

### **Why Women Attained Suffrage Late in France than in the United States?**

It was probably beyond the limits of Abigail Adams's prophecy whether she had anticipated in 1776 that women's full suffrage was going to take another one and a half century before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment on August 26, 1920 when she wrote to her husband, John, who was attending the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to work on the Declaration of Independence, to "remember the ladies". The irony was that the Declaration's language had included an ideal that "all *men* are created equal."

On the other hand, Eugenie Niboyet, Jeanne Deroin, Suzanne Voilquin, Desirée Gay, and Pauline Roland, the most active advocates for women's rights in France who were associated with the Saint Simonian and Fourierist movements of the 1830s were probably not expecting for women to get voting rights after more than a century despite the fact that universal suffrage was one of the three essential rights -along with education and employment- later recognized by the provisional government, in February 1848 (Moon, 2005). Nevertheless, the worst scenario was yet to come. Political clubs were put under police surveillance and women were prohibited to attend to the meetings on the grounds that their proper place was in the home.

While the 1871 Paris Commune granted voting rights to women, they were taken away with the fall of the Commune and would only be granted again in July 1944 albeit their active participation in the French Revolution and the French Republic of 1848. Ironically, leftist politicians were concerned that women could vote for conservatives whereas the Roman Catholic Church were opposing universal suffrage as its leaders feared that voting would emancipate women and cause the breakup of the family (Moon, 2005).

It should be noted that a period of 24 years is fairly short as a meaningful difference for the lives of countries. Yet, the facts that women's suffrage could only be achieved in France

thanks to a wartime decree by General Charles de Gaulle, not by the initiative of the legislators of the parliamentary republic, and that among the major European countries France was one of the last to grant women the vote, make two cases quite distinct.

The first factor with regards to time difference in attaining women's suffrage is that organized women's rights movements were earlier in America, women's suffrage was more institutionalized and was on the top of the agenda of feminists starting from the 1850s. Even earlier, in 1836, Sarah Grimké, who was eventually silenced by male abolitionists concerned about her public speaking, began her speaking career as an abolitionist and a women's rights advocate. The following year, the first National Female Anti-Slavery Society convention met in New York City. In 1839, Mississippi passed the first Married Woman's Property Act. Half a decade later, female textile workers in Massachusetts organized the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA) and demanded a 10-hour workday, which was one of the first permanent labor associations for working women in the United States. In 1848, the first women's rights convention in the United States was held in Seneca Falls, New York, where the participants signed a "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" outlining the main issues and goals for the emerging women's movement. Two years later, Amelia Jenks Bloomer launched the dress reform movement with a costume bearing her name, which was later abandoned by several suffragists fearing that it might divert attention from other women's rights issues. Only a year later, former slave Sojourner Truth delivered her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony was arrested and brought to trial in Rochester, New York, for attempting to vote for Ulysses S. Grant in the presidential election while Sojourner Truth appeared at a polling booth in Battle Creek, Michigan, demanding a ballot before being turned away (Susan Barber, American Memory Project of the Library of Congress).

The second argument is the economic and political dynamics in America. Among those were the expansion of middle class mainly in the North, an increasing urbanization, and the increased labor of women in the paid labor force. In addition, a shift in social structure initiated an argument that civil, economic, and political rights should be expanded. The overall result was a spillover effect on democratization movements that questioned the rationale for the deficiency in women's suffrage while aliens and African Americans were granted enfranchisement. The conundrum was that if the propertyless and noncitizens could vote, then why women not? (Keyssar, 2000) On the other hand, in France, between 1848 and 1850, "arguments for women's rights were morally rejected by those conservatives, republicans, socialists, and workers who accepted only a domestic role for women, and legally repressed by a conservative government whose general opposition to the democratic principles and social reforms of the republic specifically condemned women's rights as destructive of the family and society." (Moon, 2005)

The third factor was a much earlier amelioration in legal institutions in the United States, namely the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which paved way for future steps towards women's suffrage by providing a legal framework of human rights. The former, ratified in 1868, was a major move in extending to all citizens the protections of the Constitution against unjust state laws despite the fact that it defined "citizens" and "voters" as "male" while the latter, ratified in 1870, enfranchised black men.

