

Philosophy as a feminist triumph

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Under the French Third Republic, the gender of “citizenship” and “philosophy” was masculine. Yet women pioneers managed to obtain university degrees and rise to positions of responsibility from which they had been excluded.

Reviewed: Annabelle Bonnet, *La barbe ne fait pas le philosophe (1880-1949)* (The Beard Doesn't Make the Philosopher [1889-1949]). Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2022. 336 p., 23 €.

In 1969, I chaired a committee to boycott the philosophy *agrégation*¹ (then, I was proud of doing so, though today I am less so). At the time, I was unaware, I must admit, of the obstinacy, audacity, and willingness to fight that women had to demonstrate to gain access to this exam and the teaching of philosophy.

Annabelle Bonnet retraces these years of struggle in a fascinating book that is well documented and easy to read--a pleasant mix of individual stories, collective action, and relevant analyses of what she calls "the republic's pre-Simone de Beauvoir era" (p. 9). This is a book that everyone should read--but especially those who equate the republic with women's emancipation, as if there was an automatic, cause-and-effect relationship between them.

¹ The *agrégation* is a prestigious competitive exam for recruiting civil servants and specifically teachers. Teachers who successfully pass the exam are known as *agrégés* (*translator's note*).

Knowledge, power, and sexual difference

Bonnet's story is bookended by two dates: 1880 and 1949. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* appeared and was an immediate publishing success. 1880 is an interesting year for two reasons. On December 21, 1880, the so-called Camille Sée Law was approved after two years of discussions, opening public secondary education to girls. 1880 was also the year in which philosophy became the crowning class of the secondary education curriculum (because it was taken in the final year of high school [*translator's note*]).

Philosophy may have been the crowning moment of high school education, but not for girls. They were not provided education in philosophy, since the latter was "established as a form of knowledge necessary to the education of enlightened citizens; yet it was impossible to recognize women as full-fledged citizens" (p. 11). The gender of "citizenship" and "philosophy" was masculine, as was the form of suffrage improperly described as "universal." It is also worth noting that philosophical studies were a path to positions of great responsibility. It was out of the question to make them available to women.

In the teaching of philosophy, three issues overlapped: knowledge, power, and sexual difference. The republic did not introduce secondary education for girls with an emancipatory intent, but to ensure that they could better fulfill their purpose and destiny: to become good wives and mothers. To his end, they were granted, at best, a "moral" education.

Yet over the years and after overcoming a multitude of obstacles, a handful of women succeeded in making a place for themselves--though a small one--in the philosophical realm. They went about it in several ways: by teaching "philosophy fraudulently" (p. 61); by demonstrating, on an aptitude test held in 1888, that young women could think and reason; and by showing up at exams, since no law had bothered to ban them, since it seemed completely self-evident that no woman would ever qualify for a bachelor's degree, a doctorate, or the *agrégation*. But they did!

It would take too long to refer to all the names that Bonnet rescues from obscurity and invisibility--names that she had the good idea of listing in a chart at the end of the book.

Still, let us mention a few: Julie Hasdeu, who prepared a doctorate, but died before defending it; Jeanne Crouzet-Benaben, who obtained a bachelor's degree (*licence*) in philosophy in 1895; Clémence Royer, a self-educated Swiss woman whose request for a classroom to teach in at the Sorbonne was denied; Camille Bos, the first French woman to obtain a doctorate in philosophy, albeit in Switzerland; Jeanne Baudry, who in 1905 became the first woman to pass the philosophy *agrégation*; Alice Sériad, the first woman to earn a doctorate in philosophy at a French university; and Hélène Metzger, a Ph.D. in philosophy and the first woman "to be firmly integrated into the French philosophical field" (p. 215). Metzger's integration is noteworthy, as it was often the case that even women who earned degrees were denied recognition, careers, and access to teaching.

The "Bergsonettes"

"Women and philosophy" by no means implies "commonalities in thought" or "identical ideological (or political) positions." For instance, Léontine Zanta, who started out as something of a feminist, later supported Charles Maurras and then fascism, while Hélène Metzger remained close to republican feminist circles. Arrested in 1944 because she was Jewish, she was murdered at Auschwitz at the age of 45.

