VERSITA
DOI: 10.2478/v10320-012-0017-6

WHAT DID THE ENLIGHTENMENT LEAD TO: WOMEN'S ACTIVISM, WOMEN'S MOVEMENT OR FEMINISM? A CASE-STUDY OF FRANCE AND THE USA

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Abstract: The Enlightenment triggered different reactions among women in Europe (the most illustrious case is France) and in the USA. The present paper analyses these reactions kindled by the Enlightenment in the two above-mentioned geopolitical and cultural realms. It also analyses the development of certain social movements triggered by these reactions. Therefore, the epicentral question that I will attempt to answer is: what did the Enlightenment lead to in Europe (as exemplified by France) and in the USA: women's activism, women's movement, or feminism? Why did the Enlightenment influence the women's rights movement differently in these two countries?

Keywords: *dames francoises, dames sans culottes*, "maternal societies", the Quakers, the "Women's March on Versailles".

Introduction

The epicentral preoccupation of the present article is to investigate the possible differences and similarities between the sequential development of women's social activism in Europe and in the USA. My target is to argue for the conclusion that there is one similarity between these two social movements, namely in terms of *end result*: the Enlightenment led to feminism in both places. There are two capital differences in terms of *typology* and in terms of the *pace* of the unfolding events.

Body: Defining Terminology

All three terms need to be clearly defined. Firstly, let us consider the definition for women's activism. According to Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan (46): "women's

activism includes all social and socio-political activities of women undertaken on behalf of 'others'". The two authors also provide examples: "helping the poor, fighting slavery, working for peace and so forth" (*ibid*.). The goal of women's activism is to improve social conditions for everybody around them, namely "to make the world a better place" (*ibid*.). Such women try to reach out and provide everybody in need with philanthropic aid and at this point gender, race and social status do not constitute differentiating factors to women who perform women's activism. In the present case, activist women reach out to everyone, regardless of the above-mentioned categories.

Secondly, the two authors provide a definition for women's movement: "it concerns activities of women on behalf of other women, based on identification with 'those of their own sex'" and on "the notion of 'sisterhood'" (*ibid*.). The notion of women's movement presupposes that women identify their common self / identity and their common issues, frustrations and gender-related capital problems. The definition implies the birth of the first sense of "belonging together".

Thirdly, feminism or the feminist movement is defined (*ibid*.) as: "a social movement characterised by the fight for equal rights and / or activities aimed at ending male domination and privileging, a struggle for which arguments of women's and men's 'equality' as human beings, or of women's 'difference' could be used".

Case Study: France

I will commence my investigation by explaining the reasons why I have decided to investigate the case of France. Firstly, as a network of socio-political and human rights institutions, France is the most striking example of the then historic(al) sequence of events. It witnessed both impressive *avant-garde* achievements (the deeply humane ideals of the French Revolution, at a time when Central and Eastern Europe were still slumbering from this point of view) and painful failures in terms of women's rights and human rights: the Napoleonic Code smothered human rights in practically all nineteenth-century West European societies and almost entirely annulled the human rights programme promoted by the French Revolution. The French Revolution's successful example in terms of ideals was later picked up by women's groups both in Europe and in the USA.

Secondly, the fast changes triggered by the short-lived success of the Revolution were the first revolutionary acts directed and acted out by women, in an organised campaign. For the first time in two millennia women in France officially rebelled in a co-ordinated way and acted according to clear-cut, yet unwritten laws. Later on, these impulsive acts and laws were carefully framed in different petitions and official documents, both in France and in Britain. Thus the French women's revolutionary movement became the milestone and the groundbreaking example that all other European societies followed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Moreover, unlike in the case of the USA, the Enlightenment triggered a shattering historic event in France: the Revolution broke out under the direct influence of the liberal and democratic philosophy of the Enlightenment. It is paramount to note that it was the French Revolution that offered French women the necessary opportunity, terrain and liberty to start their fight for equal rights, because of the Revolution's ideological frame of "liberty, equality, fraternity".

