

Creating New Men in New Nations: Gender and Citizenship in early modern Europe

By Hilda Smith

In treating the issue of men and citizenship in early modern Europe, it is essential to consider carefully the gender parameters of the terms used. The documents that established the nature of the modern individual and the early modern citizen were clearly gendered both in their linguistic usage and their intended meanings, but they were seldom explicit about these gender realities. In looking at basic constitutional documents emerging from the English and French revolutions, and debates over their acceptance, one finds a continual conflation of man, human, person, people, subject, citizen, resident, etc., without any clearly delineated link to males. But both the experiential context and the unspoken assumptions behind this language illuminate the maleness of such terms.

Current scholars have treated this conundrum in normally two ways: a discussion of the omission of women and the reasons behind such omission and the “masculine” nature of the terms employed. This presentation will rather focus on the link between the lives of early modern men and such terms, and the qualities particular to the period and nation from which they emerged. Much of the study focusing on the masculine nature of language and assumptions draws its understanding of masculinity from post-Freudian sexual demarcations. Yet the qualities highlighted in the documents, and their justifications, emerge from a quite different sense of what constitutes a male citizen.¹

¹ For a recent analysis of early modern England see Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: 2003), a work which integrates early modern usage with contemporary understandings of masculinity; for a discussion of the omission of women from the French revolution and its long-term implications see Susan K. Foley, *Women in France since 1789: the Meanings of Difference* (Palgrave: 2004); and for a wide-ranging collection on the ties between gender and national identity see *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann and Catherine Hall (Berg: 2000).

In substantiating this argument, I will draw on the Putney debates of 1647 and related Leveller tracts and other anti-royal, anti-establishment values; for France I will concentrate on the *Rights of Man and Citizen* and the debates surrounding its passage, as well as the Constitutions of 1791 and 1793. I am avoiding the more familiar texts of early modern political thought, such as the works of Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau, both in terms of the limited time for this presentation and because they lack the immediate debates and comments attached to the adoption and publication of these shorter works.

For the English setting, the dispute between rank and file officers and soldiers (in alliance with the Levellers) against the more socially conservative men within the officer corps such as Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton led to a lively debate at Putney in 1647. And in France during the Revolution differences among members of the National Assembly over the Declaration, and future constituent bodies over the nature of later constitutions, as well as discussions within Parisian political clubs (both male and female) provide a good indication of both the language used and its significance for contemporary English and French men and women. We get a stronger sense of what issues mattered most, and how these issues were debated within the context of men's lives, but not women's.

At Putney it is crucial that the speakers were primarily soldiers and officers so that military standing and affairs were central to debates over both citizenship and those issues most crucial of resolution. As historian Barbara Donegan has stated: while Putney is famous for its "impressive and precocious expression of democratic principles....[such] claims must be set in the context of their membership of a victorious army conscious of

its...corporate identity.”² Men serving in the New Model Army based their arguments for an expanded franchise on the standing they gained as soldiers and on their broad representation of the English people in that role. In *An Agreement of the People*, the central democratic statement of the Leveller movement offered at Putney, the authors address themselves to the “highly honoured the freeborn people of England” and to them as “countrymen and fellow commoners”. They intertwine goals of an extended franchise with their testimony placing themselves in harm’s way for the good of the many. “For your sakes, our friends, estates and lives have not been dear to us. For your safety and freedom we have cheerfully endured hard labours and run most desperate hazards.”³ Thus the debates at Putney reflected both expanded democratic goals, a sense of pride on the part of the army and particular demands related to fighting the Civil War, especially a refusal to be disbanded before back pay had been settled. However, subsequent accounts have highlighted broad political goals at the expense of the immediate context which linked men’s military service to their ability to speak for the nation.

Extracts from the Putney debates clarify the disputed usage at play, especially in an exchange between Maximilian Petty and Colonel Thomas Rainborough on the one side and Henry Ireton on the other. Petty contends that “We judge that all inhabitants that have not lost their birthright should have an equal voice in elections.”⁴ Rainborough concurs, uttering his famous phrase of the qualification of even the “poorest he”, and

² Barbara Donagan, “The Army, the State and the Soldier in the English Civil War,” *The Putney Debates of 1647: The Army, the Levellers and the English State*, ed., Michael Mendle (Cambridge: 2001), 79.

³ *The English Levellers*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, ed. Andrew Sharp, (Cambridge: 1998), 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

continues that such a man “is not...bound in a strict sense to that government that he has not had a voice to put himself under.”⁵ Henry Ireton, in disagreement, argues that his opponents are misinterpreting the term “inhabitants”; such Englishmen have the right to “air and place and ground and the freedom of the highways and other things to live among us”, but only those “in whom all land lies and those in corporations in whom all trading lies” should have political standing.⁶ In such discussions the context was quite concrete while the language was often abstract. While women could clearly fit all categories: as inhabitants, as the poor, as property owners and as members of guilds the dispute was framed so that they were omitted from each side of the debate, beyond the realities of early modern men.

