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Lateness, Amnesia and Unfinished Business: Gender and Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe

In Carol Reed's film *The Third Man* (1949), Harry Lime, played by Orson Welles, makes a much quoted remark about Switzerland: 'Four hundred years of democracy and what do you end up with? The cuckoo clock.' In the context of gender, Switzerland might seem a particularly good example of perceived earliness and actual lateness in acquiring something called 'democracy'. Swiss women did not vote until 1971, by which time their disenfranchisement had become notorious. Switzerland was not the latest country in Western Europe in this respect, as it happens: that doubtful honour goes to Portugal, where women did not vote until 1975. But no one ever claimed that Portugal under Salazar was a democracy.

It is an apparent paradox that so-called democratic regimes in history, such as the Swiss Cantons, have often been more specifically exclusive of women than have more reactionary regimes. The modern paradigm is provided by the French Revolution. Whereas in the preliminary assemblies for the Estates-General called in 1788 under the *ancien régime*, certain women were allowed to participate (mostly aristocratic widows owning property), the new regime specifically excluded them from citizenship, while eventually granting voting rights to virtually all men.[1] Republican regimes in France went on excluding women from the suffrage until 1944. It has become a commonplace in feminist European history to remark that France was 'late' in achieving genuinely universal suffrage, both compared to other countries, and in comparison with the 'early' date at which it permanently introduced male universal suffrage, in 1848. By contrast, in a

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particular instance of gender-blindness, French histories and textbooks were still up to the 1980s and 1990s referring to 1848 as the date of 'universal' suffrage without specifying that it was for men only.[2]

If one looks at twentieth-century Europe then, how 'democratic' was the parliamentary democracy which France apparently enjoyed under the Third Republic (let alone Harry Lime's depiction of Switzerland)? As will be seen from these opening examples, the linking of the terms gender and democracy in a twentieth-century frame of reference almost immediately settles into a discussion of what is frequently referred to as 'granting women the vote'. The practice of excluding one sex from formal rights within a political system, of which the most obvious and visible are voting and standing for election, is the question that tends to dominate the literature and the preoccupations of those most closely involved. For this reason, the present article will essentially be concerned with 'electoral democracy' in a European historical setting, rather than with gender and political theory in general.

There is now a large body of empirical literature setting out the history of women's acquisition of political rights in European countries. While drawing on it for data, this article will first consider the rhetoric surrounding the topic of gender and democracy in Europe, using the ideas of lateness, amnesia and unfinished business, which all have to do with perceptions of time. How historians or politicians contextualize gender and the language they use about it can inform us how they think about politics. It will then be possible to consider unfinished business in a little more detail, reflecting on critical attacks on patriarchal parliamentary democracy in the late twentieth century and some tentative moves towards legislative change.

Lateness

Unlike ripeness, lateness is not, as a rule, perceived as a good thing. Earliness on the other hand is often consecrated by posterity. Thus, depending on who is speaking, credit for earliness in so-called democratic ideas might be given to the Greek city-states, the French Revolutionaries, the British Chartists and so on. With the hindsight of history, however flawed, short-lived

or unsuccessful their actions, they are credited with being 'pioneers'. An equivalent award in the parallel world of women's rights goes to the British suffragists at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, or more usually to the suffragettes, those in favour of direct action, especially if they showed outstanding courage and endurance: Emily Wilding Davison throwing herself at the king's horse in the Derby, or hunger-strikers who underwent forced feeding. Pioneers are by definition out of step with mainstream opinion. The point about the suffragettes though is not that they had the idea of women's rights earlier than anyone else, but that they were the first organized group to launch such determined tactics. Retrospectively at least, we are all on their side.

Measured in terms of achievement, however, they, like other pioneers, did not necessarily get to their destination first. A different kind of early/late dichotomy is provided by the dates at which women's rights achieved formal recognition. So in most histories of women's rights, one finds comparative league tables showing when women 'were granted the vote', or were allowed to stand for election, etc. Such tables, of which Table 1 is an example, provide a clear chronology to underpin 'lateness'. I have chosen national rather than local voting rights for simplicity, but one could construct similar, if more complicated, tables showing the latter.

Such tables obviously lend themselves to the conclusion that some countries were early and others late: for example Scandinavian countries were in advance of most of the rest of Europe. Britain is somewhere in the middle of these chronologies: in 1918 (including Ireland) it enfranchised women over the age of thirty, extending this to women over the age of twenty-one only rather 'later', in 1928. Both France and Belgium are seen as by comparison 'late', while Greece, Switzerland and Portugal could be seen as 'very late'.[3] Some explanations have been suggested: for example, Nordic, Protestant countries mostly enfranchised women before southern Catholic ones. There is no necessary primary connection, as the Swiss case illustrates. But there is admittedly some hint of a pattern. Similarly, countries with relatively uninterrupted parliamentary regimes from the nineteenth century on tended to grant women rights somewhat earlier than others.

