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# Introduction: British Civilization Studies and the “Woman Question”

*Introduction : Les Etudes de civilisation britannique et la « Question de la Femme »*

Marc Calvini-Lefebvre and Laura Schwartz

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- 1 This is the first themed issue in the *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*'s twenty-eight-year history to be entirely devoted to what was once called “the woman question”. It was commissioned by John Mullen (may he receive our heartfelt thanks), and we feel privileged to have had the opportunity to be its editors.
- 2 “First wave” British feminists made various predictions about the kind of gendered social change that their struggles would usher in. Some imagined a complete overhaul of relations between the sexes, particularly once women could use their votes to transform every aspect of society. Others envisaged a more gradual progression, believing that with the passage of time equality between the sexes would become the new normal, a common unquestioned and systematic practice. All of them would probably have been surprised by the kinds of changes that have occurred, as well as the resilience and adaptability of gendered inequality and oppression. The political agenda of “women’s rights” has existed in Britain for more than two centuries, and yet today women remain concentrated in the lowest paid forms of work, sex and gender-based violence persists, women’s bodies and identities remain the grounds upon which racist, imperialist and religious ideologies are frequently played out. Most immediately, the political developments of the last two years or so have served as a sharp reminder that gender remains at the heart of neo-conservative bids for power and the rise of the far right.
- 3 This themed issue invited articles engaged with the question of gendered social change in Britain in any period since 1800. As historians, the two of us seek to make sense of the questions that puzzle us by interrogating the *longue durée*. How have women’s roles changed vis-à-vis those of men? To what extent has the imbalance of power between men and women shifted? What has driven that change, and how much importance should be attributed to feminist movements in this process? Should the transformation of what it

means to be a woman and the deconstruction of binary gender roles be understood within a framework of "progress"? Or is this inadequate to understanding the multiplicity of ways in which gendered oppression and exploitation has been able to take on new guises, and emancipatory gains have been captured and contained? What might the "long view" reveal about this state of affairs and what theoretical models are best deployed to comprehend such developments and dead ends?

- 4 We were aware, naturally, that these were not new questions. They haunt each generation of feminists, recently in the powerful call by medievalist Judith Bennett to "*confront [a presumably disheartening] continuity*" in women's history rather than, or at least as well as, emphasize instances of (presumably encouraging) change.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, historians were at the centre of wider feminist debates on the utility of concepts such as patriarchy, and the question of whether analytical frameworks were capable of accounting for historical change was a key criteria for assessing their viability. It is for this reason that we wanted to open our themed issue with an interview with the French sociologist Christine Delphy, emeritus professor at the CNRS, by Marc Calvini-Lefebvre of Aix-Marseille Université. In 1975, Delphy famously designated patriarchy as the women's liberation movement's "*principal enemy*", arguing that women faced a specific form of oppression that was not reducible to an effect of existing systems of economic oppression, but worked autonomously from them.<sup>2</sup> In other words, she warned that women's oppression would not magically disappear with the smashing of capitalism, as was sometimes complacently argued in leftist circles. In this interview, Delphy explains how she came to choose the term, and defends her usage of it from the familiar accusation of ahistoricism. On this view, "patriarchy" is a uselessly monolithic term that is incapable of taking social, political and cultural change over time into account. To describe 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain as "patriarchies", in other words, is to overemphasize continuity and conceal the significant changes that have occurred in that time span. This objection, however, only stands if patriarchy is thought to have a fixed, "thick", definition. If, instead, it is understood as a shorthand for a system in which men are systematically advantaged vis-à-vis women, then it is not inaccurate to say that 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain are both patriarchies, if not of the same hue. Delphy also takes historians and anthropologists to task for their confident claims that they have found the origin of women's oppression, be that in ancient taboos over menstruation or in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The quest for origins, she implies, is probably a red herring. The urgent task is, rather, to tirelessly track the ways in which patriarchal systems reproduce and transform themselves, in the hope of managing to both better understand and better combat them.
- 5 The first section of this issue consists of two studies – one of contemporary Britain, the other of the 1980s and 1990s – that look into the gendered implications of the neoliberal turn; a political and economic project that both drew upon and circumscribed the achievements of "second wave" feminism.
- 6 Louise Dalingwater of Paris 3 draws on a flurry of recent analyses pertaining to gender inequality on the British labour market as well as her own qualitative research with focus groups on either side of the Channel to argue that the higher pay and prospect gap that British women suffer is strongly correlated with the neoliberal framework that has shaped government policy since 1979. For although the promotion of a flexible, service-based economy has drawn more women into the labour market, they have found themselves overwhelmingly clustered in "*pink-collar*" part-time jobs with limited job

