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CHAPTER 21

WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS AND FEMINISM: FRENCH POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY MEETS A COMPARATIVE FEMINIST APPROACH

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Abstract

The chapter starts with exploring the ways in which comparative research on women’s movements has challenged dominant conceptions in social movement theory, notably the antagonism between movements and institutions and the conflation between protest and disruption. The chapter then turns to the specific insights of French research on women’s movement and feminism. First, a series of studies have explored the politicization of gender identity and the historical interplay between mobilizing *as* women and *for* women. Second, there has been much examination of the complex ways in which feminist protest has become engrained in state institutions. Third, several works have focused on the process of diffusion and individual appropriation of feminist ideas outside the women’s movement. A last line of research has recently put emphasis on the intersecting power relationships that shape the contemporary women’s movement.

Keywords: France – Women’s movements – Feminism – Social movements – Women – Gender

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France has a long tradition of mobilization around women’s rights, dating back to the late 19th century and the early years of the Third Republic (Bard, 1995; Klejman and Rochefort, 1989). The word “feminism” was itself coined – in its modern meaning – by the French suffrage activist Hubertine Auclert (Offen, 2000). Likewise, as is the case in many other Western societies, France experienced a revival of women’s protests in the wake of the social and political unrest that marked the late 1960s and 1970s (Picq, 1993), and has witnessed since then a continuous, although sometimes discreet, collective effort to challenge gender hierarchy, from the campaign for gender parity in political office (Bereni, 2015; Giraud, 2005; Lépinaud, 2007; Scott, 2005) to mobilizations for gender equality in the workplace (Revillard, 2007a), against domestic violence (Delage, 2015; Herman, 2013) or concerning sexual rights (Pavard, 2012). Yet, it was not until the last decade that women’s movements and feminism became fully integrated into the social sciences agenda in France. The late institutionalization of gender perspectives in political science and the centrality of class (rather than gender, sexuality and race) in the common definition of progressive social movements account for the late legitimization of this research object in France (Achin and Bereni, 2013) while an international field of research on women’s movements and feminism has expanded since the 1990s¹.

Despite its late arrival, the study of French women’s movements and feminism has been steady and prolific over the past ten years. A new generation of analysts emerged throughout the 2000s, in the wake of pioneering works by Anglophone political analysts whose research centered around France (Allwood and Wadia, 2000; Appleton and Mazur, 1993; Duchon, 1986; Mazur, 1995; Stetson, 1987), and against the backdrop of an unprecedented legitimization of gender studies in French political science. Research on French women’s movements and feminism developed a close dialog with comparative research on women’s

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movements, while maintaining some of its roots in the French tradition of social sciences. In this chapter, We will first examine certain aspects of the field of comparative research on women's movements and feminism², pointing to the insights that have particularly informed the study of the French case and emphasizing the ways in which this field of research has participated in challenging dominant conceptions of social movements. We will then consider some innovative insights from the unfolding research on the French case, emphasising what it brings to international research on women's movements. Finally, we will take a look at the future of the field of research on French women's movements and the gaps to be filled.

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS: CHALLENGING SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

The first comparative studies on women's movements emerged in the 1980s, either from scholarly exchanges between specialists of single country cases (Dahlerup, 1986; Katzenstein and Mueller, 1987) or studies informed by comparative designs on two or three countries (Gelb, 1989; Jenson, 1982; Kaplan, 1992; Lovenduski, 1986). Yet, comparative research on women's movements really gained momentum in the second half of the 1990s and throughout the 2000s, giving birth to a structured field of research, including large-scale comparisons, and fostering theoretical and definitional debates. As pointed out by Karen Beckwith, this rising body of work has informed many research questions in a variety of research fields, from "comparative politics, social movement analysis, democratization scholarship, gender and politics research, and feminist theory" (Beckwith, 2013, p. 1). Complementing a series of overviews of the international field of research on women's movements (Beckwith, 2000, 2013; Bereni and Revillard, 2012; Ewig and Ferree, 2013; Ferree and Mueller, 2004; McBride

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and Mazur, 2008), the focus will be placed here on what this research field brings to the study of social movements.

In this respect, two major contributions can be identified. First, comparative studies on women's movements have broadened the scope of what can be identified as *political* and *disruptive* collective action. Second, this body of research has challenged the reified boundary between *protest* and *institutions*.

Setting up analytical definitions of women's and feminist movements

Concerned with the necessity to delineate operational definitions for a widening scope of comparative research, women's movements scholars have engaged in a great deal of definitional work over the last twenty years. While a first generation of studies was centered around the "new" women's movements that were unfolding in Western democracies in the 1960s and 1970s, a second body of scholarship explored women's movements in a range of other cultural, political and socioeconomical settings, from Latin America to Asia, Africa, and Central and Eastern Europe (Alvarez, 1990; Banaszak, 2005; Basu, 1995; Cîrstocea, 2008a; de Haan et al., 2006; Rai, 2001; Ray and Korteweg, 1999; Tripp et al., 2009). The field of comparative research on women's movements also benefited from the definitional insights of historical perspectives (Cott, 1987; Hagemann et al., 2008; Offen, 2000). This growing field of comparison in space and time led to the building of new analytical definitions of women's and feminist movements.

