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MARY NASH,
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Feminist rituals in the conquest of public space: a comparative (or: anti-rituals? feminism(s) in Europe and the challenge of "making it up as you go"

KAREN OFFEN

Institute for Research on Women and Gender
Stanford University, California, USA

I begin with questions. Rituals? Women's rituals? Certainly, there have been many. But what of rituals with respect to the history(ies) of feminism(s)? What resonance do such questions evoke for a historian of European feminisms? Can we claim that the concept of ritual applies to the activities of feminists in the European past? In what sense?

There are distinctive differences between writing the history of women (viewed as a form of social history), the history of representations of women, or of their historical experiences, the history of the "woman question" debate, and the history of feminism. To write a history of feminism is necessarily to write political history, encompassing a history of ideas, of actions, and in the more recent past a history of organizational efforts, all centered on contestation of male dominance. To write historically of feminism is to write about the balance of power in male/female relations, and specifically to focus on the remonstrances of women and their male allies who object to male dominance and female subordination as the organizing principles in societal organization. How can the notion of ritual illuminate the history of feminism?

A primary concern of historical feminism has been the conquest for women of access to "public space" and to the recorded word — that is, the conquest of the opportunity to speak out, to publish, to organize, to associate, to contest "wrongs" and "injustices." This activity operated in what we (both before and after Jürgen Habermas probed the notion of *Öffentlichkeit* have come to call "the public sphere" (*l'espace public* in French, *el espacio público* in Spanish).

For a working definition of feminism, see Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Analysis' in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 119-157; in Spanish: "Definió el Feminismo: Un análisis histórico-comparativo," *Historia Social*, no. 9 (Invierno 1991), pp. 103-135.

For an important critique of the Habermas view, as well as of critics such as Joan B. Landes, see Seidh Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas,' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 187-231, and Dana Goodman, 'Public Sphere and Private Life: toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime,' *History and Theory*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1992), pp. 1-20. See also the recent collection, *Melting the Boundaries: Transformation of the Language of Public and Private in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Dario Castiglione & Lecky Sharpe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995).

Too often, feminism has been written about as though its only goal was political rights - in particular, the vote. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this was an increasingly important goal of feminism, but it was never the only goal; indeed, ever since the French Revolution, obtaining the vote for women was never viewed as an end in itself; it was a tool. As the French feminist Hubertine Auclert asserted in 1881, "Political rights are for woman the keystone that will give her all other rights."¹

These rights included equal or equitable educational and economic opportunities, as well as civil rights. Indeed since the late seventeenth century, increasing numbers of feminists had concerned themselves with facilitating women's literacy, improving their education, and expediting their emergence into "public space," through access to the published (and spoken) word and, from the French Revolution on, through the possibilities of public association and claims for full citizenship.²

What, then, does "ritual" have to do with the conquest of public space by women? One can think about this question in various ways.

From the fifteenth century onward, and especially since the development of printing, overt feminist protest has left a growing record in the press. During the "querelle des femmes" of the Renaissance, though it began with the exceptional and eloquent voice of Christine de Pizan, writing in France, mostly male feminist voices were heard.³ But increasingly in the seventeenth century, published protests against "women's wrongs" began to flourish, especially in France, reaching a new sophistication with the treatises on the equality of women and men by the cartesian social philosopher, François Poullain de la Barre.⁴ Sarah Hanley has uncovered fascinating evidence of these protests in late seventeenth

and eighteenth-century French legal cases, in which female plaintiffs as wronged wives began to take their cases to the streets in print, seeking from the "court of public opinion" the justice that they could not wrest from male judges. Hanley now argues that these publicized disputes set the stage discursively for subsequent feminist protests during the early years of the French Revolution.⁵

Such complaints and suits do demonstrate a ritual aspect, notably in cultures where monarchy was in a state-building mode and where, as in France, monarchs were contesting the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church - in particular its control of matrimonial affairs. Indeed, it is amid the post-Reformation rivalries between Church and State that "fissures" open up to permit the voicing of feminist complaint (*desafios, demandas, resentimientos, appeals to injuncion*). In the later eighteenth century such complaints adopted the guise of published petitions for redress of grievances. Women's petitions were addressed variously to the king, or especially the queen, to parliamentary or extraparliamentary bodies, but particularly, as mentioned above, to the "court of public opinion." These took the forms of tracts, handbills or fliers, posters, and sometimes the form of short stories or longer novels. This outpouring of female complaint in print was not possible in societies where access to print remonstrance was effectively monitored by secular censors or authorities of the Inquisition.⁶

By the time of the French Revolution, a rather well-developed body of such petitions had come into being - but in 1789, when the question of representation in the Estates-General arose, a plethora of women's petitions elaborated new and highly ritualized expressions of political language that can best be described (retrospectively) as "feminist".