These are not unreasonable inferences, and the above sequence

Table 1
European states 'granting women full voting rights' (i.e. to vote for national parliaments) 1906–1975

(i) Before Second World War			*(ii) Post-Second World War*	
Finland	1906		Bulgaria	1944
Norway	1913		France	1944
Denmark	1915		Hungary	1945
Iceland	1915		Italy	1945
USSR	1917		Romania	1946
Austria	1918		Belgium	1948
Ireland	1918		Greece	1952/6
Poland	1918		Switzerland	1971
Germany	1919		Portugal	1975
Luxembourg	1919			
Netherlands	1919			
Canada	1920			
Czechoslovakia	1920			
Sweden	1921			
UK	1928	[over 21]		
Spain	1931			
*[USA	1920]			

Sources: M. Sineau, 'Droit et démocratie', in *Histoire des femmes en Occident* (Paris 1992), Vol. 5, 474; Claire Duchen and Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann, eds, *When the War was Over* (London 2000); see also Steven Hause with Anne Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton 1984), 253.

of dates is not meaningless. It provides a starting-point. At a personal level, the table enables me to remember that my mother, just twenty-one in 1932, was among the first generation of British women who could vote on the same terms as men. But such tables need to be deconstructed historically to explain why some countries are listed as being 'later' than others in the first place. Despite their implicit rhetoric of continuity, there was not an unbroken series of free elections in Europe from, say, 1900 to 1945, with countries falling gradually into line on women's suffrage. On the contrary, there was a great deal of turmoil, including two wars during which electoral politics were suspended — and which in both cases gave some impetus to the cause of women's suffrage. At various times, certain European countries had either regimes with no parliamentary elections at all (e.g. Nazi Germany) or regimes generally regarded as un-democratic, holding elections but with no choice (e.g. the USSR). As Martin

Conway argues elsewhere in this volume, the first half of the twentieth century was much more eventful than the second.

Table 1 in other words simply tells us which was the first date that women voted, but does not contextualize it. For example if we take Spain, the short-lived republican regime in the early 1930s did indeed enfranchise women (and men) over the age of twenty-three. Then from 1936 to 1939 the Civil War intervened, after which the Franco regime suppressed any formal democracy until the 1970s. The date '1931' is not what it seems. In Germany, the Weimar Republic granted women the vote in 1919; but its institutions collapsed in 1933 and there were no further elections until well after 1945 (and then in two separate states). It makes little sense to describe either Germany or Spain as having 'given women the vote' earlier than France, without making it clear that women (and men) lost it again. In Italy, women had never had the vote under the pre-Mussolini regime in the first place. Under fascism, Italy was not a democracy, and in the end women only voted for the first time under the new Republic in 1946. This example is rarely cited alongside France as 'late', because the rhetoric of fascism versus parliamentary democracy has obscured the question of gender. Even in the United Kingdom, if we count the elections after 1928 when all women could vote on the same terms as men, there immediately followed only three elections, in 1928, 1931 and 1935. In the ten years up to 1945, no elections were held because of the outbreak of war, so women's full suffrage had enjoyed only a brief 'window' of less than ten years (my mother was entitled to vote in only one election before the age of thirty-four). In France meanwhile, although there were regular all-male elections from 1919 to 1936, none was held between 1936 and 1945. The Scandinavian model, as in so much else, does admittedly provide a counter-example to all this: most Scandinavian countries held regular elections in which women voted from 1918 until 1939. In terms of population or significance on the international stage though, it must be acknowledged that the Scandinavian countries were not major players in Europe at this time. Lastly, there is the example of the USSR. From 1917 until 1945 and indeed thereafter until 1989, the Soviet regime (and certain post-1945 East European states on the same model) while holding elections, were deemed undemocratic by their neighbours, because of the absence of choice offered to voters; however from the start women in the USSR had votes and indeed

certain other rights not common in the rest of Europe. (This example raises other questions about democracy, which are addressed elsewhere in this collection.)

In this comparative perspective then, although France may certainly be described as 'on the late side', it is perhaps less clear that other Europeans were particularly 'early' in acquiring full double-gendered democracy during the first forty-five years of the twentieth century. From the perspective of the present day, over fifty years after the end of the war, even the head-start of the most advanced countries (the Scandinavians) will slide into an ever-receding past, as we leave that century behind. These dates are all close enough together to be seen as part of the same movement. An incoming tide floats all boats sooner or later. And as a counter-example of the invisibility of exceptional lateness, left out of all the tables, one need look no further than the British House of Lords. Undergraduates at British universities are still surprised to have it drawn to their attention that not only was part of the British Parliament dominated by hereditary peers until the current phase of partial reform, but that the huge majority of the hereditaries have been male, because of the near-universal practice of male succession to titles in the aristocracy. Leaving aside life peerages, which have only ever formed a minority, the upper chamber of British 'democratic institutions' has had built into it not only hereditary power but single-sex power, right down to the year 2001. Much protest in terms of class has (rightly) been directed at the House of Lords, but remarkably little in terms of gender.[4]

Lateness, it might be concluded, is a very relative, even dubious concept, and should be handled with care. What is more, although it may have played a useful role when in the 1970s the whole question of gender was first broached, it seems to be of limited usefulness today. It is usually devoid of context; it may be used as a somewhat crude stick to beat others with, while maintaining a good conscience; and perhaps most important of all, it is a distraction from a historical perspective. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it can been seen that the great majority of European states had arrived at least at electoral equality for men and women over the period roughly from 1930 to 1950. Any that had not were exceptional. This in itself constituted an extraordinary change from previous centuries, a major contrast with the founding notions of parliamentary democracies

which were virtually all invented as no-go areas for women. Because the change happened in a piecemeal way depending on national circumstances (early countries, late countries), its massive significance has never seriously been incorporated into democratic theory, or into general interpretations of European history. It is surprising how often it is rhetorically consigned by historians to a subordinate clause or placed in brackets. This brings us to the question of amnesia.

Amnesia

If the first half of the century saw discrimination against women as voters gradually eroded throughout Europe, the following period, roughly from 1945 to the late 1960s, might better be described as the age of amnesia, both for contemporaries and, curiously, for historians writing about it subsequently. Once lateness is over, so to speak, amnesia sets in.