While there is no unique analytical definition of *women's movements*, most scholars tend to center around two major criteria: first, *women are the major actors and leaders* of these movements (Beckwith, 2001, p. 372, 2013, p. 4; McBride and Mazur, 2008, p. 226); second, *they organize as women*, which means that their claim-making is based on their gender

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identities as women (or based on a variety of roles traditionally assigned to women in most societies, such as mothers, spouses, sisters, daughters...), whatever content is given to the category of women in a range of historical and cultural contexts. This definition encompasses a broad array of movements that have historically revolved around a variety of goals, such as peace, nationalism, democracy, moral reform or feminism. Yet, women's movements are distinct from political and social movements that do not make their claims primarily as women, even though women might participate in high numbers in these movements (peace or nationalist movements for example).

Most comparative scholars also agree that women's movements should be distinguished from *feminist movements*. The latter are often defined as primarily endorsing a feminist *discourse*, i.e. a discourse that explicitly challenges gender hierarchies in a given context. In many instances, feminist movements do not challenge the entire gender order, and they do not necessarily self-identify as "feminist" - a highly contested term, notably in contemporary non-Western settings. While there is a continuing debate over the criteria distinguishing women's movements from feminism, most scholars agree on the usefulness of this analytical distinction: many women's movements do not include feminism among their objectives, and some have explicitly pursued antifeminist goals. In other words, not all women's movements are feminist, and feminist movements are often defined as a subset of women's movements (McBride and Mazur, 2008).

While a major contribution of women's movements research has been to provide an analytical distinction between women's and feminist movements, an important deal of work has also explored how they interact and sometimes overlap. Historical studies have documented how some women's movements conveying a conservative vision of gender roles and often explicitly pursuing antifeminist goals have empowered their female members and paved the way for the development of future feminist protest. For instance, the temperance

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movement, which brought together middle- and upper-class white women in the United States during the second half of the 19th century (Giele, 1995; Skocpol, 1992), gave its female members the opportunity to escape the private realm, build solidarity with other women, raise new gender identities and acquire the skills necessary to take political action. Some of the women involved in the temperance movement even joined the suffrage movement in the end of the century. Several studies conducted on contemporary women's movements in societies where gender roles are rigidly defined have also investigated the conditions under which traditional gender identities are being displaced, spilling over into feminist consciousness of gender subordination (Kaplan, 1990; Ray and Korteweg, 1999).

Challenging routinized definitions of political and disruptive collective action

Calling attention to the blurred boundaries between women's movements and feminism, this body of scholarship has challenged the categories of *political* and *disruptive* that implicitly lay behind the dominant understanding of political and social movement. Social movements have been mostly defined as developing outside mainstream institutions, employing overtly disruptive means of action, and clearly targeting political elites (McAdam et al., 2001). Yet, this vision tends to limit the attention on the most visible, contentious manifestations of women's movements, embodied by the feminist protests that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in western democracies.

Distancing themselves from this narrow definition of protest, many women's movements scholars have shed light on collective efforts that may not appear to be political and transgressive at first sight. Especially (but not only) in societies or historical contexts where the presence of women in the public sphere remains problematic, women's movements do not clearly self-identify as political and do not necessarily use what is commonly labeled as

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disruptive means of action. Their collective actions tend to draw on traditional roles of women in the private sphere, like caring, educating, healing, moralizing, or pacifying. They do not walk the streets holding signs and shouting slogans. In some political contexts, for example in Latin America under the dictatorships, endorsing traditional gender roles as women appeared as a tactical move to apparently "depoliticize" the mobilization and then avoid the repression of public authorities (Kaplan, 1990). Yet, many of these invisible women's movements have contributed to major political and social changes, such as the emergence of the Welfare state in the early 20th century (Skocpol, 1992). As mentioned earlier, in some instances, behind a conservative façade, they have contributed to the displacement of existing gender roles and dominant visions of gender among their participants and beyond (Cott, 1987).

Research on second-wave feminist movements has also enriched the understanding of the categories of political and disruptive that lay behind social movement theory. The US radical feminist local groups of the 1970s and 1980s that were studied by Verta Taylor, Nancy Whittier, and Susan Staggenborg first took an explicit political stance (Staggenborg, 1996, 1998; Taylor and Whittier, 1992). Yet, by the end of the 1970s, feminist activists increasingly directed their actions toward cultural change at the local scale, or at the individual level of everyday practices, in the domestic, professional or artistic realm. Rather than structuring themselves as political organizations with clearly stated goals, and targeting public authorities, they formed *feminist communities* which included a range of social and cultural activities (feminist music festivals, bookstores, shelters for victims of domestic violence, etc.) and encompassed a wide array of individuals recognizing themselves in a discursively defined feminist movement rather than as "members" of "political organizations" (Mansbridge, 1995). Finally, as we will see in detail below, research on the development of feminist "unobtrusive

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mobilization" within the state and other institutions also led to challenging dominant visions of protest (Katzenstein, 1998a).

