meschianza" of 1779 that Teute and Shields describe also took place in an imagined Old World right down to its chivalrous gender politics. To evoke "Europe" in the years before the French Revolution was to conjure up all that was not republican and egalitarian, all that was foreign to new—and superior—American ways, especially when it came to women. A similarly gendered dichotomy, based exclusively on time as opposed to geography too, would characterize French political culture of the early 1790s. Think of the invention of the (feminized, aristocratic, tyrannical) Old Regime alongside the (feminized, aristocratic, tyrannical) Old World.<sup>3</sup>

But that was then. What about the end of the twentieth century? One of the interesting aspects of these essays of Teute and Shields—which can now be seen as historical texts in their own right, that is, as documents of a more recent moment in the development of thinking about women's roles in American political culture—is the way they demonstrate the continuing potency of the Europe/America binary. Indeed, we might even say that this pattern holds just as much, albeit with certain critical differences in interpretation, in the early 1990s as in the early 1790s. Critical to Teute and Shield's important reimagining of the so-called "republican court"—already an oddly ironic and hybrid term reminiscent of Napoleon calling himself "emperor of the French republic"—was the work of a small but influential group of contemporary American historians of eighteenth-century Europe. Inspired by recent feminist theoretical work challenging the existence of rigid boundaries between the public and the private, as well as by the English translation of Habermas's account of the rise of the public sphere, these historians reopened the vital question of the compatibility, or lack thereof, between feminism

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3. The necessity of political revolution entailing a revolution in the political, social, and especially moral status of women is most famously evoked in the writings of Olympe de Gouges (esp. her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* of 1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792). Even opponents of public or political roles for women insisted upon revolution requiring a break with old, corrupt female ways; see, for example, the arguments against women's clubs collected in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston, 1996).

and democracy. In response, they collectively redefined the creaky old institution of the *salon* as a proto-feminist space, distinguishing it both from traditional court society, on the one hand, and from the world of republicanism created by the age of democratic revolution, on the other. It was an argument as much about the (American) present as about the (European) past.<sup>4</sup>

The historian Dena Goodman is cited in the first of Teuté and Shields's essays, "The Republican Court," but Joan Landes and others participated equally in this reformulation.<sup>5</sup> In their work, the salon—long ignored as a frivolous private amusement of Old Regime elites—became a unique site in the culture of Enlightenment France where (1) social ranks, from aristocrats to budding *philosophes* of humble background, mixed on egalitarian terms; (2) otherwise taboo topics, including politics, could be freely discussed apart from the protocols of the court; and (3) a few exalted women ran the show. The (largely forgotten) *salonnières* were responsible for inventing new spaces for new forms of sociability and public opinion to flourish. And these forms would eventually characterize the dominant political culture of the age of revolutions—even as women were ultimately formally marginalized by the creation of (all-male) representative institutions and the explosive growth of the press under republican modes of governing.

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4. Key works include Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ, 1979); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ, 1981); and Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA, 1988). On Habermas's subsequent impact on feminist thought, see Johanna Meehan, ed., *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (New York, 1995). For an excellent overview of the discussion on the boundaries of the public and the private in the mid-1990s, see Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, eds., *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy* (Chicago, 1997).

5. On the eighteenth-century salon as a feminist space, see Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1988); Deborah Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin* (New Haven, CT, 1988); and especially Dena Goodman, "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward A Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime," *History and Theory* 31 (Feb. 1992), 1-20; and *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY, 1996). Royal courts are occasionally presented similarly, i.e., by Landes, as spaces of empowerment for women—whether as queens, regents, wives, sisters, or mistresses—that disap-