Leading female figures appropriated the Enlightenment's philosophy of equality during the French Revolution. These *avant-garde* women took up the Enlightenment's principle of equality and used it as the paramount argument in their struggle against male domination and in their campaign to carve out equal gender rights.

The 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* was indeed designed to guarantee equality to all members of the French society. Yet the paradox was that it only referred to the rights of men and completely neglected the rights of women (as the word "man" in the title suggests). Having guaranteed equal rights to men, the *Declaration* acted as if women were completely non-existent in France. This was precisely what most female leaders attacked in the *Declaration*: the fact that women's rights were absent from the document.

At the outset, one of the most important female figures was Olympe de Gouges (1745-1793). It was she who wrote the famous *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen* as a caustic reply to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. De Gouges commenced her historic document (*The Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen*) by openly accusing men of being "blind" and "degenerate" tyrants "oppressing" women in all domains. She denounced male domination and argued for equal rights for women in all areas of life. Not only did she militate for an end to male socio-political domination, but she also

demanded equal political rights for women, namely "to be constituted into a national assembly" (ibid.).

Next, she asserted that any "woman is born free" (ibid.) and equal to man and that no male authority had the right to withdraw this natural freedom of hers (Articles 1 and 2). De Gouges also argued for certain extremely progressive rights for women, considering the patriarchal (sub)systems of the eighteenth century: women's right to vote and their equal public employment opportunities (Article 6 and 13). What is more, she strongly supported women's right to public speech, in caustic tones: "woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she should equally have the right to mount the rostrum" (Article 10).

Article 11 and the Postscript of her *Declaration* contained those two arguments which the eighteenth century found the most challenging. De Gouges based her discourse on the right to "free communication of thoughts and opinion" (Article 11) and from there, she subtly arrived at her first argument, which attacked the French patriarchal system: each woman had the right to communicate to her partner that she was pregnant with his child. Consequently, all women were freed from "barbarous prejudices" and stigmatisation (ibid.). In addition to this, men were thus forced to recognise their illegitimate children (ibid.) and women who gave birth to "bastards" should not have to shoulder alone all the economic and psychological burdens of raising their joint, illegitimate child(ren). Men would also have to play their fair part in the education and upbringing of their illegitimate children.

Next, let us consider de Gouges' second argument, the one that shocked French society so deeply that it considered her to be mentally insane and suffering from sick imagination and delirium. She maintained (in the Postscript) that "the married woman can with impunity present her husband with bastards" (*ibid*.) and that she may also request that her out-of-wedlock children receive her husband's name and the same share of the family wealth as their legitimate children. What is more, she went on to fight for equal rights for unmarried mothers, whose children deserved their fathers' official recognition and name and the same share of his wealth as their half-siblings.

It is obvious that in both cases de Gouges was vehemently arguing for equality between sexes and for the two sexes to bear equal responsibilities in the case of illegitimate children. She devoted special attention to the unfair way that society despised women when she called into question the social norm that stipulated that only men had the freedom to satisfy their sexual

desires outside of marriage, while women who did so were abandoned to shoulder all the consequent responsibilities and hardships on their own.

To conclude, Olympe de Gouges openly denounced male domination and the oppression exercised by men over women. In addition, she strongly militated for equal political, social and economic rights, equal employment opportunities and equal sexual freedom. If we glance back to the definition of "feminism" stated at the beginning of the paper, it becomes clear that de Gouges' demands and concepts fit the definition of this term.

The second category of female leaders who strongly militated for women's rights was the *dames sans culottes*. Firstly, on January 1, 1789, they submitted a petition to King Louis XVI in which they voiced their fury at gender inequality, male domination and exploitation: the exclusion of women from the political sphere, women's lack of education and employment opportunities and consequently, their sexual exploitation at the hands of men (Bock 33-4).

Later that year, on October 5th-6th, 1789 these Paris women actually marched to Versailles (the "Women's March on Versailles"), stormed the Royal Palace and forced the King to come to Paris and face the growing political and economic crisis. This way, the present historic march represented the birth of constitutional order in France and according to Bock (36) "it became a symbol of the early revolutionary phase".