A certain kind of *contemporary* amnesia affected many people in the years after 1945, both men and women. Politics moved away from the dramatic mode of the first part of the century, and there was arguably a degree of retreat into private life after the trauma of the Second World War, not unconnected with the baby boom and the Americanization of European culture. Following enfranchisement, women did not move en masse into politics. Previous struggles to acquire the vote were half-forgotten, and one of the most resistant statistics to change was the low level of political activity among women during these years, paralleled by their low levels of full-time employment — while for men, these years were by contrast a time of reconstruction and full employment. This is perhaps better referred to as a plateau in the century's overall pattern of change in both men's and women's lives, rather than amnesia. It certainly requires analysis, but that is not my primary concern here. The kind of amnesia that I particularly wish to discuss is less understandable, and is primarily found in historical rhetoric and discourse, the language in which 'democracy' was (and still is) discussed when the middle years of the twentieth century are being described. It is as if gender stops being historically significant once women have the vote.

A particularly clear example of historical amnesia comes in the following quotation from Pierre Rosanvallon's book about

citizenship, *Le Sacre du citoyen* (1992). Rosanvallon in fact has devoted more time and serious analysis to the question of women's rights than any other male French historian of political theory, yet on the first page he implies that opposition to women's votes is far in the past, lost in the mists of time: his book opens with the words:

> One man [sic], one vote: this equation seems absolutely obvious to us . . . and if women have only been voting [in France] for half-a-century, this is a very far-off history in our heads, extraordinarily distant from us. It sends us back to what seems like a kind of prehistorical age of modern society, almost incomprehensible.[5]

This is amnesia talking: it might be translated as saying 'we are now so politically correct that we cannot imagine a time when anyone was crude enough to deny women the vote'. This is an odd claim of course, because Rosanvallon is not talking about prehistory, but about the lifetime of Frenchwomen in their eighties today, who were denied the right to vote before the last war. And as already noted, Swiss and Portuguese women did not vote till the 1970s. It might seem a trivial point, but amnesia is never insignificant in historical discourse. Rosanvallon goes on to argue that the opposition to women's voting in France was philosophical rather than political — in other words, he lends it principled clothing to cover what feminists might describe as its naked patriarchy. Amnesia about women's enfranchisement in twentieth-century Europe usually signifies several things.

In the first place, it enables most historical commentators to assume that nothing very significant happened *for men* when the decision to enfranchise women was finally taken. It did not trouble the waters of memory sufficiently for later generations to see it as a watershed, and if there was a problem, it has been resolved. This has consequences for the periodization of history. For instance, instead of looking at women's suffrage as a kind of twentieth-century afterthought to a liberal democracy laid down to all intents and purposes in the nineteenth century, one could look at the hundred years from about 1850 to 1950 as the century in which voting rights for *both* sexes were seriously campaigned for in Europe, starting with the various movements of 1848, continuing with both the women's-suffrage and the universal-suffrage movement in Britain, and the creation of organized feminist movements, international and national, across much of

Europe, and ending with the establishment or re-establishment of parliamentary democracies, at least in Western Europe, with truly universal adult suffrage, after the defeat of fascism. The universal franchise effectively ceased to be a preoccupation after 1945, except under a few residual dictatorships and oddities, but it had been a Europe-wide phenomenon, which is not generally analysed as such.

Secondly, amnesia enables people not to recognize that regimes which operated before universal suffrage for both sexes were, in this sense at least, undemocratic. Discrimination against a group of adults because of the shape of their bodies can be historically forgotten, consigned to prehistory, without questions being asked as to why this group was singled out (setting aside for the moment disqualifications that may still persist on the grounds of insanity or criminality, and remembering that the age at which young people are first admitted to voting rights has varied historically and geographically). Such regimes need not therefore be analysed in terms of being single-sex regimes, in effect male hegemonies. The coming of gender as a category of historical analysis ought to have made it possible to examine such regimes according to the constructions of masculinity they embodied; yet this remains rare in political history. If feminism is to patriarchy what socialism is to capitalism, it fares less well as a politically recognized approach. To take an example that is not trivial in historical research, modern library classification systems (whether Dewey or Library of Congress) are repositories of this kind of amnesia. They still locate male-dominated socio-political movements (socialism, anarchism, communism) under separate labels within a 'political science' category, while not doing the same for 'feminism', which has to take its chances with 'women' in various 'social'-science locations.[6]

Thirdly, amnesia by wreathing the past in mist allows space for self-congratulation by the people (men, by definition) who 'granted women the vote' as the expression goes. According to any general theory of democracy, however, this was not in anyone's 'gift' to give: if all adult humans have rights, then women have always had rights, which were eventually recognized by people unwilling to do so earlier. The rhetoric of granting or giving can even be reconciled with a view of pre-universal suffrage regimes as particularly 'generous', since they agreed to extend rights. 'Generosity' is a particularly loaded term in French

political discourse, associated with the Republic, especially in its early days, when it certainly refused to extend those rights to women. By contrast, feminism, that is the campaign to have the same women's rights recognized, is very rarely described as 'generous', although feminism has been devoted to extending rights, and has never advocated taking away rights from anyone.[7] All of this is contained within the expression 'giving women the vote', which is selectively amnesiac about democratic theory.

Lastly, amnesia entails forgetting that the political structures in place in many current regimes may never have received the consent of half the population in being established. The newly enfranchised were in most cases invited (or rather obliged) to accept a certain pre-existing disposition of power, certain long-established rules and practices and so on. It is as if netball players were being invited to play football — or vice versa — while being warned that the rule book was written before their admission and could not be changed. It is the belated recognition that this was the case that leads us to the third term here, unfinished business.

