



Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution

By Joan B. Landes



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In this provocative interdisciplinary essay, Joan B. Landes examines the impact on women of the emergence of a new, bourgeois organization of public life in the eighteenth century. She focuses on France, contrasting the role and representation of women under the Old Regime with their status during and after the Revolution. Basing her work on a wide reading of current historical scholarship, Landes draws on the work of Habermas and his followers, as well as on recent theories of representation, to re-create public-sphere theory from a feminist point of view. Within the extremely personal and patriarchal political culture of Old Regime France, elite women wielded surprising influence and power, both in the court and in salons. Urban women of the artisanal class often worked side by side with men and participated in many public functions. But the Revolution, Landes asserts, relegated women to the home, and created a rigidly gendered, essentially male, bourgeois public sphere. The formal adoption of "universal" rights actually silenced public women by emphasizing bourgeois conceptions of domestic virtue. In the first part of this book, Landes links the change in women's roles to a shift in systems of cultural representation. Under the absolute monarchy of the Old Regime, political culture was represented by the personalized iconic imagery of the father/king. This imagery gave way in bourgeois thought to a more symbolic system of representation based on speech, writing, and the law. Landes traces this change through the art and writing of the period. Using the works of Rousseau and Montesquieu as examples of the passage to the bourgeois theory of the public sphere, she shows how such concepts as universal reason, law, and nature were rooted in an ideologically sanctioned order of gender difference and separate public and private spheres. In the second part of the book, Landes discusses the discourses on women's rights and on women in society authored by Condorcet, Wollstonecraft, Gouges, Tristan, and Comte within the context of these new definitions of the public sphere. Focusing on the period after the execution of the king, she asks who got to be included as "the People" when men and women demanded that liberal and republican principles be carried to their logical conclusion. She examines women's roles in the revolutionary process and relates the birth of modern feminism to the silencing of the politically influential women of the Old Regime court and salon and to women's expulsion from public participation during and after the Revolution.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Landes explores from the critical perspective of feminist political theory the historical evolution of 'the public sphere'—its definition as male space and the exclusion of women from it."—*Women's Review of Books*

"Filled with stunning hypotheses and brilliant insights."—*Choice*

"In this intelligent and readable book, Joan Landes argues that women's exclusion from the modern public sphere is neither accidental nor incidental but a central feature of its incarnation."—*Journal of Modern History*

"It is in reading Joan Landes's *Women and the Public Sphere* that we can best see the power and problematic character of democratic thinking as Tocqueville understood it . . . Both female domesticity and modern feminism, as well as the difficulties that attend each, originated in liberal republicanism."—*The Review of Politics*

"Should become part of the increasingly varied repertoire available to everyone interested in the formation of the discourse of modern politics as well as specifically feminist issues."—*Eighteenth-Century Studies*

"Joan B. Landes's theoretical analysis of the public sphere organizes a wide spectrum of events and texts in order to examine, from a feminist viewpoint, the passage from absolutism to bourgeois society during the period between 1750 and 1850. Responding especially to the work of Habermas, Landes investigates the way in which the emerging bourgeois public sphere was constituted to exclude women."—*The French Review*

"Compelling and thought-provoking. . . . Ranging across several disciplines and the critical historical divide of the French Revolution, it gives us women's voices, classical political theory, and an analysis of political culture all at the same time. Landes has opened an exciting path in the study of gender and politics."—Lynn Hunt, University of Pennsylvania

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