In sum, the comparative field of studies on women's movements and feminism broadens the definitions of the *political* and the *disruptive* on which male-dominated social and political movements have traditionally relied. In the following section, we go further in this idea by examining how the prolific body of comparative research on women's movements, feminism and institutions has challenged the dominant scholarly divide between social movements and institutions.

Blurring the line between movements and institutions

State institutions have responded to second wave women's movements' pressures, whether confrontational or moderate, by being increasingly open to their demands (Banaszak et al., 2003; Mc Bride Stetson and Mazur, 1995). Gender equality bodies, positions and policies proliferated in a variety of national contexts through the 1980s and 1990s, in the North and in the South, with the strong support of international and supranational organizations, most notably the United Nations and the European Union (Jacquot, 2015). Feminist scholars have drawn on this empirical path to map out new theoretical views on the relationship between feminist protest and the state. Breaking with feminist theorizations of an irreducible state patriarchy (Ferguson, 1984), the concept of *state feminism* was introduced as early as the 1980s to refer to a possible presence of feminist ideas and actors within mainstream institutions, primarily inside the state (Hernes, 1987). Studies that developed around this concept in subsequent years have placed the emphasis either on *individuals* pursuing gender equality goals within the state (usually referred as "femocrats"), or on bureaucratic *bodies*

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formally devoted to the advancement of women’s status (women’s policy agencies) or on gender equality *policies* carried out by the state.

While many of these works have followed the paradigms and research questions of policy studies (see the “Gender policy” chapter in this volume for a detailed review), some of them have fully engaged in social movement theory debates, challenging “the view that social movements are clearly and completely ‘outside the state’”(Banaszak, 2010, p. 2), blurring the boundaries between social movements and other political actors, between disruptive action and conventional politics (Bereni and Revillard, 2011). The works of Hester Eisenstein and Marian Sawer on Australian femocrats (Eisenstein, 1995, 1996; Sawer, 1990), as well as Mary F. Katzenstein’s study of feminist protest inside the US Catholic Church and the military (Katzenstein, 1998a) and Lee A. Banaszak’s research on women mobilizing inside the US federal bureaucracy (Banaszak, 2010) have been key to this strand of research. They all explored different forms of feminist activism within dominant institutions.

Rather than considering femocrats (members of women’s policy agencies) as *former movement participants* co-opted by the state and/or as *allies* of the women’s movement, these authors consider them as full participants of a reconfigured women’s movement. Eisenstein proposes thinking about this continuity through the notion of “multiple accountabilities”: “femocrats, like all bureaucrats, are accountable in a formal and legal way [...] to government”, she writes; yet, “informally” “in the Australian context, there has been a strong notion that the femocrats are in some sense accountable to the women’s movement.” (Eisenstein, 1995, pp. 72–73).

These works have led to redefining the notion of institutionalization: as put by Sawer, “there is still a strong tendency [in social movement research] to see ‘institutionalization’ in negative terms: to view it as a strategy mistakenly adopted by social movements, which results in co-optation, marginalization, or ‘fading’” (Sawer, 2010, p. 604). Rather, she contends,

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"institutionalization is part of the way that the women's movement has always operated". In the same vein, Katzenstein defines institutionalization as "the establishment of organizational habitats of feminists within institutional environments" (Katzenstein, 1998b, p. 197), and Banaszak suggests to think about feminist protest in state institutions in terms of a "state-movement intersection" (Banaszak, 2010). These authors also challenge the routinized definition of "outsider status", which is based on location (outside the state) and tactics (overtly disruptive) in most theoretical and empirical works on social movements. As Banaszak puts it, there is a continuum of possible positions between full exclusion and full integration into institutions, such as "inside government but marginalized" and "inside participation with no chance of influence". In line with Katzenstein, she defines outsider status by "the degree of inclusion in institutions" (Banaszak, 2010, p. 6).

This is not to say that the location of feminist activism has no consequences. Constraints and opportunities specific to institutions strongly shape women's advocates' repertoires and framing strategies (Katzenstein, 1998). Moreover, working with/within institutions does lead, in many instances, to a de-radicalization of the movement goals (Lang 2013). Yet, the women's movement has penetrated mainstream institutions, and there is no mechanical link between institutionalization and de-radicalization.

