

On the French Origin of the Words *Feminism* and *Feminist*

The words *feminism* and *feminist* are used today throughout the Western world to connote the ideas that advocate the emancipation of women, the movements that have attempted to realize it, and the individuals who support these goals. Few people in the English-speaking world realize, however, that the origin of these terms can be traced to nineteenth-century French political discourse.

The earliest origins of the French word *féminisme* and its derivatives are still obscure. Their roots should be traceable to the political agitation of the 1830s, during which time the related words *socialisme* and *individualisme* made their appearance in the political vocabulary of French-speaking peoples. The origins of these latter words have long since been illuminated by scholars.¹ But this is not the case for *féminisme*.

Invention of the word *féminisme* has long been attributed to Charles Fourier (1772-1837), the audacious thinker who coined so many French neologisms and who understood so well that the essence of women's emancipation lay in eradicating their legal and economic subordination to men. The dates of attributed origins nevertheless vary from 1808—the publication date for the first edition of the *Théorie de Quatre Mouvements et des destinées générales*—through 1837, the year of Fourier's death, to 1841, when the posthumous second edition of the *Quatre Mouvements* appeared in Fourier's *Oeuvres complètes*.²

In 1896 Marya Chéliga-Loevy, writing in Paris, claimed that Fourier had invented the expression in the 1808 edition of his *Théorie*.³ But careful examination of this edition confirms that the word *féminisme* is not to be

This is a slightly amended English-language version, by the author, of "Sur l'origine des mots 'féminisme' et 'feministe,'" originally published in the *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 34, no. 3 (July-September 1987).

found, although the celebrated paragraph in which Fourier insisted that "progress" in liberty for women was a precondition of general social progress certainly reveals the existence of what we would now consider to be a "feminist" consciousness on Fourier's part.

Research on these words in etymological dictionaries of the French language constitutes nothing less than a frustrating exercise in circular citation. In Paul Robert's *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (1960 edition), the first usage is attributed to Fourier with the date of 1837. This dictionary distinguishes between the "doctrine that anticipates the extension of women's rights and role in society" and "the political feminism of the suffragettes." Robert cites as his authority Marcel Braunschvig, *Notre littérature étudiée dans les textes*.⁴ On consulting Braunschvig, however, we find that he gives neither a date nor a text for attribution, but simply refers his readers to a book by Léon Abensour, *La Femme sous le règne de Louis-Philippe et en 1848*⁵ and to an article by Céléstin Bouglé, "Le Féminisme saint-simonien," in the *Revue de Paris*,⁶ which was reprinted in his book *Chez les prophètes socialistes*.⁷ A more detailed inquiry reveals, however, that Abensour's book is very badly documented on this point, and that concerning Fourier. Abensour takes his analysis from the studies of Bouglé (already cited by Braunschvig) and Emile Dessignolle's doctoral dissertation, "Le Féminisme d'après la doctrine socialiste de Charles Fourier,"⁸ which nowhere discusses the origins of the word. Like Robert's dictionary, the *Nouveau dictionnaire étymologique et historique* by Larousse (1964) also gives the date 1837 and attributes the word to Fourier. Neither *La Grande encyclopédie Larousse* of 1886-1902 nor that of 1971-78 contain an entry under the word *féminisme*. And what is more, the 1837 date given with such assurance by these authoritative dictionaries seems to be a total mystification. Eighteen thirty-seven was the year of Fourier's death, and a year during which he published virtually nothing. The posthumous edition (1841) of the *Quatre mouvements* gives no better results than the original edition.⁹

When one consults the works of recognized historians who have studied Fourier's voluminous, idiosyncratic (and often repetitive) works, the mystery only deepens. Among American scholars of Fourier whom I have consulted, no one could identify a single citation of the word.¹⁰ Even in the Fourierist dictionary, the *Dictionnaire de sociologie phalanstérienne* compiled by Silberling, one finds only the keywords *famillisme* and *femme*.¹¹ It seems that a few of the works published by Fourier toward the end of his life escaped Silberling's net, and therefore that of subsequent dictionary editors; it may still be possible to locate the term in the pages of some obscure Fourierist periodical of the time. That possibility, however, seems remote.