Unfinished Business

With hindsight, we can now argue that women's acquiring the vote was only the first step towards gendered change in European society, and that much unfinished business remained to be transacted. But that realization was some time coming. The analytical concept of gender itself only really became available in the last third or so of the century, in the wake of the various cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. The second-wave feminists of these years at first campaigned under the banner of women's 'liberation', a term borrowed from anti-colonialist discourse. In this case, the second-wave feminists saw the first wave, that is the suffrage campaigners, as having failed to perceive the institutionalized sexism (another new word) of everyday life. That earlier generation had assumed the vote would resolve everything. In wages, education, jobs and advertising, however, there was still much overt discrimination in the 1960s throughout Europe. In practical terms, employment was difficult to reconcile with child-bearing and -rearing, because mothers were supposed to be the primary carers for their children, and childcare arrangements were variable and in most countries inadequate.

The campaign for a new approach to women's rights was part of a wider recognition that something was wrong with democracy as presently constituted in the West: it coincided with the civil-rights movements in the USA and Northern Ireland, protest against the war in Vietnam, the rise of ecologist and student movements, the brief blossoming of far-left groups out of sympathy with established left-wing parties, and (in some countries) of far-right protest parties. But in the case of women, there were all kinds of new causes to fight for, paradoxically leading to disaffection from politics in the normal sense. 'Old-fashioned liberal feminism' was seen as wanting more women MPs, whereas new feminism was rethinking paradigms in terms of sexuality, sociology, psychology, literary criticism; or campaigning on issues such as abortion and equal pay. The word democracy was not much in evidence, while the key slogan was 'the personal is political', a watchword that meant looking for power relations where nobody had looked before. In a popular text like Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1972), for instance, there is more emphasis on orgasms than on increasing the number of women MPs. The women's liberation movement amounted to a new kind of pressure-group politics, with direct-action campaigning, and was not as a rule linked to any analysis of the formal structures of democracy. In previous kinds of revolution, in the nineteenth century, when the established machinery of politics was violently suspended, women had often come briefly to the fore. In the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, the established machinery of politics was instead being ignored as irrelevant (in the events of May 1968 in France for example) so once again some political space was created in which women could engage in forms of political activism — but usually by ignoring formal institutions of parliamentary democracy rather than looking for access to them.

These years did, however, see legislative and social change, partly as a result of lobbying and campaigns. Many of the more obvious forms of gender discrimination were removed by law (enacted by parliaments which were on average 90 per cent male); and since the 1960s there have unquestionably been striking changes in women's lives and opportunities throughout Europe, including modern contraception and the expansion of the service sector in the economy. In turn these have meant some quite considerable changes for men too, though again this has been less

commented upon. In the century's last two decades however, there was something of a second lull, both in perceived change and in feminist activism, so much so that the press took to talking of 'post-feminism', while some detected a male 'backlash', to use Susan Faludi's term (1991). Meanwhile, the most obvious arena where there had been little change was formal politics. In most European countries, elected assemblies were overwhelmingly male in composition. The connection between women and democratic theory (while being made in the academic arena)[8] had not accompanied the heyday of second-wave feminist activism, an age when parliamentary politics had been dismissed as being dull, manipulative and civil-servant dominated, while street politics were seen as exciting. Paradoxically, Britain's first woman prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, who had a virtually unprecedented length of tenure, dominating British and to some extent world politics for a decade (1979–90), was herself deeply unsympathetic towards the feminist movement, which in turn mostly detested her brand of conservatism.

It was during these 'backlash' years however, that with some help from EU bodies, an item found its way back on to the agenda in several European countries, including France and Britain. This is what I would describe as 'unfinished business', left over from the suffrage days, and concentrated on the fact that women remained a tiny minority in the formal institutions of democracy: governments, parliaments, local and regional councils etc. (see Table 2). The initiative came from both women politicians and feminists who drew attention 'to the facts of women's under-representation in political life and of their over-representation amongst the unemployed, the low-paid and the part-time workforce'.[9] The conclusion seemed to be that formal electoral democracy had not delivered the goods. While feminist political theorists argued that the problem lay deep within democratic theory, pragmatists have set out to demonstrate that democratic institutions need to be reformed by legislation to achieve greater representation for women.[10]

Numerous reasons have been put forward for women's low representation in democratic institutions. It needs first of all to be seen in the more general context of women's political activity and participation. In the early days of enfranchisement, political science, when it considered women, usually did so under the heading of electoral behaviour. The early data, based on the first

Table 2
Percentages of women MPs 2001, regional overview in global terms

	Regional average percentages of women in national parliaments		
	Single or lower house	*Upper house or Senate*	*Both houses combined*
Nordic countries	38.8	–	38.8
Europe — OSCE member countries including Nordic countries	16.1	13.4	15.6
Americas	15.3	15.3	15.3
Asia	14.9	15.7	15.0
Europe — OSCE countries excluding Nordic countries	13.9	13.4	13.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	12.1	12.8	12.1
Pacific	11.5	25.9	13.1
Arab states	4.6	2.7	4.3

Source: Inter-Parliamentary website (http://www.ipu.org), updated to 29 June 2001.

generations of women voters (so somewhat incomplete and historically and demographically skewed, as we might now judge it) tended to support the characterization of women as relatively uninterested in politics, with a tendency to abstain, but with a slight preference for the parties of the right. Even so, Maurice Duverger did not see any very great divergence between men's and women's voting patterns in 1955, and such differences as there were had been greatly reduced by the time of later studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Women have on the whole used their voting rights regularly in most polities, and their voting preferences have tended to converge with those of men. However, Duverger observed something in 1955 that was to remain broadly observable to the present day:

> At the level of government . . . women's political participation is very low, and declines even more as one approaches the core of the inner circle. There are few women candidates in elections, even fewer women in parliament; even fewer women ministers and no women heads of government.[11]

Past explanations for this absence from political institutions

can roughly be divided into those based on women's own motivation (lacking, or inhibited by problems to do with the resources required) and those based on obstacles placed in their way (discrimination and gatekeeping by men). In a recent book on French politics, Gill Allwood and Khursheed Wadia seek to refine this analyses and suggest a number of factors that could be applied to other countries too. They group them under three headings: legal–historical; environmental; and political–institutional. Among legal–historical factors would be instances of specific discrimination against women in a political context which governed later actions. French examples would include the Salic Law (preventing women succeeding to the throne); the Napoleonic Civil Code subordinating married women to their husbands; and the institution of male suffrage in 1848. In Britain, the 1832 Reform Act specifically excluded women from the national franchise, as did subsequent acts until 1918.[12] In both cases, discrimination formally identified people born female as outsiders from where power was located; in many European countries, women were also officially barred until the twentieth century, from becoming civil servants above a certain rank, or lawyers, doctors and other professionals. Such barriers had the effect of making politics a woman-free zone.

Environmental factors would include the presumption of women's lack of motivation, and their differential access to the resources that make political careers possible. As Allwood and Wadia concede, the data here are difficult to interpret and changeable over time, but both seem to apply. Historically, women have indeed been less likely to seek political office, while their access to higher education and the kind of employment that leads towards politics (whether as lawyers, corporate executives, journalists or trade-union officials) has been both recent and patchy. Under this heading too would come the primary responsibility for childcare, which has overwhelmingly remained with women.

The third set of factors, described as political–institutional, includes electoral systems and the mechanisms of candidate selection. The evidence about electoral systems is complex, but it has been suggested for example that proportional, i.e. 'list-based', systems, while not guaranteeing equality, do render inequality more visible, by enabling the public to see exactly how many men and women are candidates. Single-member majority systems are

less transparent.[13] Probably more important is the role of political parties as gate-keepers. In list systems the party machine draws up the list; in majority systems, the party selects candidates. In almost all European polities, political parties have a very great deal of power over the selection process. It could also be argued that Catholic parties (notably post-1945 Christian Democrats) were often likely to recruit female political personnel (albeit in secondary roles) through the networks of Catholic social and spiritual organizations, whereas parties closely linked to trade unions drew on a pool of mostly male representatives. Finally, the organized women's movement had a role to play here: in some countries, notably the Nordic ones, women's groups opted to co-operate with the political parties and institutions, thus adding a new recruitment channel to the pool of decision-makers, and increasing the numbers of women there. Elsewhere, the women's movement resolutely avoided contact with national political institutions.

Local conditions vary across Europe, but some combination of these factors has clearly operated since 1945 to restrict the numbers of women members of national parliaments. Open discrimination is no longer an issue, but covert obstacles or deep-seated disadvantages have discouraged women from holding more than a small minority of seats in most assemblies. (At the local level, perhaps not surprisingly, women are better represented.) During the 1990s, following the airing of some of these questions, a number of initiatives were taken at the European level. First the Council of Europe, then the Commission of the European Community (as it then was; now the European Union) took up the debate. A group of experts held meetings on 'women and decision-making' in Athens (1992), Dublin (1995) and Rome (1996), and equality of women and men in decision-making became an objective in the fourth programme of action of the Commission (1996–2000).[14]

Dealing with Unfinished Business: The Examples of the French Parity Campaign and the Scottish Parliament

In the late twentieth century, some attempts were made to tackle the perceived absence of women as legislators. Two examples may illustrate possible approaches.

Surprisingly — since feminism's profile in France was low at the time, and since the tenure of France's first woman premier, Edith Cresson (1991–2), was not a success, to say the least — a campaign was launched there in 1992–3 for 'parity' of representation between men and women in political assemblies. It followed years of stymied activity on quotas. France has consistently had one of the lowest percentages of women in parliament in Europe, rarely rising above 6 per cent until 1997, when it reached just over 10 per cent, the highest ever. In 1982, a socialist bill under which no more than 75 per cent of a party's candidates should be of one sex, was ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Council because it infringed the Declaration of the Rights of Man, still part of the French constitution: to privilege one group of citizens over the other (by quotas) was seen as contrary to the law.

On 10 November 1993, on the initiative of the socialist politician Françoise Gaspard and others, *Le Monde* printed a petition calling for complete 'parity' of representation for women and men in all elective assemblies, signed by 577 people — the number of *députés* in the French National Assembly — 289 women and 288 men (chiefly intellectuals, academics and representatives from the arts). The parity debate, slowly at first, then more urgently gathered pace and received increased publicity in the press, partly because it was so provocative, partly because the subject was receiving a high profile within the European Union. The fact that it divided feminists among themselves may have helped give it extra publicity. To considerable surprise, however, it achieved a degree of success, with legislation introduced in 1999–2000.[15]