security. More importantly still, Dalingwater's research suggests that neoliberalism has managed to achieve a form of cultural hegemony, as evidenced by the seeming acceptance by her British respondents of these inequalities as inevitable, the "normal" consequences of the market's unfettered workings. As Delphy might put it, it would seem that patriarchy and neoliberalism are mutually supportive.

- 7 This point is particularly powerfully illustrated in the article by Eve Worth of Oxford University. Drawing on oral history interviews she conducted with women born between 1938 and 1952, she seeks to complicate the familiar presentation of this generation as one that benefited straightforwardly from the profound social changes of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, by focusing on the second half of their lives, she brings to light the impact that the neoliberal turn had on their careers and sense of self. Thatcherism, as Worth highlights, was not only characterized by deindustrialization and its effects upon a predominantly male workforce. It was also characterized by what she terms "*deprofessionalization*", a process through which a predominantly female workforce working in the so-called "*semi-professions*" of the public sector was stripped of its autonomy and expertise by a new managerial (and virile) ethos that claimed to make the welfare state a "leaner" and supposedly more efficient machine by rigidly codifying and systematically inspecting the actions of its agents. The consequence, for Worth's interviewees, was often downward occupational mobility and a profound sense of personal failure, of "*being put back in my box*", as one puts it.
- 8 The attempt to contain and constrain the impact of more than a century of struggles for gender equality is a central theme of the second section of the issue, with three articles that, like Worth's, are grounded in interviews which reveal how women have navigated and continue to navigate the minefield of gender norms in three distinct contexts: the legal profession, the Church of England, and the professional practice of Cricket.
- 9 Alexandrine Guyard-Nedelec, of Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne, focuses on highly-educated women who work in the socially prestigious and financially lucrative legal sector as barristers and solicitors. As in other sectors of the economy, these women earn comparatively less than their male counterparts and face both vertical segregation (the infamous "*glass ceiling*") and horizontal segregation (they tend to cluster into certain areas of legal practice, like family law, but are under-represented in others, like criminal law, which generates higher income and greater prestige). She shows that the most convincing explanation for this is not so much institutional sexism (though this can be the case in certain sets of chambers) as the operation of a "*maternal wall*", a concept coined by the American scholar Joan Williams and that this article applies to an analyses of labour markets in Europe. Indeed, it helps to pinpoint the specific discrimination women face as real or potential mothers including in working environments that are, at least on paper, proactively attempting to eradicate sex discrimination. The discrimination women face, then, is best understood as intersectional, that is to say as the result of overlapping ideas, attitudes and prejudices regarding femininity, maternity and motherhood (and that may interact with other paradigms such as race, class, sexual orientation, and so on).
- 10 Such ideas also loom large in Eglantine Jamet-Moreau of Paris Nanterre's analysis of the Anglican Church's tortuous debates over the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopacy since 1900. Indeed, the antis seem always to fall back on the idea that women's bodies are the ultimate obstacle to their ordination. Because Christ was a man, they argue, only men can embody him. All the more so that women's ability to carry a

child and give birth are God-given and indicate clearly in what direction they must devote their lives. What is more, women's bodies are described as impure, both because of menstruation and because of the fact that they bear witness, via pregnancy, to sexual activity. Such impurity is declared to be incompatible with officiating in a sacred, holy, space. Significantly, despite their ancient pedigree and relentless repetition, these arguments have not been sufficient to bar women from ordination in the Anglican Church. However, Jamet-Moreau shows their continued effects on the manner in which the Church strives to accommodate those within its ranks who refuse to accept female ministers, as well as the ways in which the gendered expectations of congregations affect the experiences of ministers, male and female. Clearly then, patriarchal ideas and norms, though contested, have not, to reprise the article's title, been fully deconstructed in the Anglican Church.