Alas, it is generally agreed now that the European past that Goodman and Landes described was also largely mythical. Over the last decade or so, most of the elements of this appealing story have been dismantled as exaggerated or ideologically driven, just as views of late Old Regime Europe as a residually feudal place characterized by a rising, frustrated bourgeoisie were earlier dispelled. The French historian Antoine Lilti, in particular, has shown that these seventeenth-century inventions called salons remained largely aristocratic in make-up and form up to 1789, involving a few men of letters, yes, but always on inferior terms; were never distinct from court society; centered mainly on witty banter rather than contentious (and forbidden) talk of politics or religion; and mainly, offered very little public role for women except as hostesses and dispensers of patronage.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, another group of currently practicing historians, foremost among them Carla Hesse, has demonstrated that elite women's ostensibly outsized roles in civil society did not disappear with the Revolution and republicanism, as Goodman and others initially proposed.<sup>7</sup> Not only did women's and mixed-sex political clubs in a sense temporarily replace salons (albeit with different class connotations); women, like men, increasingly entered the public sphere by attaching themselves to the modern world of print, producing as well as consuming a growing array of published materials. Most historians—including Lynn Hunt, whose influential characterizations of this era have also changed between the 1990s and today—now generally acknowledge that republicanism closed some traditional avenues for women in public life but also opened up some promising new ones that we now associate with the birth of human rights.<sup>8</sup>

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peared with the rise of representative government and of the male citizen endowed with voting rights.

6. Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2005), soon to appear in a revised English version with Oxford University Press as *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris*.

7. Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, NJ, 2001). See too Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA, 2004) on women's success in garnering economic rights, including to equal inheritance, in the context of the French Revolution.

8. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007). Compare with *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA, 1993).

But what does any of this have to do with Teute and Shields's 1990s accounts of the creation of the first American versions of a court or a salon around the new figure of the president's wife? If Goodman got it wrong, does that undermine what Teute and Shields—who adapted only pieces of Goodman's account to fit American circumstances—had to say? On the contrary, I propose that Goodman gives us a clue for how to read Teute and Shields's essays now: as think-pieces and important feminist efforts to stimulate consideration of the larger problem of the very different roles available to intellectually and socially ambitious women under absolutism, constitutional monarchy and, finally, a kind of democratic republicanism with which we still live. Teute and Shields, read in light of Goodman, force us to ask a traditional comparative question: What did well-placed American women do similarly and differently as they created a political culture on their own in various coastal cities? But these essays also lead us to wonder when we should give their female subjects' actions a positive or negative valance and, indirectly, what these historical efforts mean for women's roles in a republic today, at the start of a new millenium. (One cannot help but be especially interested in Teute and Shields's claim that forging trans-regional political marriages was central to the early First Ladies' function, this being one of the *only* aspects of their unwritten job description to have fallen away over the last two hundred years. Arguably Michelle Obama still has much the same set of informal but politically critical responsibilities as did Abigail Adams, who helped invent them.) Just consider how often these essays have been cited despite not being published until now. My hunch is that they have become stimulants for other historians just as Goodman's valuable work was a stimulant for Teute and Shields.

We might say, in conclusion, that these essays show, once again, how looking to Europe, with its Old World associations with courts and salons and dynasties, has proved helpful in sorting out American women's public roles—but in this case, as in Goodman, *against* a long tradition of dismissiveness inherited from twentieth-century Progressive historians as well as from the eighteenth century itself. One might hope that, in the future, historians working on related questions will distinguish slightly more clearly between Europe as an actual place and as a state of mind, that is, between actual social practices, with specific histories, and imagined ones. So too we might now question the very category

of women, who were rarely thought of as an interest group in the eighteenth century, and perhaps turn our attention to families as the key units in the new political order instead. But what Teute and Shields show is that when it comes to American political life, "Europe" and its past remain potent for "thinking with" precisely because they keep questions of gender front and center.<sup>9</sup>

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9. For a suggestive argument about viewing the family as the link between the political and the social in the age of revolutions, see Anne Verjus, *Le Cens de la famille. Les femmes et le vote, 1789-1848* (Paris, 2002) and *Le Bon mari: une histoire politique des hommes et des femmes à l'époque révolutionnaire* (Paris, 2010). It is not incidental that the women in Teute and Shields's essays were participants in these social rituals primarily in conjunction with their roles as wives, daughters, and mothers of the governing class, even if this gave a few of them occasional license to behave as semi-autonomous individuals in the public sphere.