It is probably premature to suggest reasons why this happened: most likely a combination of factors was responsible, including the socialist victory in the 1997 election, some well-managed publicity, and financial backing. But after initial reticence, President Chirac, a man of the right, came round to the view held by Prime Minister Jospin, on the left, that action was appropriate. The National Assembly was broadly in favour, the Senate broadly against, partly because there were implications for its own composition. But on 28 June 1999, the French National Assembly and Senate meeting in Congress at Versailles, voted, by 742 to 42 with 48 abstentions and 67 absences, to approve an amendment to the Constitution of the Fifth Republic. The

amendment did not use the term 'parity' — thought unlikely to command support — and could be described as a compromise. It stated that the law 'favorise' (encourages) 'equal access of men and women to electoral mandates and elective functions'; political parties would furthermore 'contribute to the fulfilment of this aim'. It should be noted that the original claim for an end result of equal *representation* would not be met by a ruling applying only to *candidates*. The press, however, greeted it as 'approving parity in principle' (*Le Monde*), and early in 2000, in a series of debates, the National Assembly voted to introduce equal numbers of men and women wherever list systems were used in French elections (that is in regional, departmental and certain municipal elections, as well as those to the European parliament). The ruling would apply for the first time during the local elections of 2001.[16] Since the Senate is indirectly elected, with some of its seats allocated by list system, the change would clearly have an impact on its make-up in the long run. A crucial exception, ironically, was the National Assembly, the key legislative body, which continued to be elected under a majority single-member system. The financing of political parties would be used to encourage moves towards parity there, but results were unlikely to be spectacular, at least in the short run.

During these debates, Lionel Jospin announced that 'our democracy has suffered from this injustice towards women: because of it, our democracy is incomplete, unfinished, imperfect', a significant admission in terms of democratic theory, that voting rights had not been the last word. The 'unfinished business' concerned the representatives in a representative system. The problem arose because structures never devised with equal representation in mind, had been identified as effectively single-sexed. On the other hand, it can be argued that French republican universalism, by ruling out quotas at an earlier stage, actually opened the door conceptually to a more radical and thoroughgoing reform than anyone had previously expected.

The second example concerns a sub-national assembly, the Scottish parliament, but one created *ex nihilo*, which may be significant. In Britain as a whole, the representation of women in elective assemblies has been very similar to that in France, but the approach to any reform has taken a different course.

Until very recently, women had always constituted less than 10 per cent of MPs at Westminster. The reason for the higher figure

Table 3
The British example: women MPs in the UK as a whole and among MPs elected to Scottish constituencies, 1945–97

Election	*As a percentage UK*	*As a percentage Scotland*
1945	3.8	4.0
1950	3.3	5.6
1951	2.7	5.6
1955	3.8	5.6
1959	3.9	7.0
1964	4.4	7.0
1966	4.1	5.6
1970	4.1	2.8
1974 (Feb)	3.6	4.2
1974 (Oct)	4.3	5.6
1979	3.0	1.4
1983	3.5	2.8
1987	6.3	4.2
1992	9.2	7.0
1997	18.2	16.7

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliaments 1945–1995* (Geneva 1995), 254; *Times Guide to the House of Commons*, ed. Tim Austin (London 1997); table courtesy of Catriona Burness.

in 1997 was that the Labour Party had unilaterally chosen to introduce all-women short lists of candidates where a constituency became vacant — until this was challenged in the courts. This is a striking example of piecemeal voluntary reform: there were all-women short lists in half the seats where MPs were retiring and half of the most winnable ('target') seats. The landslide Labour victory in 1997 brought an unprecedented number of women candidates into Parliament, and the repeat victory of 2001 meant that the percentage was maintained.[17] The pattern for Scottish constituencies was broadly in keeping with the rest of the United Kingdom: Scottish women MPs at Westminster (1997–2001) numbered 12 out of 75, i.e. 16.7 per cent. (The total number of women who have served as Scottish MPs or MEPs since 1918 is only 29.) In the summer of 1998 however, following the devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales, the United Kingdom saw the election of two new assemblies, the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff. The proportion of women in both bodies was considerably greater than at Westminster.[18]

Table 4
Scottish Parliament, 1999

Party	*Men*	*Women*	*Total*	*Percentage women*
Labour	28	28	56	50.0
SNP	20	15	35	42.9
Con	15	3	18	16.6
Lib-Dem	15	2	17	11.7
Others	3	–	3	–
Total	81	48	129	37.2

Source: Guardian, 11 May 1999.

The new Scottish Parliament has 48 women out of 129, i.e. 37.2 per cent. In the Welsh Assembly the percentage was even higher (40 per cent). In both cases this was because of the large numbers of women elected as Labour Party representatives, though the Scottish National Party also elected a large percentage of women.

It was not until the late 1980s that the question of women's representation became a campaigning issue within that of devolution. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that politics in Scotland had long been a very male-dominated arena. But during the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, when there was a rejuvenation of a number of women's organizations, spurred on by Scotland's already special status within the United Kingdom, these groups began to lobby the Scottish Office. The Scottish Trade Union Congress women's committee proposed a policy of equal representation, and shortly afterwards the Labour Party in Scotland adopted it. The Constitutional Convention recommended steps towards better representation; the Constitutional Commission of 1994 recommended a 40 per cent voluntary target for women, and in 1995 both Labour and the Liberal Democrats signed a commitment to equality of representation. Donald Dewar, as Secretary of State for Scotland, confirmed the commitment after the Labour victory of 1997. In the event, the Labour Party was the only one to carry it out. It should also be noted that the electoral system adopted for the Scottish Parliament was a mixed one: of the 129 MSPs, 73 are elected by single-member constituencies, and 56 from an additional top-up list system. The final figures were thus the result of deliberate Labour Party

policy in placing women in winnable individual seats and in equal positions on the lists.

Research by Alice Brown, Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay[19] has suggested several reasons why there was an unprecedented mobilization of women behind the issue of representation in the 1990s. They include the European initiatives referred to earlier; the negative impact of Margaret Thatcher's policies on women, and especially on low-income families — of which Scotland has a high proportion; the greater experience gained in local women's committees and trade-union or similar groups, for example during the 1984 miners' strike; and frustration at the way in which the House of Commons functions. They also argue that the context for women's activism was slightly different in Scotland — it may be in fact more like a Nordic country with a smaller population, and easier contacts at the national level. All these reasons led to hopes in some quarters that the Scottish Parliament, if it came, would be 'different'.