Consider, for example, the "Cahier des doléances et réclamations des femmes," par Madame B*** B*** (1789), who objected to the non-representation of property-holding women of the Third Estate. In this manifesto, we glimpse the beginnings of what would become a ritualized

¹ Hubertine Auclert, in *La Citoyenne*, n° 1 (13 February 1881); as translated in *Victorian Women. A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in 19th Century France, England and the United States*, ed. Fina Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen Ollen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), p. 345. [1] Donc, il n'est pas de toute évidence que le droit politique est pour la femme la clé de voûte qui lui donnera tous les autres droits." original article is reprinted in Edith Tuchs, ed., *Hubertine Auclert: La Citoyenne: Articles de 1881 à 1891*, Paris: Seves, 1982, p. 89.]

² On these developments, see Ollen, "Reclaiming the Enlightenment for Feminism," in *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought in European History: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Tjitske Akkerman & Siep Stegeman (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 85-103, and "Contextualizing the Theory and Practice of Feminism in Nineteenth Century Europe (1789-1914)," *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 3rd edition, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan Moshier Stuard, & Merry E. Wiesner (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), pp. 327-355.

³ See Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁴ See Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), and more recently Siep Stegeman, "L'Égalité des sexes qui ne se conteste plus en France: Féminisme in the Seventeenth Century," in *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought*, pp. 67-84, and "Social Cartesianism: François Poullain de la Barre and the Origins of the Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 58, n° 1-3, Oct. 1997, 617-640.

⁵ See, most recently, Sarah Hanley, "Social Sites of Political Practice in France: Lawsuits, Civil Rights, and the Separation of Powers in Domestic and State Government, 1500-1800," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 101, n° 1 (February 1991), 27-52.

⁶ For French examples in particular, see the recent collection of articles edited by Elizabeth C. Goldsmith & Dena Goodman, *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), and Dena Goodman, "Women and the Enlightenment," in *Becoming Visible*, 3rd edition, pp. 233-262. For Spain, see especially Sally Ann Kirts, *The Debate with Nature: Role and Influence of Women in Eighteenth Century Spain* (Lexington, MA: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995).

⁷ "Cahier des doléances et réclamations des femmes, par Madame B*** B***, Paris de Paris, 1789," reprinted in *Cahiers de doléances des femmes en 1789 et autres textes*, préface de Paul Marie Dubet (Paris des Femmes, 1981). For a Spanish translation, see "Cuadernos de quejas y reclamaciones de las mujeres: Madame B*** B*** in 1789 (1793)," *La Voz de las mujeres en la revolución francesa: Cuadernos de quejas y otros textos* (Valencia: La Sol [Instituto Valenciano de la Donna], 1989), pp. 9-17.

language of appeal to male justice on women's behalf: invocations of the triumph of enlightenment over ignorance, dawn over darkness, reason over prejudice; objections to the dominance of the strong over the weak and application of the analogy of black slavery to describe the subjection of wives to husbands in marriage, along with objections to a sexual double-standard. "Why is it that the law is not the same for both [sexes]? . . . Why does one sex have everything and the other one nothing?" (in French: ...pourquoi faut-il que la loi ne soit pas uniforme entre eux, que l'un ait tout & que l'autre n'ait rien?) Among the most striking uses of what would become feminist ritual language during the next 150 years concerned the political claims made for the rights of propertied women as taxpayers, and - even more significant - the assertion that men could never "represent" women in political assemblies.

A second example, also from France in 1789, is provided by a slightly later text, known as the "Requête des Dames à l'Assemblée Nationale," circulated some time after the women's march to Versailles of early October 1789. This text, whose authors are unidentified, raised the stakes for feminist expression, drawing not only on the themes indicated above, but condemning "masculine aristocracy" [aristocratie masculine] and calling for the "abolition of the privileges of the male sex." [Tous les privilèges du sexe masculin sont entièrement & irrévocablement abolis dans toute la France]. Two other noteworthy features of this remonstrance are its authors' insistence on the pride of womanhood, on women's beauty and grace and their power of attraction - seemingly unusual features to find in a political document — as well as insistence that the "genre masculin" is a sociopolitical construction, not merely a linguistic issue.¹ This document, irrespective of who the authors may be, underscores the *power* of issues of sexual injustice in the "imaginary" of the early Revolution. Such "ritual" expressions of grievance, and the demands they make for the inclusion of women in the new "public space" opened up by the Revolution, precede the better-known tracts of Éta Palm (1790/91) and Olympe de Gouges (1791). The objections that arose against women's inclusion in political citizenship in 1792 and 1793 make it abundantly clear that some male revolutionaries objected to the participation of females in this particular aspect of the new public space, i.e. government, which was once again reconstituted, in Arminda Lozano's expression, as "un culto masculino prohibido a las mujeres"². Among the most fervent opponents of women's inclusion in politics was the influential journalist Louis-Marie Prudhomme, editor of *Les Révolutions de Paris*, who in his publication denounced women's pernicious influence under the now-defunct monarchy,

invoked Rousseau's reformulation of gendered notions of public/private. Prudhomme called at every opportunity for women's exclusion from political life and their confinement to domestic life³. This emphasis was repeatedly underscored, as in Charles Theremin's *De la condition des femmes dans les républiques* (1799), in which he insisted in the republican family, the husband was the political representative for the entire family.