It is interesting to note that the women philosophers who managed to score a few points owed their success not to the republican education system, but rather, according to most personal narratives, to their typically bourgeois and educated families, particularly fathers who wanted their daughters to be educated and private institutions that appeared "towards the end of the nineteenth century with the purpose of enrolling young women who wanted to go further than what the curricula of women's high schools offered them" (p. 97).

Consider the case of the Mutualité de Maintenon or that of the Collège de Sévigné, which was run by Mathilde Salomon and where the philosophers Victor Delbos and Alain taught. Far from being feminist, these schools naturalized and essentialized women, viewing them as the "affective sex," but considering them capable of "feminine knowledge" (p. 103) due to the education they offered.

It must be emphasized that men, often for conflicting reasons, supported to varying degrees the women who demanded that their daughters have access to

philosophy. In addition to fathers, several philosophers who supported women's access to their field deserve mention: Delbos and Alain (discussed above), Dominique Parodi, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, André Lalande, and Léon Brunschvicg. Nor must one forget Henri Bergson, whose role was very unique, as Bonnet explains in an interesting chapter on the "The Promise of the Bergsonettes" (after the *précieuses* of the seventeenth century and the *bas-bleus* of the nineteenth).² "Bergsonettes" was the name given to the women who jostled one another to attend the lectures that Bergson, the "first French celebrity philosopher of the twentieth century (p. 135), gave at the Collège de France.

"Bergsonette" was a signifier that sought to disqualify and delegitimize the women to whom it referred (and it evokes the *juppettes*, a term used almost a century later to refer to the women in Prime Minister Alain Juppé's government). The term implied that the women who attended Bergson's lectures could only be *mondaines*--society women--who wanted to be seen in the presence of a fashionable philosopher. Bergson, for his part, did not complain of this feminine presence, which he deemed as legitimate as the male constituency.

In this chapter, Bonne also provides an interesting analysis of Bergson's philosophy from the standpoint of gender. In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, he proposed a conception of masculinity and femininity that contradicted dominant stereotypes: whereas emotion was usually devalued as feminine, Bergson gave it a positive meaning, placing it at the heart of the creative process--but while considering it an almost exclusively male quality!

No philosophy under police protection

In the field of philosophy as in many others, the First World War favored, at a time when so many men were away, the entry of women philosophers into the teaching profession.

But one would have to wait until 1924 for all competitive examinations and degrees previously reserved for men to become available to women and for boys and

² The *Précieuses* were adherents of a seventeenth-century literary movement that emphasized a highly refined style in addition to be centered around aristocratic salons. Its romantic ideals were very particularly among women, though they were famously satirized by Molière in his play *Les Précieuses ridicules*. *Bas-bleu* (literally, "bluestocking") was a nineteenth-century term for women writers, which quickly became pejorative (*Translator's note*).

girls to be offered the same secondary-school curricula, after "more than forty years of individual battles and collective activism to give equality a foothold in the republic" (p. 249). Not until 1953 did a woman--Geneviève Rodis-Lewis--obtain a university chair in philosophy.

In its epilogue, the book devotes a few pages to Simone de Beauvoir and Dina Dreyfus. The former is well-known, and I will not consider here. Dina Dreyfus, unfortunately, is better known as Claude Lévi-Strauss's first wife than as a philosopher, despite the fact that she had a prominent institutional role, particularly in relation to the teaching of philosophy. She was the first woman to be a general *inspectrice* of philosophy (I have feminized the term, though she would have preferred *inspecteur*).

It was Dreyfus who was chairing the *agrégation* jury in the spring of 1969. The exam was scheduled to take place at the Sainte-Geneviève Library in Paris. Dreyfus opposed the boycott, but she did not stop me from speaking. A majority of candidates were in favor of boycotting the exam. The police, who had been on the adjacent street since that morning, entered the room where we were assembled to divide us up: on one side, those who wanted to take the exam, on the other, those who refused and were asked to leave.

In the end, the exam was not held. For Dina Dreyfus, the republican philosopher, a philosophy *agrégation* under police protection was inconceivable.

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