Perhaps a key factor was the existence of a clean slate. The opportunity to make a fresh start, untrammelled by tradition, was crucial, though it has to be seen in historical context. If the parliament had been set up in 1979, it is doubtful whether the gender balance would have been anything like this. A process of historical maturation of the Scottish sense of cultural identity had been under way in the wake of the earlier unsuccessful referendum on devolution. This was not on the face of it particularly favourable to women (if one remembers the prominent role played by productions such as *Braveheart* and *Trainspotting*), but women artists, journalists and writers were more visible during the 1980s and 1990s than in previous flowerings of Scottish culture. Whatever the combination of reasons, the Scottish example shows that it may be easier to effect change when everything is changed, when a new paradigm enables people to escape the tangles of the past. For example, a Consultative Steering Group made practical proposals for the arrangements for the new Parliament (a horseshoe-shaped, rather than a confrontational chamber, family-friendly working hours, and childcare facilities).

Conclusion

It is too early yet to say whether these examples will either make a very great difference to France or Scotland, or whether they will inspire further change. Nor are they the only possible ways forward towards the aim of greater representation for women. The European network of experts referred to above recommended that member states prepare a 'political plan' incorporating concrete measures to be enacted over a five-year period, which might include training programmes for women, grants to women's groups, quotas for public appointments, databases of women for quangos and so on.[20] It is, however, worth asking the question: How has the idea of unfinished business affected gender and democracy?

The debate about representation takes us into questions of equality and difference. The idea of parity is clearly related in some way to equality. It is based not on the actual number of women and men in a society (there are usually slightly more adult women) but on the fact that the species is fundamentally divided into two sexes for reproductive purposes. The argument is that they should have equal representation.

If we go back to the early debates about 'giving' women the suffrage, however, in the first part of the twentieth century, we find a constant refrain in most countries, coming from women but also from their male allies, that it was important for women to have the vote not only out of 'fairness', in other words a notion of equality, but so that women could vote 'differently', in particular on issues judged to be more 'womanly': health, childcare, social work and so on. In those years, few people argued about representation: the vote was thought to be the key issue and it was perhaps assumed that representation would gradually increase. Later feminists have always been wary of this kind of argument, based on 'difference', with women ministers cast in the traditional role of carer, concerned with issues of children, personal life and welfare, instead of defence, technology or foreign affairs.

We could, however, reject the dichotomy and argue that men and women share some things in common as human beings, so they should have a certain number of equal rights, but that culturally, historically and in terms of life patterns, there have been differences, which should not be forgotten by some kind of amnesia. Equality is not the *opposite* of difference. The opposite

of equality is inequality; and the opposite of difference is sameness or identicalness. The politics of the past inevitably reflected the preoccupations of politicians, who were all men in the nineteenth century and who retained a 90 per cent majority within the political class for much of the twentieth century. Looking back historically, it is arguable that the agenda of politics did shift towards issues of welfare, health and education at precisely the time that women were becoming voters and — much more slowly — parliamentarians; in other words towards so-called 'women's issues'. The government policy issues most aired in the media are more concerned with health, education and welfare than they would have been before 1945. On the other hand, it could be argued that these were also priorities for the (mostly male) trade-union movements and the social-democratic parties that emerged over the course of the twentieth century.

It has been suggested, although so far there is too little evidence to support or deny this, that political priorities definitely could and will change once women are no longer a token minority in assemblies. The differences might concern not only (or not even) agendas, since there is more consensus, for instance, over the key importance of welfare. But they might concern arguments and objections that might not occur to a male-dominated assembly. One obviously has to treat such suggestions with care. On one hand, in her research on revision of the Penal Code in France, Marie-Victoire Louis has pointed out that a quasi-male monopoly on the relevant parliamentary committee resulted in certain questions going unasked. There was no gendered analysis of the status quo, in which differential sentences were being handed down, comparatively more severe for non-violent 'women's crimes', comparatively lenient for male violence against women. When women campaigners protested, they met the somewhat amnesiac response 'France is no longer a patriarchal society.'[21] On the other hand in an analysis of Scandinavian politics, Drude Dahlerup noted that women's issues were more present on parliamentary agendas once women had made the breakthrough to over 30 per cent representation — but that it was not obvious that pressure from within the parliament (by women MPs) was in practice more effective than campaigning from outside (by pressure-groups).[22]

The conclusion that this suggests to me is that parity initiatives are probably necessary but not sufficient. More thought should

go not into analysing the difference women would make, which is unknowable on the present evidence, but into analysing the relics of the past in the male political apparatus and their equivalents in democratic theory. To take an example that is based on a similar argument in Susan Mendus's article on feminism and democracy, men do not give birth, women do. That is a biological difference. But its construction in political terms has been as something of importance only to women, not to men, and enlarged to cover so-called 'domestic duties', which in turn appear a disadvantage to be overcome in the political arena. Consider the proposition 'X, in spite of having three children, is a very active MP.' Could X equally well be a man or a woman? Approaches that have concentrated on crèches for women members of parliament are tackling only part of the problem. To give birth biologically takes a few hours, and certainly requires a few weeks or even months of recuperation. It should not be underestimated, but on the other hand it is far from being the only aspect of 'the personal' that may compete for the adult citizen's attention over a working life. Raising children takes many years, lasting well beyond crèche age; more Europeans of both sexes were by the end of the twentieth century caring for elderly parents, worrying about their teenagers, taking time off when a family member was ill. Food has to be prepared, clothes and dwellings kept clean, people talked to. There is no particular reason why members of only one sex should do these things: they are not aspects of childbirth. The old *classe politique*, as it is known in France, used to consist of men who left this side of their lives entirely to other people — whether wives, relations or servants. Locating politics as if it were apart from these realities has been part of the 'taken for granted' of democratic theory, whatever its form in the past. Improving the number of women in assemblies is probably a good thing, but democracy also needs to 'embark upon extensive critical examination of its own philosophical assumptions'.[23] Lastly and more pessimistically, it can be argued with hindsight that historically, women have entered previously all-male bastions, only when those arenas were losing power and importance. In the twenty-first century, political and economic power has unarguably shifted into different arenas: multinational companies, national and international bureaucracies, financial institutions, the media — in all of which women are still strikingly under-represented. Is the new willingness to