Similar issues faced those constructing the basic principles of the French Revolution. Lynn Hunt has edited a collection of excerpts from French Revolutionary documents entitled *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, but can one employ the term “human rights” in regards to the revolution? Basic revolutionary documents restricted rights to men; the *Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen* set forth the revolution’s principles in a non-explicitly, but clearly, gendered fashion. And those documents (most prominently Olympe de Gouges’s *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen*, and a less well-known work by Marie Madeleine Jodin entitled *Legislative Views for Women* reference women’s particular standing, leaving no document that explicitly frames French Revolutionary goals in universal human terms.

While de Gouges opens with a preamble that asks men who gave them “authority to oppress my sex?” and continues by stating: “seek, search and distinguish, if you can,

⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

the sexes in the administration of nature,” thus negating the arbitrary distinctions forged by Frenchmen to deny women citizenship, still much of her argument is based on women’s special place in society—especially their role as mothers of children not supported by their legitimate fathers.⁷ de Gouges thus continually integrates calls for equal, even identical citizenship, for women and men, with concerns restricted to women. She claims in Article VI that: “all female and male citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, should be equally admissible to all public offices, places, and employments,” but in Article XI, she states: “Free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious rights of woman, since this liberty assures the legitimate paternity of fathers with regard to their children”, thus particularizing a presumably broad right to free speech.⁸

Marie Jodin has been termed an author of “one of the first signed, woman-authored feminist works of the revolutionary period.”⁹ She was an actress who corresponded with Denis Diderot, and in 1790 she used the occasion of a debate over prostitution and public morals to push for women’s citizenship. While telling her female readers that “we are too citizens,” she also adopted a special female perspective, asking for a separate women’s legislature to monitor moral concerns. She addressed her work to Rousseau, both utilizing his principles but also making a public place for women not acknowledged by him. She adopted Rousseau’s emphasis on the natural and was heavily influenced by his and John Locke’s understanding of natural law. As Frenchmen came to

⁷ Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen in Women’s Political and Social Thought: an Anthology*, eds. Hilda L. Smith and Berenice A. Carroll (Indiana: 2000), 150.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁹ F. Gordon, *Vues Législatives pour les Femmes 1790: A Reformist-Feminist Vision, ‘And we too are citizens’*”, *History of Political Thought* 20:4 (Winter, 1999), 649.

remake their state, she claims: in their hope “to base its happiness and frame on the eternal bases of virtue and law, I have thought that my sex, which composes the attractive half of this great Empire, could also reclaim the honour and even the right to work towards public prosperity,” which would move women beyond “that silence to which politics seems to have condemned us.”¹⁰ But her arguments while explicitly claiming citizenship rights again sought a special female role in revolutionary government.

Perhaps the reason both women emphasized women’s special qualities and concerns was that the basic documents of the revolution kept their gendered identity silent. Such is clear in principles one and three of the *Declaration of Rights*. One states in well-known language “men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility,” while three claims “the principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation. No body and no individual may exercise authority which does not emanate expressly from the nation.”¹¹ Did the authors mean to claim that women were not French by this juxtaposition; most likely they did not think about it, and such omission forced women to address citizenship in a more explicitly gendered manner to overcome this masking of gender.

In debates over the adoption of the Declaration, a supporter noted the importance of laying fundamental principles before writing a constitution and here claimed: “the rights of man are invariable like justice, eternal like reason: they apply to all times and all countries.”¹² In the debates over the Constitution of 1793, the document that extended

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 651-652.

¹¹ *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Bedford Books: 1996), 78.

¹² Duke Mathieu de Montmorency, August 1, 1789, *Ibid.*, 74.

voting rights to virtually all male citizens, supporters claimed that key was the “sovereign”, from which all legitimate government originated. In excluding women, the committee charged with assessing various constitutional goals, identified women, along with minors and the insane, as ineligible for citizenship and then followed with subsequent ambiguous language: citizen “is applied to all those who form the social body, that is, who are neither foreigners nor civilly dead.”¹³

The problem has therefore always been the confused interaction between male specificity in argument and example tied to the widest claims for democracy, thus requiring women’s omission from the former but making it difficult to exclude them from the latter. This inconsistency, and often outright contradiction, has made it difficult for those advocating women as citizens on the same terms as men to frame clear and consistent arguments. They have always been confronting a moving target that sometimes seemed most susceptible to claims of sameness, and other times to those of difference—creating a long legacy of women being seen as different citizens and political beings than their male counterparts.

¹³ Lanjuinais, Report of the Committee Charged with Analyzing Constitutional Projects, *Ibid.*, 132-133.