The term *féministe* has a less problematic history. The Robert dictionary gives the date as 1872 and attributes first usage to the French playwright and essayist, Alexandre Dumas fils. This usage can be verified; indeed, the word does appear in Dumas's *L'Homme-femme* (1872). But his pejorative use suggests that he did not invent it himself: "Les *féministes*, passez-moi ce néologisme, disent, à très-bonne intention d'ailleurs. . . ." (The feminists, if I may borrow this neologism, say, with very good intentions moreover. . . .)¹² Where did he discover—if indeed he did not coin—this "neologism"?

In 1882 the term *féministe* reappears—this time as a label claimed by Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914), the French champion of woman suffrage. In a letter addressed to the Prefect of the Seine, published in the daily press, Auclert opposed the restrictions recently imposed by the Prefect on speeches during the civil marriage ceremonies held at the city hall. She asserted the right of *féministes* to criticize the marriage laws during France's obligatory civil weddings.¹³ Further on in the same letter, Auclert used the term *partisans de l'affranchissement des femmes* (partisans of women's liberation); in a later version of this letter, published in 1908 and cited after Auclert's death by her sister in 1922, the words *partisans de l'affranchissement des femmes* were changed to *partisans du Féminisme*. Relying solely on the 1908 version, subsequent commentators have alleged that the 1882 letter marks the first use of both words, *féministe* and *féminisme*. Clearly, this claim will not stand the test of closer examination of the textual evidence.¹⁴

In any case, neither of these two words really entered public discourse before the end of the nineteenth century. Even the movement for the extension of women's rights is described in the French press until 1891 as "le mouvement féminin."¹⁵ But soon thereafter the terminology began to change. In the 20 September 1891 issue of *Le Droit des femmes* (published since 1869 by Léon Richer), Eugénie Pottonie-Pierre called for the foundation of a "Fédération française des sociétés féministes." The issue of 20 December published the association's charter. In mid-May of 1892 this group convened a "Congrès générale des institutions féministes."¹⁶ Shortly thereafter literary critic Emile Faguet used the word *féministe* several times in the *Revue bleue*. Maria Deraismes consecrated the usage several months later in the *Revue des revues*.¹⁷

From 1892 on the terms *féminisme* and *féministe* entered common usage in French—not only in France but also in Belgium and Switzerland. In English, the earliest reported use of *feminist* (by the *Oxford English Dictionary*) dates from 12 October 1894, in the *Daily News* (London); *feminism* was introduced in April 1895 in a literary book review.¹⁸

From 1893 on the term *le mouvement féministe* also gained currency.

In June, the *Revue encyclopédique Larousse* appropriated it.¹⁹ In 1895 Clotilde Dissard published the first issue of *La Revue féministe*. In April 1896, in Paris, a second "Congrès féministe international" convened. It received wide coverage in the press and contributed further to the popularization of the words.

Reporting on the position of women in France at the September 1896 Berlin Women's Congress, Eugénie Potonie-Pierre took credit on behalf of herself and her colleagues for inventing the word *féminisme*. She praised the press for successfully launching it.²⁰ Several months later Marya Chéliga-Loevy edited a special issue of the *Revue encyclopédique Larousse* devoted to French feminism; it was there she made the claim for inventing *féminisme* on Fourier's behalf. Other publications soon appeared using one or another of the words *féminisme* or *féministe* in their titles.²¹