- 11 Rafaele Nicholson of Queen Mary, University of London explores one area in which women have managed, since the late 1920s, to challenge conservative gender norms not by fighting for change to an existing institution from within but by creating their own parallel organization: the Women's Cricket Association (WCA). Here too, it was widely argued that women could not play this most English of games because of their bodies, for reasons both biological (their bodies are too weak, too fragile, or too precious, to play this game) and aesthetic (when played by women, the game is ugly, and a woman who plays the game loses her beauty). The WCA took these criticisms to heart and attempted to nullify them by imposing strict dress codes to ensure that players would appear irreproachably feminine. Such enforcement of conservative gender norms, and the general hostility of the largely middle-class interviewees to the label "feminist", should not, Nicholson argues, conceal the significant ways in which cricketing women challenge (d) the gender *status quo*. Most obviously, there is their practice of cricket at the highest levels of international competition and in mixed-sex games, which undermines claims about their bodily inability. But there are also their domestic arrangements which, because of the nature of the sport (the length of games and tours), require long spells of absence from their homes, sometimes for several months at a time. Cricket, then, is one arena in which we can trace the legacies and impact of first wave feminism into the later twentieth century, even when the women involved did/do not embrace the feminist label.
- 12 The third section of this issue explores the strengths and limitations of campaigning organizations which seek to speak on behalf of women and their rights, through two case studies – one of the women's suffrage movement, the other of labour organising.
- 13 In her article, Anna Muggeridge, a doctoral student at the University of Worcester, explores the oft-overlooked property qualification of the 1918 Representation of the People Act. It is well-known that, whereas all men aged twenty-one and older were enfranchised, the vote was only granted to women over thirty. What is often forgotten is that these women also had to face a property qualification. The result was the exclusion, Muggeridge shows for the first time with accuracy, of close to two million working-class women from the franchise. Looking into the women's movement's reaction to this exclusion, she notes that the concern it caused was minimal when compared with the constant campaigning for the redress of the age qualification up to 1928. We see here how the well-documented class bias within the women's suffrage movement not only contributed to acceptance of the property qualification but also to a relative lack of interest in combating it. This article, then, is a timely reminder that even the most uplifting of movements for social justice can simultaneously reproduce forms of exclusion

and domination, thus leading to legal transformations that do less to further gendered social change than might have been expected.