The fourth argument is the fragmented structure, changing class interests and the lack of strong leadership in women's rights movement in France. According to Humphries (2001), French bourgeois women wanted formal equality with their men whereas "working class women saw the right to vote as the key to better living conditions for the working class as a whole, including working class women." With regard to the leadership, in America, the "winning plan" of National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) president Carrie Chapman Catt,

unveiled in 1916, called for the coordination of activities by suffrage workers in both state and local associations. In France, however, Boxer (1985) notes that “the failure of women to gain suffrage in the early twentieth century and the related absence of French names among the foremothers celebrated by contemporary feminists have permitted persistence of the idea, first advanced by the turn-of-the-century antisuffragists, that there was among Frenchwomen no real suffrage movement but only a handful of isolated ‘leaders’ without followers.”

Fifth reason is the influence of communist Soviet Union on the women’s right movement in France. The feminist left lost many supporters such as Pelletier, Séverine, Roussel, Caroline Kauffmann, Marianne Rauze, Hélène Brion, and Anne Léal whereas republican socialists such as Maria Vérone characterized Bolshevism as a threat to suffragism and republicanism (Hause, 1987). The author contends that the disagreements between bourgeois feminists and socialist women were extended by the response to Bolshevism and “fearful conservatives had little difficulty in connecting the feminist threat to the family and to traditional French society with an international Communist conspiracy, especially when so many prominent feminists became Communists. Hence, police surveillance increased and government cooperation decreased.”

Sixth, a major impact was caused by the World War I. Jane Misme, editor of *La Française*, the organ of mainstream suffragism in France, told her readers in 1914 that “so long as our country is suffering, no one is permitted to speak of rights. We have only duties now.” (McMillan) Hause and Kenney (1984) argue that the First World War was a “major setback for the women’s suffrage movement, choking off a campaign which had been building up promisingly on the eve of the conflict and bequeathing a series of problems such as those relating to economic reconstruction and the search for national security which pushed the women’s suffrage issue well down the political agenda.” The fact that wartime required a mobilization to serve in extraordinary situations caused women to find “themselves demobilized rapidly in the

postwar rush back to normalcy” and “[t]he hiatus of suffrage activities during the sacred union marked the passing of a generation in French feminism; the postwar campaign was missing a large number of leaders, organizations, and periodicals.” (Hause, 1987)

However, a leading factor standing as a barrier against the women’s suffrage was the tight and secular republicanism. The entity that stopped the women’s suffrage, on 21 November 1922, was the Senate which followed the recommendation of radical and anti-clerical Senator Alexandre Bérard who argued that “women’s suffrage would be ‘sealing the tombstone of the Republic’. ... Throughout the Third Republic, the French Senate stood as a conservative bulwark against precipitous change. Senatorial wisdom held that any reform that seemed brusque be blocked or delayed until times were more suitable. In no area of legislation was this more evident than women’s rights.” (Hause and Kenney, 1984)

Last but not least, all of the listed justifications should not underestimate the dynamics of the era’s politics. Reynolds (1996) asserts that two things were necessary to happen for women to obtain the vote. The first one is that “Europe’s political elites had to be reconciled to the advent of democracy itself and accept that it was not a ‘leap in the dark’ to be dreaded but potentially a force for moderation, stability and good government” and the second is the fact that these elites had to be convinced so that women’s suffrage was not going to be a means for disorder, while it would not disturb classical gender roles. At the end, *le retard Français* only halted thanks to an “establishment of a new state committed to making the transition to genuine parliamentary democracy” which would “draw up a new constitution in which women could be accorded equal rights of citizenship.”

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