From that time forth, factions also emerged. Like their socialist counterparts in *fin-de-siècle* France, groups and individuals espousing divergent theories of what constituted feminism began to categorize themselves and their rivals through the now familiar practice of exclusionary classification and the formation of separate organizations and publications.²² By the beginning of the twentieth century, there were already many self-described or attributed feminisms: "familial feminists," "integral feminists," "Christian feminists," "socialist feminists," "bourgeois feminists," "radical feminists," "male feminists," etc. This phenomenon poses many interesting questions for the historian of feminism: Who was really a feminist? At what point did some feminists become branded as antifeminists? Which advocates of which answer to the woman question held women's best interests at heart? Could it be said that all women shared the same interests? What must the fundamental criteria be? And, most important politically, who would decide? Such questions remain as lively and as troubling in public discourse today as they were in France in 1900.²³

Notes

1. For a use dating from the 1830s, see the article by Pierre Leroux in the *Revue encyclopédique* (October 1833), reprinted with the title "De l'individualisme et du socialisme," in D.O. Evans, *Le Socialisme romantique. Pierre Leroux et ses contemporains* (Paris: M. Rivière, 1948), pp. 223-38. On *l'individualisme*, see Henry-Léon, "Quelle est la véritable définition de l'individualisme," *Journal des économistes* (April 1899), pp. 3-18; K.W. Swart, "'Individualism' in the Mid-Nineteenth Century (1826-1860)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23 (1962), pp. 77-90; and Steven Lukes, "The Meanings of 'Individualism,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (1971), pp. 45-66. On *socialisme*, see Gabriel Deville, "Origine des mots 'socialisme' et 'socialiste' et de certains autres," *La Révolution française* 54 (1908), p. 390; and Roger Picard, "Sur l'origine des mots 'socialisme' et 'socialiste,'" *La Revue socialiste* 51 (April 1910), pp. 379-80.

2. Charles Fourier, *Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales* (Paris, 1808), reissued in 1967 by Simone Debout (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert). See also the third edition of the *Théorie*, in his *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1966), a reprint of the *Oeuvres complètes* (1841-1846).

3. Marya Chéliga-Loevy, "Les Hommes féministes," *Revue Encyclopédique Larousse*, no. 169 (28 November 1896), p. 826.

4. Marcel Braunschvig, *Notre littérature étudiée dans les textes*, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Colin, 1921-23), vol. 2, p. 409.

5. Léon Abensour, *La Femme sous le règne de Louis-Philippe et en 1848* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1913).

6. Célestin Bouglé, "Le Féminisme saint-simonien," *Revue de Paris*, 15 September 1918, pp. 371-99.

7. Célestin Bouglé, *Chez les prophètes socialistes* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1918).

8. Émile Dessignolle, *Le Féminisme d'après la doctrine socialiste de Charles Fourier* (Lyon: A. Storck, 1903).

9. In her article, "Feminism in the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (February 1975), pp. 43-62, Jane Abray gives as reference Charles Turgeon, *Le Féminisme français*, 2 vols. (Paris: L. Larose, 1902), vol. 1, p. 10, for the attribution of the first usage in the second edition (1841) of the *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements*, published in the *Oeuvres* of 1841-46. Turgeon himself cited page 195 of that edition, where one finds the celebrated paragraph—but not the word. My consultation of the 1841 edition did not reveal a single trace of the word, either on the page indicated by Turgeon or on the surrounding pages.

The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (8th edition, 1932) defines *féminisme* as a "doctrine qui a pour objet l'extension des droits civils et politiques à la femme" (a doctrine whose object is the extension to woman of civil and political rights), but says nothing of its origin. More recently, the *Treasury of the French Language: Dictionary of the Language of XIX and XX Centuries (1789-1960)* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1980) has defined feminism more broadly as a "mouvement social qui a pour objet l'émancipation de la femme, l'extension de ses droits en vue d'égaliser son statut avec celui de l'homme, en particulier dans le domaine juridique, politique, économique; doctrine, idéologie correspondante" (a social movement whose object is the emancipation of woman, the extension of her rights with the goal of making her status equal to that of man, particularly in the juridical, political, and economic domains; the doctrine and its corresponding ideology). But the examples of usage given begin in 1904, and they are excerpted from a text written by a male author.