- 14 A similar conclusion can be drawn from the next article by Sundari Anitha of the University of Lincoln, Ruth Pearson, Emeritus Professor of International Development at the University of Leeds, and Linda McDowell, of the University of Oxford, who discuss two emblematic trade disputes involving South Asian women workers: Grunwick in 1976-78 and Gate Gourmet in 2005. Enriching the existing record of these disputes with new interviews, their account reveals troubling continuities in the ways both management and the trade union movement engaged with migrant and/or Black and Minority Ethnicity women workers. In both disputes a central feature of managers’ attempts at bullying women into being more productive involved a sex-specific limitation of their bodily autonomy through the deliberately humiliating policing of toilet breaks. The trade union leadership, on the other hand, are taken to task for misleadingly presenting Grunwick as a turning point in their treatment of marginalized women workers, a claim to “progress” that they failed to make good over thirty years later in the case of the Gate Gourmet workers. Indeed, not only did the trade union bureaucracy arguably fail, in both cases, to adequately support the striking women workers, they also continue to work on orientalist assumptions about these workers’ alleged preference for domesticity, disinclination to unionise, and tendency to be moved to action by community rather than class interests. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the challenges unions face in a labour market characterized by a ubiquitous “*ethnic division of labour*”, the rise of the “*gig economy*”, and a legal framework that impedes militancy, the authors maintain that marginalized women workers’ interests can and must be better defended. For this to occur, unions must first acknowledge and remove the structural barriers within their organizations that limit the representation of marginalized voices. In addition, they would do well to adopt an intersectional approach when analysing these workers’ situations. Indeed, as their article shows, this allows one to see that these workers’ sense of injustice and their decision to resist is driven not only by the degradation of their working conditions but by their desire for recognition and the restoration, as the authors put it, “*of their sense of worth and dignity*”.
- 15 The final section of this themed issue looks at how the memory of the women’s movement is mobilised both within contemporary British politics, via a case study of the recently formed Women’s Equality Party (WEP), and within broader British public debate, via the heated exchanges sparked by the feature film *Suffragette*.
- 16 Véronique Molinari of Université de Grenoble’s article places the WEP in historical perspective. Created in 2015 and already accruing more members than UKIP or the Greens, the WEP is not the first attempt by some British women to effect political and legal change by organizing separately from the existing “malestream” parties. Its predecessors, Molinari argues, range from Christabel Pankhurst’s short-lived right-wing Women’s Party, created in 1918, to the left-leaning interwar Six Point Group, through to the Women’s Liberation Movement and the six radical demands it championed between 1971 and 1975. Taking the long view reveals two striking continuities in this hundred-year history. First, that the main policy areas singled out for reform have remained largely the same: education and employment, pay, violence against women, and sexuality. Second, that despite their considerable differences, these groups have come in for a pair of strikingly similar criticisms: enemies accuse them of being primarily motivated by misandry, while potential allies chide them for naively expecting to achieve their aims

from outside the main parties of government. One way in which the WEP has sought to meet these criticisms and legitimate its actions, has been to explicitly invoke the memory, and adopt the colours and slogans, of the militant suffragettes. Here, the historical perspective invites a reflection on the politics of memory. Indeed, it is quite clear that the WEP has much more in common with a reformist/liberal strand of suffragism than with militancy, both in terms of methods and policy. That it prefers instead to lay claim to quite a different political tradition is a testament to the place that the suffragettes occupy in Britain's national narrative. But it also problematically sweeps their authoritarianism and post-1914 xenophobia under the carpet, all the while obscuring important continuities in liberal feminist reformist politics.

- 17 Molinari's article thus places a helpful spotlight on the tensions surrounding the history and memory of the suffrage movement, tensions that came to the fore in the heated public debate about the film *Suffragette* released in 2015, a debate to which Laura Schwartz of the University of Warwick turns in the review essay that brings our themed issue to a close. One of many historians of the nineteenth-century women's movement to weigh in on the various controversies surrounding *Suffragette*, Schwartz returns here to one of the most controversial critiques of the film, that surrounding its race politics. Her article highlights how approaching such debates historically requires a double lens. Historians might indeed wish to nuance criticisms of the film for failing to portray suffrage campaigners of colour or failing to distance itself from the racist pronouncements of the Women's Social and Political Union's leadership, on the basis that this is to too bluntly impose a reading of the North American experience onto the British context. Yet it is also crucial to understand that although context is explanatory it is not exculpatory. The fact that the British women's movement did reproduce racist and imperialist tropes is beyond question and cannot be simply brushed aside as "a sign of the times". Not only because there were contemporaries who did not think in this way, but also because such ideas have not disappeared. The point, then, of thinking as a historian is not to stand in judgement over our predecessors, nor simply to set the record straight by drawing on our expert knowledge of the archives, but rather to keep the past alive as a site from which to think and act in our own time and place.
- 18 We knew that this issue could not offer either an exhaustive nor a definitive treatment of our questions and we regret that it does not, as we initially hoped, go further back than 1900. But we were impressed with the breadth of topics that our questions were applied to, and the depth of expertise with which those topics were treated. Indeed, as Florence Binard has recently shown, though women's and/or gender studies have been a constant presence in the plural and varied landscape of British civilization studies in France since at least the 1970s (benefitting greatly, as this issue has done, from the weaving of close intellectual and friendly ties between scholars on either side of the Channel), it is only recently, in 2010, that a dedicated learned society (the *Société Anglophone sur le Genre et les Femmes*)<sup>3</sup> was founded, indicating that a critical mass of "British civ" scholars is now actively working in these fields. <sup>4</sup> This themed issue may thus be thought of as a further stepping stone in the gradual move of women and gender studies from the periphery to the heart (if not the centre) of British civilisation studies in France. It is certainly a testament to the vibrancy of the field that it brings together scholars at all stages of their careers (from the doctoral student to the Emeritus professor) and from at least four different disciplinary backgrounds: economics, history, sociology and political science. We hope therefore that it will contribute to furthering the dissemination of interest in