In sum, comparative research on women's movements has challenged canonic definitions of social movements and protest politics in two - intertwined - ways. On the one hand, research on women's movements has brought into the picture an array of movements whose discourses and repertoires do not fit the conventional visions of *political* and *disruptive*. Second, by placing the focus on how feminist actors and ideas play out *within* institutions, this field of research has challenged the idea that movements, activism and protest politics are necessarily located outside institutions. This insight from the comparative field of women's

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and feminist movements has strongly informed the development of the French strain of research.

THE BOUNDARIES OF FRENCH WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND FEMINISM UNDER SCRUTINY

Until the mid-2000s, French contemporary women's movements and feminism were mainly studied by Anglophone scholars. A series of works conducted in the 1980s and 1990s by historians and political scientists provided the first scholarly overviews of the contemporary women's movement in France and documented its transformations since the 1970s second-wave of feminism. Several studies focused on the ambivalent relationship between women's movements and post May '68 left-wing organizations, unions and political parties, examining the feminist attempts to act inside these organizations and the latter's particular resistance to feminist demands. Dorothy McBride (Stetson, 1987) and Amy Mazur (Mazur, 1995) examined the development of women's policy agencies and policies aimed at advancing women's rights within the French state, emphasizing their "symbolic" dimension and their structural marginality, yet pointing to the ongoing institutionalization of feminist ideas and actors within the French state. Other studies focused on women's organized efforts to increase the presence of women in political office, from the battle for gender quotas within political parties in the 1970s and 1980s to the campaign for gender parity in the 1990s (Mazur, 2001; Opello, 2006; Scott, 2005).

It was not until the mid 2000s that women's movements were present at the center of a structured field of research in France, as a new generation of political sociologists completed their doctoral dissertations on this subject matter. Many of these scholars, including the author

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of this chapter, fully benefited from the pioneering works of Anglophone researchers on contemporary women’s movements, and anchored their work in the international field of comparative research on women’s movements. At the same time, this new body of research on women’s movements and feminism has been very much informed by what can be referred to as the French tradition of political sociology, strongly influenced both by Bourdieu’s structuralist constructivism (Bourdieu, 1994) and by the US interactionist tradition (Becker, 1998; Goffman, 1959; Hughes, 1958). French political sociology is also marked by an interdisciplinary perspective, at the crossroads of history and anthropology, with major epistemological and methodological consequences, including a critical distance to a positivist model of scientific research, the importance granted to microlevel processes, the attention to the complexities and instabilities of social reality, and the centrality given to qualitative methods such as historical analysis and ethnography. French research on women’s and feminist movements and activism combines some of the insights of the international field of comparative research and those of the French tradition of political sociology.

A brief history of women’s and feminist movements in France

Feminist voices have been heard in the public space since the French Revolution, from Olympe de Gouges (author of the 1791 *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne*) to Eugénie Niboyet (editor of the newspaper *La Voix des Femmes* during the 1848 Revolution). Yet, it was not until the first years of the Third Republic, in the 1870s, that the first organized movement for women’s rights emerged – several decades later than in the US and Britain. The 1901 law creating the status of *association* (non-profit organization) allowed for the development of a network of feminist organizations that gained momentum during the Interwar period. Mostly reformist and moderate, this “first wave” of feminist mobilizations centered around the battles for women’s suffrage, for equal access to professions, and against

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women's inferior status in marriage inherited from the 1804 Napoleon code. Besides these feminist organizations, a network of "feminine" organizations developed, mainly related to the Catholic movement, some of them being strongly opposed to feminist demands, and promoting a competing vision of women centered around their domestic duties and values.

After the suffrage was won in 1944, the French feminist movement entered a period of quiescence, known as "le creux de la vague" (Chaperon 2000). The publication of *The Second Sex* by philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, widely discussed in intellectual circles, did not spur a renewal of protest. Women's organizations became more and more engaged in the Cold War political divides and few voices publicly challenged the dominant familialist ideology of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the wake of May '68, and in line with women's liberation movements that were already flourishing in North America and in other European countries, a new wave of feminist protest emerged. The *Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF)* made its first public appearance in August 1970 when a dozen feminists placed flowers at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in tribute to the "wife of the unknown soldier". The movement that developed in subsequent years was diverse, but mainly loyal to the revolutionary mood of the post May '68 era. Second-wave feminist activists mostly refused organizing and political delegation. Following the "private is political" motto, they centered around free sexual rights and against domestic violence, women's labor exploitation and gender stereotypes.

President François Mitterrand's accession to office in 1981 is usually presented as the end of the 1970s protest cycle. The visibility of feminist protests to the public declined. The movement experienced a process of institutionalization, as the new Ministry of Women's Rights took a growing centrality in feminist activities and as the second-wave movement transformed into a myriad of specialized and often professionalized state-funded organizations.