10. I discussed this problem with three American experts on Fourier's publications: Elizabeth C. Altman, Jonathan Beecher, and Nicholas Rusanovsky. They were unable to help me unravel the problem of the attribution of the word *féminisme* to Fourier.

11. Édouard Silberling, *Dictionnaire de sociologie phalanstérienne. Guide des œuvres complètes de Charles Fourier* (1911; republished by Burt Franklin, New York, in the series "Bibliography and Reference," no. 63).

12. Alexandre Dumas, *L'Homme femme. Réponse à M. Henri d'Idéville* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1872), recently republished in *Alexandre Dumas fils, Le Dossier "Tue-La", constitué, étudié et plaidé par André Leboucq* (Avignon: E. Aubanel, 1969), p. 86.

13. Auclert published this letter in her weekly suffrage newspaper, *La Citoyenne*, no. 64 (4 September—1 October 1882). *Le Temps* (5 September 1882) discussed it in a lead editorial on the first page. (Despite the existence of this article, the reference cannot be located under "Auclert" in the 1882 index of *Le Temps*.) I wish to thank Steven C. Hause, who has just published a biography of Hubertine Auclert (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), for sending me a copy of Auclert's article from *La Citoyenne*. The essential passages are as follows:

Je ne doute pas que la liberté d'adresser dans les mariées quelques mots aux nouveaux mariés, liberté dont je serai heureuse d'user, est octroyée aux femmes comme aux hommes, aux féministes comme aux libres-penseurs, car il serait incompréhensible que les libres-

penseurs puissent aller à la mairie critiquer l'Église, sur l'esprit de laquelle reposent les lois matrimoniales, alors que les féministes ne pourraient aller à cette même mairie critiquer les lois matrimoniales qui sont basées sur l'esprit de l'Église [I have no doubt that the freedom to address a few words to newlyweds in the town halls, a freedom I would be most happy to use, is offered to women just as to men, to feminists as well as to freethinkers. It would be incomprehensible that freethinkers could go to the town hall to criticize the Church, whose spirit informs the marriage laws, whereas the feminists could not go to that same town hall to criticize the marriage laws informed by the spirit of the Church.]

Vous ne ferez pas de distinction, monsieur, entre ceux qui attaquent l'effet et ceux qui attaquent la cause, du moment qu'un partisan de la libre-pensée a pu parler, les partisans de l'affranchissement des femmes ont de droit de parler. [You must make no distinction, Monsieur, between those who attack the effect and those who attack the cause. From the moment a partisan of free thought can speak out, the partisans of women's liberation have the right to speak out.]

14. The letter was republished, with the change indicated above, in a collection of Auclert's articles, *Le Vote des femmes* (Paris: V. Giard et E. Brière, 1908), p. 63. Auclert's sister, Marie Chaumont, later cited it in her biographical introduction to another collection of Auclert's articles, *Les Femmes au gouvernement* (Paris: M. Giard, 1923), p. 5. On this point, Patrick Kay Bidelman is mistaken in his otherwise very instructive book, *Stand Up Parisians: The Founding of the Liberal Feminist Movement in France, 1858-1889* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 153, 194, and 215, note 3.

15. Steven C. Hause also pointed out that Auclert used the term *mouvement féministe* many times as a headline in *La Citoyenne* during the latter months of 1885. But it seems that her usage found little immediate echo in other periodicals.

16. See *Le Droit des femmes*, no. 402 (20 September 1891) and no. 408 (20 December 1891). The congress of May 1892 is mentioned by Suzanne Grinberg in her *Historique du mouvement suffragiste depuis 1848* (Paris: H. Goulet, 1926), p. 81; and by Frances Ida Clark, *The Position of Women in Contemporary France* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1937), p. 18. See also *Dépopulation de la France, allocution prononcée par Mme. Léon Bagnat, née de Vienne, au Congrès général des institutions féministes, tenu à la mairie du VI^e arrondissement, le 14 mai 1892* (Paris: P. Dupont, 1892).