It is a fact that these lower- and lowest-class women from Paris played a crucial role in the French Revolution as they geared all their efforts towards the deconstruction of gender inequality. Moreover, they became *the* dynamic catalysts of the battle against gender inequality, as they literally fought against the embodiment of normative patriarchy, King Louis XVI, outside the gates of Versailles.

Therefore, revisiting the definition of "feminism", I conclude that this social class of Parisian women was struggling for feminist claims and that they did so in the form of a feminist movement. They were actively fighting for the abolition of women's exploitation and for equal rights and opportunities: political, educational and sexual rights.

The third category of French women that I will analyse is the *Dames francoises*. They became quite active members within the political field, moreover they proposed a parliament "composed of 'our sex'" (Bock 35). Further on, some of the highly educated ladies among the *Dames francoises* (for example, Madame B. B. of Caux) requested the instant liberation of black slaves, equality for men and women, women's right to vote, the equal right to own property and

equal political participation in the French parliament. Their main argument was that only female representatives could have the same interests as the women they represented; only female political leaders could fully understand the needs and troubles of women. As Bock (35) underlines: "women, therefore can only be represented by women".

Therefore, it is extremely important to note how revolutionary and prescient these *Dames francoises* (especially Madame B. B. of Caux) were: as far back as the eighteenth century, they were voicing the same feminist claims as the twentieth century suffragettes (especially the right to vote and equal representation participation in decision-making bodies). They served as a platform for the nineteenth and twentieth century feminist movements.

In conclusion, the women's rights movement in France may be considered a feminist movement. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that this feminist movement in France was not led only by feminist women. Surprising as it may seem, there were some notable men who took up the French women's cause, the most remarkable example being the Marquis de Condorcet.

The Marquis de Condorcet (Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, 1743-1794) was a French philosopher, mathematician, political scientist and a promoter of equal human rights. Much ahead of his time in many respects, the eighteenth century thinker advocated not only equal rights but also free public education for both genders. What is more, he argued for equal suffrage for men and women, for the abolition of slavery and for equal political career opportunities (Bock 35).

Taking all this into account, I may now answer the first part of the epicentral question of my paper: in France, the Enlightenment led to feminism from the very beginning. Unlike in the USA, there was no need for a number of intermediate stages or steps. Also, what is most remarkable is that the French feminist movement was not represented solely by Frenchwomen but it was also embraced by illustrious Frenchmen.

Case Study: the USA

In the USA, the Quaker community played a major role in setting up a democratic ideology, after having fled England and settled in Pennsylvania in the mid seventeenth century. The Quaker community's liberal and democratic set of beliefs became the benchmark for the upcoming social reforms in the USA (van Drenth and de Haan 30). It was the Quaker community whose ideology almost completely coincided and overlapped with the ideology of the (French)

Enlightenment. The Quakers were the first group on the American continent to disseminate the doctrine of equality in all fields: gender, race/ethnicity as well as in the socio-political sector. Nevertheless, it is vital to mention that the Quakers were not preaching the ideas of the Enlightenment *per se*. They had their own democratic and egalitarian set of rules, which were based on their religious convictions. Secondly, they had developed these principles as early as the mid seventeenth century, when George Fox founded the first Quaker community. Thus, the Quakers' democratic and egalitarian beliefs were born *before* the Enlightenment appeared in Europe in the eighteenth century.

Consequently, the Quakers did not disseminate their democratic beliefs and rules under the direct impact of the Enlightenment, as the French revolutionaries did. The French indeed wrote their *Declaration* under the unmediated impact of the Revolution, which was triggered by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the Quakers' democratic and progressive ideology did offer fertile terrain for the Enlightenment's egalitarian theories to flourish in the USA, because they overlapped with the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Quakers were deeply religious and rejected any human hierarchy that was based on gender, race/ethnicity, social status or political power. This very same hierarchy was deconstructed by the philosophy of the Enlightenment. The Quaker community strongly believed that all human beings were equal due to their divine spark: there is a tiny particle of God in each human being and that is why God may speak through any human being, regardless of their race, gender or social status. Consequently, all human beings are equal before the Divine Law, so they must be equal before any human law as well (van Drenth and de Haan 30).