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Feminist protest came back to public visibility in the 1990s, through the campaign for gender parity, for equality at work and for the defense of sexual rights. At this time, a new generation of activists appeared, and redefined the norms of feminist activism by including men, challenging gender dichotomy and placing the intersectionality of power relations at the center of their agenda. Conflicts and debates, partly along generational lines, have been particularly vivid especially around prostitution, trans and queer identities and the wearing of the veil by muslim women.

This next section considers the two main contributions of French research to the analysis of women's movements and feminism. The first is a series of studies that have explored the historical interplay between mobilizing *as* women and *for* women. There has also been much examination of the complex ways in which women's protest might develop within mainstream institutions.

Rethinking the politicization of women's identity in historical perspective

A first strong line of research on French women's movements and feminism consists of studies placed at the crossroads between history and political sociology. These studies have emphasized the fluctuating boundaries of the women's movement, and called specific attention to the historical shifts between mobilizing *as* women and *for* women.

Three studies are particularly emblematic of this research stream: Magali Della Sudda's study of a conservative organization of Catholic women during the first half of the 20th Century (Della Sudda, 2007); Bibia Pavard's research on the movement for legalizing contraception and abortion from the 1950s to the late 1970s (Pavard, 2012); Alban

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Jacquemart's work on male participants in the feminist movement from the 1870s to the early 2000s (Jacquemart, 2015).

In her study of the *Ligue des Femmes Françaises*, the largest French Catholic female organization in the first part of the 20th century, Magali Della Sudda pointed out the paradoxical discrepancy between a very conservative discourse on gender and organizational practices that unobtrusively challenge this discourse. The *Ligue* was created in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair with the aim of organizing a female Catholic opposition not only to republicanism and secularism (*laïcité*), but also to the feminist movement that gained visibility through the first decades of the 20th century. Despite its very conservative discourse on gender, Della Sudda showed that the *Ligue* constituted a setting of politicization for middle- and upper-class women at a time when they were legally excluded from political citizenship. As they were involved in male electoral campaigns for the sake of the Catholic movement, the female leadership of the *Ligue* acquired political skills and prepared Catholic women to exert the right of suffrage, even though they continued to combat organizations that called for women's enfranchisement. The *Ligue* stood for female influence on the political sphere that both respected and displaced the traditional gender divide between private and public realms: women should pursue the religious mission of "putting" public affairs "in order" on behalf of their presumed virtue and moral superiority as women. Renamed *Action générale catholique féminine (ACGF)* in the 1950s, the organization gradually shifted away from the male ecclesiastic hierarchy and from its most conservative roots, notably in the wake of the reform movement within the Catholic church (Vatican II) in the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, the organization became increasingly involved in domestic and international institutional networks of women's rights organizations; in the 1990s, *ACGF* members actively participated in the campaign for gender parity in political representation, alongside self-identified feminists of the second wave (Bereni, 2015).

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Bibia Pavard explored the role of women's collective identity in the development of the movement for free contraception and then free abortion (Pavard, 2012). She focused on the organization, *Maternité heureuse*, founded in 1956 to promote free access to contraception for all women. The group initially gathered a few highly educated, bourgeois and professional women. The image of the "respectable", upper-class woman was at the core of their collective identity: they rejected the term "feminist", harbored strong family values, and advocated their cause through education without apparently disturbing the social order, at a time when the 1920s legislation made it a crime to advertise contraceptive means. In the following decade, as the movement was renamed *Mouvement français pour le planning familial* (MFPF) and grew substantially, male physicians became increasingly important to the organization's leadership. Their professional legitimacy and social/political networks became more and more central to the group's strategy. Although women still made up the large majority of the rank-and-file members, they were no longer at the center of the organization's collective identity. The 1967 Neuwirth reform legalizing contraception rewarded this male-dominated strategy. In the early 1970s, while the radical *Mouvement de libération des femmes* called for free access to abortion, women regained a dominant position in the leadership of the MFPF. The organization increasingly identified as part of the new feminist movement, acting on behalf of women and for women (Pavard, 2013). In sum, Pavard's work stresses the continuities between women's organized efforts around sexual rights before and after the "irruption" of the second wave feminist movement while at the same time putting the emphasis on the shifting constituencies of the movement over time, from professional women (1950s) to male physicians (1960s) to feminist activists (1970s).