It was "political" space, a specific aspect of the broader "public" space, that was deemed off-limits to women, and not only by certain Jacobins. It was signified, subsequently, by explicit exclusions of women from voting rights: in France in 1791, in New Jersey in 1807, in England with the Reform Act of 1832, again in France in 1848. The issue resurfaced again and again: in England in 1867, in 1868 in Spain, and in the 1870s in France and Germany. And throughout this period -indeed, well into the twentieth century- feminists, even though excluded from formal politics repeatedly inserted themselves into the broader "public" space of print, expanding their ritual use of a language of grievances in the form of petitions, essays, tracts, catechisms, novels, short stories, dramatic works, and by male-feminists in law, medicine, etc. These efforts were countered by a prodigious backlash, bolstered by the citation of "authorities" ranging from the Bible and Aristotle to Rousseau and a wide range of counter-revolutionary medical authorities who waxed lyric on the physical, mental, and moral inferiority of women. The point I wish to insist on here, however, is not the extravagance of this backlash, but rather how it demonstrated that the case for women's subordination could no longer be taken for granted: it had to be forcefully argued. What I have called elsewhere the "knowledge wars" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and particularly the explorations of "woman's nature" and "woman's mission," were all elaborate manifestations of a sustained antifeminist counter-attack that permeated the developing social and natural sciences.

In the meantime, feminists had begun to see that ritual petitions of grievances were not sufficient, that they must organize politically in order to win their case, and that they must obtain representation and political power in their own right. Between 1848 and 1914, feminists, invoking primarily their political significance as mothers in order to make the point that men could not "represent" them, were using every public means at their disposal - from the press to parades in the streets - to interject their views on every sociopolitical question of the day, ranging from war, peace, and militarism to violence against women in marriage and state-regulated prostitution. They ultimately founded international

¹ "Requête des Dames à l'Assemblée Nationale (1789), reprinted in *Femmes dans la Révolution française 1789-1794*, présentés par Albert Soboul, 2 vols (Paris: EDHIS, 1982), vol. 1, doc. 19.

² Arminda Lozano, "La religiosidad femenina: un medio de reconocimiento social de la mujer en el mundo griego," paper given at the AFHM conference, Cadiz, June 1997.

³ One of Prudhomme's earliest and most lengthy statements, a direct response to a series of women's letters and petitions complaining about their political marginalization, was "De l'influence de la révolution sur les femmes," *Les Révolutions de Paris*, n.º. 83 (5-12 Février 1791), pp. 226-235. Further, he had commissioned the publication of the virulent *Crimes de femme de France* (1791).

organizations to consolidate their case and appeal not only to the highest government authorities but to world opinion. Leila Rupp's new book, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (1998) beautifully chronicles these developments from the 1880s to 1945.

What I want to highlight here is the way in which feminists went about using the tools of ritual protest through petition and manifestation during the early twentieth century, especially in the course of World War I and in the 1920s and early 1930s, once most women in Europe had obtained the vote and set about enacting their anticipated programs.

The mobilization of feminists in 1915, deploying the ritual of petition in seeking peace in the midst of war, is well known, and ultimately resulted in a new organization, less explicitly focused than its predecessors on ending male domination *per se*, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

I will focus instead on the efforts by leaders of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance in 1919 to influence in some way the terms of the peace settlement. For it was at this point that the feminists embarked on new and uncharted territory, which in some sense surpassed all their prior experience that of lobbying the men in power at Versailles to effect some aspects of the international feminist program. Even as the vote was being accorded to women (who in many European countries outnumbered men, following the war) by the new post-war regimes, a group of suffrage advocates assembled in Paris succeeded in gaining a firm commitment to the principle of equal pay for equal work, and the incorporation of women and their special concerns within the newly-established *Sociedad de Naciones* and in the International Labour Organization. During the 1920s they succeeded further in placing the legal issue of married women's nationality, along with that of the "traffic in women and children," on the agenda of the *Sociedad*. In the 1930s they succeeded in committing the *Sociedad* to investigating the status of women in member countries⁷.