contemplate changes in elected representation a sign that women are entering a citadel that is no longer of strategic importance?

Notes

Catriona Burness kindly provided me with Tables 2, 3 and 4, and Esther Breitenbach with unpublished material. I am also grateful to Tom Buchanan and Martin Conway for their helpful editorial advice.

1. Steven Hause with Anne Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton 1984), 4–5.
2. See François Lelièvre et Claude Lelièvre, *L'histoire des femmes publiques, contée aux enfants* (Paris 2001), 17–34, for a survey of school textbooks.
3. As an example of rhetoric based on a similar table, Elisabeth Guigou refers to French women as having voted '38 years later than Finnish women, 29 years after the Danes, 26 years after the Germans, Austrian and Irish, 25 years after the Luxemburgers and Dutch, 23 years after the Swedes, 16 years after the British, thirteen years after the Spanish': *Être femme en politique* (Paris 1997), 75.
4. The same remark could be made of the British honours system, in which masculine titles (e.g. knight, baronet) continue to dominate at certain levels, and are given to men only, while 'dames' are a small minority. In the French Légion d'honneur, the titles are masculine, but are conferred on both sexes.
5. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen. Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris 1992), 1.
6. See Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford 2000), 5–6. I had already written this paper when Offen's book was published, but was interested to note that she heads this section 'Overcoming amnesia'. She also uses the image of the sleeping volcano to describe feminism, erupting from time to time, when people have forgotten about the last explosion.
7. Rosanvallon, op. cit., 135, 397–8, 400–3, 407, 411, on the 'troubling' aspects of feminism, to which he does not grant the word 'generous' used of republicanism in general. For a more detailed critique of Rosanvallon, see my chapter 'Le sacre de la citoyenne? Réflexions sur le retard français', in Yolande Cohen and Françoise Thébaud, eds, *Féminismes et identités nationales* (Lyon 1998), 71–84.
8. See, for example, Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge 1989), Anne Phillips, *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge 1991), and Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (London 1992; US edition 1991).
9. Susan Mendus, 'Losing the Faith: Feminism and Democracy', in John Dunn, ed., *Democracy, the Unfinished Journey: 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford 1992), 207–8.
10. During the 1980s pressure was building for greater representation of women. Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, eds, *Gender and Party Politics* (London 1993), 1.
11. Maurice Duverger, *La Participation des femmes à la vie politique* (Paris 1955), 125–6.
12. On France, see Gill Allwood and Khursheed Wadia, *Women and Politics in*

France, 1958–2000 (London 2000), chapter 5, 'Explaining Women's Absence from Politics', 132–56. On Britain, see Catherine Hall, 'The Rule of Difference: Gender, Class and Empire in the Making of the 1832 Reform Act', in Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann and Catherine Hall, *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford 2000), 107–36.

13. See Pippa Norris, 'The Impact of the Electoral System on Election of Women to National Legislatures', in Marianne Githens, Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, eds, *Different Roles, Different Voices: Women and Politics in the United States and Europe* (New York 1994), 114–21.

14. See Allwoood and Wadia, op. cit., 193.

15. On the parity campaign in France, see Françoise Gaspard, Claude Servan-Schreiber and Anne Le Gall, *Au Pouvoir, citoyennes! Liberté, égalité, parité* (Paris 1992); Danielle Haase-Dubosc, 'Sexual Difference and Politics in France Today', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 25/1 (1999), 183–210; Rose-Marie Lagrave and Juliette Caniou, 'L'exercice de la citoyenneté pour les femmes. Parité ou égalité', in *Liber*, supplement to *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 120 (February 1998), 9–11; and Allwood and Wadia, op. cit., 213–25.

16. In the 2001 local elections, the results in towns of over 3500 inhabitants were that 46 per cent of the newly elected municipal councillors were women, a considerable increase. Figures provided by Manda Green, Stirling University, who is preparing a doctoral dissertation on women in the French legislature.

17. In the House of Commons elected on 7 June 2001, the Labour Party was once more returned with a large majority: the number of women MPs dropped very slightly, from 120 to 118 out of 659, so the overall percentage fell hardly at all, although there were a small number of personnel changes: see website (www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/gender.htm), consulted 29 June 2001.

18. The *Scotsman*, special supplement, 1 September 1999: 'The Scottish Parliament: A User's Guide'.

19. Unpublished paper kindly communicated to me by Esther Breitenbach. For a collection of articles providing the background to this issue, see Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay, *Women and Contemporary Scottish Politics: An Anthology* (Edinburgh 2001).

20. Allwood and Wadia, op. cit., 226–7.

21. Marie-Victoire Louis, 'Le nouveau code pénal français', *Projets féministes*, Vol. 3 (1994), 40–69.

22. Drude Dahlerup, 'From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 11/4 (1988), 275–98, quoted in Allwood and Wadia, op. cit., 201.

23. Mendus, op. cit., 208.

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