Alban Jacquemart's study on men's participation in the French feminist movement from the late 19th century to the early 21st century also fruitfully questions the boundaries and constituencies of women's and feminist movements (Jacquemart, 2015). He finds that while

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men have participated in feminist movements since the outset, their presence has always been, to varying degrees, problematic in the eyes of women activists. Men visibly participated in the first wave of feminist protest without encountering strong resistance from female activists, at a time when women were excluded from political institutions. In contrast, second-wave feminists upheld new political norms, such as excluding men from visible participation (*non-mixité*) and defining them as "allies" – rather than participants – of the feminist struggle. By contrast, in the last wave of feminist protest, which began in the mid-1990s, men's participation appeared as a new defining principle for the younger participants in the feminist movement (Henneron, 2005). Drawing on rich, empirical material, within an extended time frame, Jacquemart distinguishes two models of male participation in feminist movements: the *humanist* model, by which men activists seek to extend the scope of universal principles; the *identity* model, by which men activists seek to challenge dominant gender roles and especially the dominant definition of masculinity. While the first model prevailed during the first wave of feminist movements, the second one increasingly gained importance through the 1970s and onward. Beyond its empirical and analytical value, Jacquemart's work is a major theoretical contribution to the scholarly debates over the definition of feminist movements. He shows that feminist movements should not be considered a *subset* of women's movements, which are defined as organizations composed of women taking action for women: not only have men long participated in feminist movements in the name of universal values, but the equation between women and feminism has been strongly challenged by the recent emergence of trans, queer and prosex feminism, which center around the deconstruction of the gender dichotomy. Thus, Jacquemart argues that women are not necessarily the *political subject* of feminism and defines the feminist movement as overlapping the women's movement, rather than being encompassed by it.

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Thinking the institutional embeddedness of feminist protest

A second major line of contemporary French research on women's movements and feminism has focused on the way in which feminist protest has become engrained in state institutions. Building on insights from international scholarly debates on women's movements and institutions, a series of works have proposed new analytical categories to characterize the intersection between women's movement activism and dominant institutions. These theoretical reflections have drawn on various fieldworks, from state women's policy agencies (Revillard, 2007b, Forthcoming) to the campaign for gender parity (Bereni, 2015) to the organizations charged by the state to provide help to victims of domestic violence (Herman, 2013 ; Delage, 2015).

Anne Revillard researched women's policy agencies in France and Quebec from the 1970s to the early 2000s. While many studies on women's policy agencies consider them as the *allies* or *relays* of a women's movement inevitably located outside of the state, Revillard argued, building on Katzenstein's (1998) and Banaszak's (2010) work, that these bureaucratic instances can be considered to some extent, as "contentious institutions" (*institutions militantes*). Marginal within the state, these institutions provide a specific feminist socialization to the bureaucrats who work within them. They actively participate, on their own, in purveying feminist protest in contemporary societies, through specific repertoires (Tilly, 1986), such as legal action and institutional communication (Revillard, 2007b, Forthcoming).

In her work on the campaign for gender parity reform, Laure Bereni introduced the concept of "field of women's advocacy" (*espace de la cause des femmes*) to grasp the transversal dimension of women's claim-making (Bereni, 2012, 2015). This concept refers to the *configuration* of groups and organizations mobilizing on behalf of women and for women

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in a variety of social settings, either inside or outside institutions. Groups or organizations standing for women's rights in the state, political parties, trade unions, academic institutions, religious bodies, business organizations, etc., are as much a part of the field of women's advocacy as "autonomous" women's groups and organizations. In other words, in this theoretical framework, what is usually referred to as the "autonomous" women's movement is considered to be *one component* of the field of women's advocacy, in relation with many other components. Although the multiple actors that make up the field of women's advocacy might use a variety of means of action and discourses, they are linked together in an entanglement of social networks and through a series of circulating discourses and practices, which make possible, in certain historical contexts, the emergence of cross-sectional feminist campaigns – such as the gender parity campaign in the 1990s (Bereni, 2015).

By focusing on work activities in organizations that were closely associated with the French women's movement in the 1970s, French researchers have been able to better understand the way feminist activism has become engrained in state institutions. In the following decade, these movements became the official providers of the state social policies directed towards women. In an ethnographic study of organizations that help women who are victims of domestic violence, Elisa Herman explored the tensions between social work and feminist activism (Herman, 2013). The organizations analyzed were founded by women's movement activists in the late 1970s. In the following decade they became increasingly professionalized, benefiting from state subsidies and relying on paid staff. By closely studying the trajectories, representations and practices of the women who work in these organizations, Herman found that many of them could be described as "activist workers" (*travailleuses militantes*), inventing new subjectivities beyond the opposition between activism and work. Their definition of violence breaks with dominant definitions inspired by psychology and centered on the personality of the perpetrator. Relying on a feminist rhetoric, they insist on

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the major role of the pervasive social structure of gender. Pauline Delage found similar results in her comparative study on organizations against gender violence in France and the US: while explicit references to feminism tend to fade through the professionalization process, social workers are still strongly influenced by feminist views in the way they frame their work activities (Delage, 2015). Erika Flahault’s study of the *Mouvement français pour le planning familial* (MFPPF) tells a comparable story (Flahault, 2013). Since the 1970s, this organization has grown in size and increased its dependency upon state subsidies as well as its degree of professionalization as it carries out the “public service mission” of “sexual information”. At first sight, the MFPPF lacks the overt feminist dimension it used to have during the heyday of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s (Pavard 2012). After conducting an ethnographic study on couple and family counseling within the MFPPF, Flahault pointed out that many women counselors (*conseillères*) view sexuality in its social and political dimension and envision their professional activity as political rather than psychological and medical.