17. Emile Faguet, "Courrier littéraire," *Revue bleue*, 28 May 1892, pp. 701-703; Maria Derasmes, "A propos du Congrès de la Fédération des sociétés féministes," *La Revue des revues*, August 1892, pp. 1-3.

18. See the 1933 *Supplement* to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The very short unsigned review was published in the *Athenaeum*, 27 April 1895. It introduced a novel entitled *The Grasshoppers*, by a Mrs. Andrew Dean [pseud. Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick]. The author of the review put the word *feminism* in quotation marks. A more important usage is Virginia M. Crawford, "Feminism in France," *Fortnightly Review*, April 1897, pp. 524-34. The 1972 *Supplement* to the *OED* retains these dates and attributions.

19. For example, Louis Bridel, "Le Mouvement féministe et le droit des femmes," *Revue sociale et politique* (Brussels), vol. 3 (1893), pp. 119-33; Gustave Lajeal, "Le Mouvement féministe," *Revue encyclopédique Larousse*, no. 61 (15 June 1893), pp. 585-96; Raoul de La Grasserie, "Le Mouvement féministe et les droits de la femme," *Revue politique et parlementaire* I, no. 3 (September 1894), pp. 432-49; Marie Dronsart, "Le Mouvement féministe," *Le Correspondant*, vol. 184 (10 September and 25 September 1896), pp. 860-93 and 1090-1109, and vol. 185 (10 October 1896), pp. 110-37. See also *L'Éclair*, 11 June 1893 and 12 February 1895.

20. In *Der Internationaler Kongress für Frauenwerke und Frauenbestrebungen*, Berlin, 19.-26 September 1896, ed. Rosalie Schoenflies et al. (Berlin: Walther, 1897), p. 40.

21. For example, Marie C. Terrisse, *Notes et impressions à travers le féminisme* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1896); Auguste Fabre, *Le Féminisme: ses origines et son avenir* (Nîmes: Imprimerie Veuve Laporte, 1897); Paul Soudry, "Humanisme et féminisme," *Revue bleue*, 4 December 1897,

etc. In August 1896, the *Revue politique et parlementaire* began a series of articles on "féminisme" in England, Italy, the United States, Australia and Germany. The authors included Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Emiliana Mariani, Harnnet Hanson Robinson, Elizabeth Walstenhame, and Lily Braun-Gizycki.

Despite these many examples, the computer search I ordered in April 1986 in the data base of ARTFL (American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language) informed me that the first usages discovered were the following: for *feministes*, 1898 (E. Coppée, *La Bonne souffrance*); for *féminisme*, 1900 (O. Mirbeau, *Journal d'une femme de chambre*); and for *féministe*, 1904 (L. Frapié, *La Maternelle*). It should be noted that as of that date, at least, there were very few women authors represented in this data base and virtually no periodical literature.

22. Evelyn Sullerot, the historian of the women's press in France, counted some twenty-one feminist periodicals at the beginning of the twentieth century. See Sullerot, *La Presse féminine* (Paris: A. Colin, 1966), p. 9. Pat Bidelman has recently compiled a much more complete list.

23. See my forthcoming book on this subject, "The Woman Question in Third Republic France (1870-1914)." See also Marilyn J. Boxer, "First Wave' Feminism in Nineteenth-Century France: Class, Family and Religion," *Women's Studies International Forum* 5, no. 6 (1982), pp. 551-59; and Karen Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984), pp. 648-76. For further elaboration, see my article, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Perspective," forthcoming in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1988). For several attempts at classification by antagonists of feminism in the early twentieth century, see especially Turgot, *Le Féminisme français*, and Théodore Joran, *Le Mensonge du féminisme* (Paris: Jouve, 1905), pp. 290-94, and his commentaries on the *Almanach féministe* in his book, *Au Cœur du féminisme* (Paris: Arthur Savatet, 1908).

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