Based on such democratic theories, an anti-racist and abolitionist social movement had appeared within the Quaker community by the end of the eighteenth century. Quaker travelling missionaries, both men and women, took a leading role in many eighteenth–nineteenth century social movements and social reforms, including abolitionism, education, prison reform and the combating of alcoholism (ibid. 46). The strongest social movement and the one taken up by the most powerful social activists / reformers was the abolitionist movement. For this reason it was abolitionism that constituted the first step towards feminism in the USA.

Two of the most important social activists were the Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah. In the first half of the nineteenth century these two young women left their prominent slave-owning family in South Carolina and joined the Quakers in search of "religious alternatives"

(Sklar 4). Both of them were deeply impressed by the Quakers' philosophy and identified whole-heartedly with the Quakers' theory on the equality of races. Thus Angelina and Sarah became leading figures of the abolitionist movement in the USA. In 1835 the two sisters started touring the north-eastern and later the southern states of the then America, promoting gender and racial equality and the abolition of slavery. Their meetings and speeches soon received added support from Lucretia Mott and William Lloyd Garrison. These four became the first group of powerful social reformers, and their chief aim was the abolition of slavery.

Lucretia Mott had been a Quaker minister since 1821 and, like many other female Quaker missionaries, was active in the abolitionist movement in the period prior to the Civil War. She was also well known for her eloquent speeches against slavery. William Lloyd Garrison was the most famous antislavery journalist in the USA and the founder of *The Liberator*, the nation's main abolitionist newspaper (Sklar 8).

At this point it becomes clear that by the beginning of the nineteenth century the Quaker female missionaries had developed a quite strong social activism, which may be considered women's activism. If women's activism includes women's socio-political activities geared to help the poor or slaves (van Drenth and de Haan 46), this was precisely what this group of Quaker social reformers did in this first stage of their activism: they reached out and tried to provide philanthropic aid, that is, they took up the fight against slavery in general, defending both male and female slaves. At this point *race was the most important issue* that mattered in fighting discrimination. *Gender did not yet matter as much as race did*. Consequently, these ladies' social activism at the dawn of the nineteenth century should be considered women's activism.

Nevertheless, the social movement soon underwent a substantial gender-sensitive alteration. A certain sense of belonging together appeared among women in the 1830s, followed by common self-identification with this "sisterhood". By 1833 the first exclusively women's organisation had appeared in Philadelphia, the *Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society*, founded by Lucretia Mott and William L. Garrison (Sklar 8). This society united both white and black women fighting *together* for one *common* goal: abolition.

Secondly, women started to find sufficient sense of belonging together to found the first maternal societies (ibid. 10). These maternal societies gave them the opportunity to self-empower themselves by organising meetings where they could discuss the gender-specific issues they were

addressing on a daily basis: the burdens of motherhood and marriage, racial prejudice and inequality in terms of employment and education (ibid.).

Thirdly, American women's empowerment took one further step: black women in the free/non slave-holding states of the USA founded the *Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem*, the nation's first exclusively black women's abolitionist organisation (ibid.). Women in ethnically mixed organisations, but also in exclusively black race/ethnic groups took up the fight against slavery. This anti-slavery activism slowly became characteristic of female activists, who far outnumbered male ones.

Moreover, prominent female activists grew concerned with gender-specific issues, such as the higher level of exploitation of female slaves as compared to males and the different forms it took: sexual harassment, rape and torture. Catherine Beecher, a well-known teacher in Hartford, started lecturing about and promoting the feminisation of education, as a means of providing economic independence for women (ibid. 7). Needless to mention, women's activism slowly became concerned with gender-specific issues and a strong sense of sisterhood, of belonging together and of networking emerged. Therefore, women's activism slowly moulded itself into a women's movement.