In sum, while many comparative studies on women’s movements and feminism have tried to establish stable, analytical definitions of these categories, French works have been predominantly interested in their fluctuating *boundaries*: how and by whom they are historically constructed, how they move over time, how they get crossed and sometimes blurred.

NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES: STUDYING THE DISSEMINATION OF FEMINIST IDEAS AND THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS

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Two other lines of reflection have recently emerged in women's movement research in France, paving the way for future investigation: a series of works have focused on the process of diffusion and appropriation of feminist ideas outside the women's movement (Albenga et al., 2015), while others have examined the way in which women's movements are cross-cut by the different power relations that structure the category of women (race, sexuality, class, age...).

Appropriating feminist ideas beyond feminist movements

A first category of research focuses on the *settings* and *mechanisms* by which feminist ideas spread to outside militant organizations. In a study of the "Tupperware circles" that proliferated in France in the 1970s, Catherine Achin and Delphine Naudier provided a micro-level exploration of the appropriation of feminist ideas by non-militant middle-class women in a small town of provincial France in the 1970s (Achin and Naudier, 2009). Their research showed that being a demonstrator (*démonstratrice*) was often experienced as a form of economic emancipation, and as an opportunity to escape the home. *Démonstratrices* turned out to be agents of new ideas and spread practical information about contraception or divorce. Tupperware circles allowed the creation of female sociability networks beyond the domestic sphere, connecting middle-class housewives between themselves and allowing them to verbalize personal experiences as women, questioning familial roles and assignments, as well as the traditional female destiny. They allowed for the diffusion of feminist ideas and practices "by capillarity" although these middle-class women did not self-identify as feminist and did not know much about the women's liberation movement that was unfolding at the same period.

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In her doctoral research on the biographical consequences of feminist activism based on a series of in-depth interviews with participants of the Women’s liberation movement in the 1970s and their children, Camille Masclet examines the ways in which a feminist politicization is transmitted through family education (Masclet, Forthcoming). The feminist activists who became mothers considered the family to be a realm where they could question dominant gender norms. Masclet finds that only a minority of feminists’ children actually get involved in feminist organizations: those who do are women and they tend to draw a line between their feminist activism and that of their mothers, which they envision as “traditional” feminism. Although feminists’ children do not automatically engage in the feminist movement, Masclet finds that a “feminist inheritance” (*héritage féministe*) is passed on through education. Most of the children have incorporated throughout their socialization some dispositions that are partly unconventional in terms of gender, and inherited an interpretative framework of the social world that is sensitive to gender issues – a form of *gender consciousness*.

A second line of research examines the various *forms of appropriation* (or non-appropriation) of feminist ideas by individuals located outside the realm of feminist activism (Jacquemart and Albenga, 2015).

Soline Blanchard, Isabel Boni and Marion Rabier all investigated ways in which professional and executive women can appropriate feminist ideas in their work practices and challenge gender norms within the French corporate world. Since the early 2000s, a series of public policies have been set up or strengthened in order to break down the “glass ceiling” in the workplace, such as the obligation to collective bargaining and reporting on gender equality and, more importantly, gender quotas in corporate boardrooms (2012) and in governmental appointments of administration leadership (2013). This new legal context has made it easier for women to speak as women and for women in the corporate world. Soline

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Blanchard studied the emergence of a professional field of gender equality consultants, who work both in the fields of women's advocacy and management, combining professional managerial values with a social change agenda (Blanchard, 2013). Marion Rabier documented the development of elite women's circles and networks of professional women who graduated from the French "*Grandes écoles*" (several of the top universities of France) and held senior leadership positions in the corporate world or in public administration (Rabier, 2013). Although they avoid the "feminist" label, their discourses and practices attest to the development of a discreet, yet growing movement towards improving the interests of professional and executive women in the workplace (Blanchard et al., 2013).

Other studies call attention to the *obstacles* to the appropriation of feminist ideas beyond feminist movements. Eve Meuret-Campfort and Fanny Gallot, for example, focus on how working-class, female union activists have historically related to their identity as women, and to feminism – both as an ideology and as a movement (Gallot and Meuret-Campfort, 2015). The relationship between left-wing organizations and feminism in France has historically been more contentious than in other European countries with strong Socialist traditions, such as Germany or Britain (Sowerwine, 1982). In the 1970s, although a minority of union members explicitly endorsed feminist ideas and participated in the autonomous women's movement, the term feminism was mainly rejected by female and male union activists, seen as anti-men and bourgeois. Female union members and women workers tended to place their class identity at the center and reject the feminist label. Yet, because of the segregation of labor by gender, the plants where women worked often operated as large-scale women's groups, gathering women of the same age and class. Studying the female participation in the social unrest that marked the decade, Gallot and Meuret-Campfort emphasize what they call a "feminist agency" (*puissance d'agir féministe*) in their practices. In some of their struggles, such as during the 1970s strikes at the *Chantrelle* plants (manufacturing lingerie), they built

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new subjectivities of working-class women workers resisting sexist and classist representations, and sometimes – although rarely – politicizing their gender identity as women. In this case, researchers are interested in the obstacles to the diffusion of feminist ideas, because of the class distance between working-class women and middle- and upper-class feminists, and because of the context of left-wing unions that reject feminism as an ideology.