In this new frame work, feminists continued to use the forms of ritual public protest, but they had also achieved direct access to governmental processes in ways they had never had before. As some women began to enter governmental life and political parties, to be elected to parliaments as well as city councils, and as some nominally "token" women were appointed as ministers, even as ambassadors and delegates to the *Sociedad de Naciones*, new forms of action were called for. With the opportunity to make policy came the opportunity for feminists to improvise new strategies and tactics, to "make it up as you go." They organized trans-national committees, transorganizational liaison committees,

and learned how to work together across national boundaries in new and remarkably effective ways.

A splendid example of how feminists deployed the older tools of ritual protest in new ways is the February 1932 monster petition to the League of Nations Disarmament Conference. *Eight million signatures* were gathered throughout the world by the "Women's Disarmament Committee" formed by the three major international women's organizations, WILPF, the International Suffrage Alliance, and the International Council of Women. The point of this massive effort was not protest as such - but rather the more constructive venture of *endorsing* disarmament as the logical and necessary sequel to the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact of the late 1920s. The organizers paraded the bulky petitions through the streets of Geneva before delivering them to the floor of the conference, where they were formally presented to the assembled delegates⁸.

Even more innovative, perhaps, was the effacement of feminist language itself during this mostly post-suffrage period, which was so turbulent on the economic and political fronts. As these highly competent women stepped into the arena of governmental power, especially at the international level, they began to debate the very meaning of "feminism."⁹ Many began to deploy a new ritual language of "humanism" and "human rights" began to supercede the earlier language of feminist remonstrance, of women's rights. It was this language of "human" rights, rights that included women as well as men - at least in the eyes of the feminists - that would ultimately be promulgated by the United Nations in its 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. Ironically, it was this very language of human rights - and human solidarity - that would permit, following the Second World War and the defeat of Nazism, the virtual erasure of the memory of feminism and efforts to speak specifically to the rights and needs of over half the population - distinctive needs that are, all too often, still not being satisfactorily addressed. How peculiar that the choice made for "humanism" should inadvertently result in obscuring the very memory of the European feminist campaigns whose remarkable and complex histories we are only now successfully recovering.

In conclusion, what lessons can we learn from this quick historical overview of the question of feminist rituals in the conquest of public space? How do rituals relate to changing concerns?

1. In general, we might say that although the forms may change, the problems recur, and certain ritual behaviors will be called for. Feminist demands are efforts to monopolize "authority" - to create masculine cults (or monopolies) that shut women out. These may be monopolies of force, of wealth, of belief, of

⁷ These matters are further investigated in Leila Rupp's work (cited above), in the final chapter of my own forthcoming book, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950*, and in the work of Carol Miller.

⁸ See *This International* (organ of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom), vol. 7, no. 4 (March 1932), for photos of the petitions and the parade.

⁹ See my final chapter, and also Rupp's discussion of the turn to "humanism".

knowledge, of opportunity for self-realization. And indeed, history suggests that efforts to recreate such monopolies seem to recur every generation or two. Thus, whether we like it or not, it seems unlikely that the human race will ever definitively outgrow the behaviors that feminists have repeatedly addressed. In short, feminism as such will never be *passé*.

2. In closing, I propose that we, as feminist historians, must impress on others the need for a new ritual - a ritual of remembrance - a ritual of handing on a tradition, a memory, a history, a comprehensive history (or histories) of feminisms to our daughters, our sons — those who will follow us. How this is done will differ in every culture, and indeed, innovative strategies are called for to ground such rituals. But such rituals there must be, not cast in stone, but flexible, varied, accommodating to contemporary needs and issues. Such rituals must take advantage of the conquest we have made of "public space," and must effectively capture the attention of those we seek to reach, attention on which already many demands are placed.

In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir asserted that women "lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat".⁷ We now know that Beauvoir was seriously mistaken with respect to a past and a history, and many have engaged in the effort to recuperate and reclaim that hidden past, not solely of women but, more pointedly of women's "political history" — the history of feminism. But recuperating and transmitting are different propositions.

It is important to underscore that the history of European feminisms belongs to us all, whether American or Spanish, French or Dutch, Greek or Russian. Our task now is to transmit that rich and fascinating heritage to future generations. The problem is how to do it. As historian Mary Beard observed, just a few years before Beauvoir penned her own observations, "college training robs women of their own history and puts in its place only the history of men".⁸ If Beauvoir could be wrong, perhaps this explains why. We feminist historians, the historians of feminism, wherever we are based, have an obligation to ensure that passing on knowledge of the European feminist heritage becomes an integral part of every younger woman's education, a ritual of education and the acquisition of knowledge.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, "Introduction," *The Second Sex*, tr. and ed. by H. M. Parshley (New York: The Modern Library, 1968, originally published in French, 1949), xiv.

⁸ Letter from Mary Beard to Catherine Drinker Bowen, 20 February 1944, as quoted in Nancy E. Cant, *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through her Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 243.