To move on, a decisive breakthrough came in 1832, when Maria Stewart, an African American woman, delivered a public speech in Boston. This event marked a breakthrough from two points of view. Firstly, Stewart publicly denounced not only racial inequality but gender inequality too (ibid. 11). Secondly, this was the first time that a woman had delivered a public speech addressed to "a mixed audience of men and women" (ibid.). Speaking in public was considered highly immoral for women, as the public sphere was exclusively reserved for men and women were restricted to the private sphere. That is why Maria Stewart was breaking a fundamental social code. The fury that followed Stewart's speech served the American women's movement by gearing it towards the first steps of feminist activism / feminism.

A few years later, in 1836, Angelina Grimke wrote her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*. In this she again took up her fight against slavery and she also tackled a paramount women's rights issue: women's right to speak in public (ibid. 16). This way she implicitly criticised gender discrimination: while men enjoyed the right to speak in public, women were banned from the public sphere.

This violation of women's rights to public speech became a national issue when a national convention of antislavery women took place in 1837. Angelina Grimke presented her *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States*, "a long pamphlet that defiantly defended women's right to speak and to act" (ibid. 26). Not only did Angelina Grimke fight for women's right to speak; she also defended their right to take action. The scope of the fight against the violation of women's rights was broadening from the right to speak in public to the right to act. A few radical activists stressed gender inequality to such an extent that they even called women "the white slaves of the North" (ibid. 22).

The roots of American feminism sprang from the anti-slavery movement, initiated by the Quaker abolitionists. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to highlight that these feminist roots required certain steps along the way that resemble a chain reaction. First, he Quakers' religious beliefs promoted the same egalitarian principles as the Enlightenment did in Europe, thus serving as a platform for the embedding of these ideals in the USA. Later, female Quaker missionaries engaged in women's activism, focusing on abolition. Next, female abolitionists began to construct a strong network and an identity of sisterhood. Unawares, women's activism melted into the women's movement. Starting from the lack of the right to public speech, female activists became aware of all the other gender inequalities that they suffered from and engaged in their first feminist steps.

The birth of feminism in the USA was not a spontaneous socio-historical event. It did not explode spontaneously, as it did in France under the impact of the outbreak of the Revolution. The birth of feminism in the USA needed to pass through a number of stages in a domino effect from women's activism to the feminist movement. This is the difference in terms of *pace*: French women arrived at feminism as early as 1789, while American women reached this point in 1848. This brings us to the second difference, which is in terms of *typology*. Female activists arrived at the *roots* of American feminism in 1837, when Angelina Grimke presented her *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States*. It is of paramount importance to underline that these were only the *roots* of American feminism, a kind of proto-form of the feminism that developed later. At this point American feminism was still in its embryonic stage. Women had started to realise their gender inequality but were still too timid to embrace true feminism as they did between 1848 and the 1850s. At the national antislavery convention in 1837, women agreed that only "certain rights and duties are common to all human beings" (Sklar 26). Also, "not all women

abolitionists were willing to be associated with the radical claim that women and men had equal rights" (ibid.).

A much stronger and more courageous feminism unleashed its forces eleven years later at the *Seneca Falls Convention* (1848) and subsequently at the *First National Women's Rights Convention* (1850) and at the *Second National Women's Rights Convention* (1851). This is when women all over the free states of the USA united their forces to thrash out their demand for equal rights in all domains and especially regarding the franchise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the women's movement in the USA developed the roots of feminism in the 1830s and turned to a more radical stage of feminism in 1848. That is why there is a difference between the two historical 'types' of feminism, feminism in France and that in the USA. This is the difference in terms of *typology*. While French women achieved a daring form of feminism in 1789, the feminist movement in the USA was much milder until the middle of the nineteenth century. I am specifically thinking here of the progressive claims argued by Olympe de Gouges, the *Dames francoises* and the Marquis de Condorcet as early as 1789.

As a final conclusion, the Enlightenment led to feminism both in France and in the USA. This is the similarity in terms of the end result. However, there is a considerable difference in both pace and typology between the 'lines' of feminism that women achieved in these two countries.

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