women and gender studies amongst the next generation of British civilisation scholars. Such continuity would, for once, be cause for celebration!

- 19 **Ce numéro de la revue a été mis en forme et mis en ligne avec le logiciel Lodel par Shirley Doulière et John Mullen.**
- 20 **Marc Calvini-Lefebvre is Lecturer in 19th Century British History at Aix-Marseille Université. His research explores the intellectual history of feminism in Britain.**
- 21 **Laura Schwartz is Associate Professor of Modern British History at the University of Warwick. She has published widely on the history of British feminism and is currently completing her third monograph *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class Conflict and Domestic Labour in the British Women's Suffrage Movement*.**
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Binard, Florence, 'Beyond Invisibility and Bias: English Women's and Gender Studies in France', in Renate Haas (ed.), *Rewriting Academia: the Development of the Anglicist Women's and Gender Studies of Continental Europe* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 105-132.

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## NOTES

1. See in particular, Judith Bennet, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), especially chapters 3 to 5. The original expression can be found in an earlier article of hers: Judith Bennet, "Confronting continuity", *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 9, n. 3, (1997), pp. 73-94.

2. Christine Delphy, *L'ennemi principal*, 2 tomes, (Paris, Edition Syllepse, 3<sup>e</sup> édition, 2013).

3. *Société Anglophone sur le Genre et les Femmes*

4. Florence Binard, "Beyond Invisibility and Bias: English Women's and Gender Studies in France", in Renate Haas (ed.), *Rewriting academia: the development of the anglicist women's and gender studies of continental Europe* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 105-132.

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## ABSTRACTS

This is the first themed issue in the *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*'s twenty-eight-year history to be entirely devoted to what was once called “the woman question”. At its heart lies a simple yet puzzling question: why is it that, after over two centuries of campaigning for “women’s rights”, women remain concentrated in the lowest paid forms of work, sex and gender-based violence persists, and women’s bodies and identities remain the grounds upon which racist, imperialist and religious ideologies are frequently played out? In providing detailed case-studies through which to reflect on this question, our contributors reveal the plurality of objects and methods that characterise the rich fields of women’s and gender studies research. We hope therefore that they will contribute to furthering the dissemination of interest in women and gender studies amongst the next generation of British civilisation scholars.

En vingt-huit années d’existence, ceci est le premier numéro thématique de la *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* à être entièrement consacré à ce que l’on appelait autrefois « La Question de la Femme ». Il pose une question à la fois simple et profondément déroutante : comment se fait-il qu’après deux siècles de militantisme en faveur des droits des femmes, celles-ci se retrouvent encore concentrées dans les occupations les moins bien rémunérées, les violences sexuelles et genrées persistent, et les corps et identités des femmes continuent régulièrement à être les terrains de déploiement privilégiés d’idéologies racistes, impérialistes et religieuses ? Les études de cas détaillées de nos contributrices montrent la pluralité des objets et méthodes caractéristiques de ces deux champs très riches que sont les études sur les femmes et les études genre. Nous espérons donc qu’ils contribueront à prolonger la dissémination croissante d’intérêt pour ces champs au sein de la prochaine génération de civilisationnistes.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** women’s studies, gender, SAGEF, civilisation studies, feminism

**Mots-clés:** études sur les femmes, genre, SAGEF, études de civilisation, féminisme

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