Yet, class position and political ideology are not the only obstacles to the diffusion of feminist ideas. Gwénaëlle Perrier tells another story of the non- – or limited – appropriation of feminist ideas, by exploring how actors in charge of implementing employment policies at the local level in Paris and Berlin and their suburbs include the principle of gender equality in their activities. Despite the institutionalization of the principle of *gender mainstreaming*, which holds every public policy actor accountable in terms of gender equality, she finds that the goal of equality is sustained at the local level by a handful of (female) equality specialists, often with an activist background. The vast majority of non-feminist actors ("*les profanes de l'égalité*") have a limited appropriation of this public policy goal because of their professional ethos and gender-blind public policy routines, restricting the scope and efficacy of the principle of gender mainstreaming (Perrier, 2010, 2015).

Studying the women's movement through an intersectional lens

A final line of research has recently put emphasis on the intersecting power relationships that shape the contemporary French women's movement. A few works have shed light on the structural heterogeneity of the women's movement and on the continuing inclusion and exclusion processes by which the women's movement is being produced.

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In her doctoral work on collective-memory building in the French women's movement, Marion Charpenel investigates how collective representations of a movement's past are shaped by movement leaders as a way to create or maintain that organization's unity (Charpenel, 2012, 2014). She gives the example of the violent murder of Sohane Benziane, a 17-year-old girl of Magrebian descent, who was killed by a young man of her age in a poor neighborhood in the suburbs of Paris in 2002. This event was successfully framed by a handful of leading feminist activists as a symbol of sexist violence and placed in the long story of feminist struggles dating back to Simone de Beauvoir. By transforming this terrible event into a symbol, they were able to attenuate existing tensions and dissensions that were unfolding at that time within the women's movement along generational, ethnic and class lines.

Eléonore Lépinard explores how intersectionality challenges the universalist project of many contemporary women's rights organizations in France (on this matter see also Bassel and Lloyd, 2008). Lépinard particularly grasps this issue through a study of the feminist controversies over the 2004 law banning the headscarf in public schools, and around a 2010 law outlawing the burqa and niqab (*voile intégral*) in public spaces (Lépinard 2007a, 2014). Many (white) leaders and members of feminist organizations strongly called for these bans, under the argument that Muslim girls and women should be protected from gender oppression deriving from religious principles. These feminist activists, Lépinard points out, refused to frame this issue in terms of intersectionality and failed to see the veil bans as a way to racialize and marginalize Muslim women. According to Lépinard, two main factors account for this misrecognition of intersectional issues in feminist movements. First, she emphasises the extent to which the struggle against the Catholic church marked the identity of the French second-wave women's movement – notably in the early 1970s campaign for free abortion. For many feminists of the second-wave generation, opposition to religious oppression remains

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the dominant political agenda, preventing them from recognizing the processes by which certain religious groups might be racialized. Second, feminist blindness to intersectionality reflects increasingly dominant visions of French republicanism, placing the emphasis on cultural assimilation, color blindness, and conveying a conception of secularism (*laïcité*) which is more and more defined as a strict invisibility of religious signs in public spaces (*neutralité*).

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES, PUZZLES AND QUESTIONS

As shown in this chapter, France has a recent, yet rich body of research on women's movements and feminism. These studies build on the insights of comparative research while bringing to the table an original perspective, rooted in the French tradition of political sociology. This chapter particularly placed the focus on studies that have challenged the mainstream definition of social movements as being visibly disruptive and located outside institutions. It also called attention to recent developments in French research that focus on the diffusion of feminist ideas beyond the boundary of women's movements, and on the intersection of power relations within these movements. I would like to conclude by pointing to a few challenges, puzzles and questions that the study of women's movements in France is currently facing.

First, there is a need for more comparative research. The French tradition of political sociology, insisting on the necessity of in-depth, micro-sociological analysis through ethnographic or historical work has led to overlooking the importance of the comparative lens. This is not due to a lack of interest in non-French cases: in recent years, a prolific body of research has developed around women's and feminist movements outside France, especially in non-Western contexts. These works have examined the ways in which gender

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identities are being politicized outside the realm of western feminism, and the impact of globalized gender equality policies and discourses on local women's activism in southern and eastern countries (Cîrstocea, 2008b; Dutoya, 2014; Lacombe et al., 2011; N'Diaye, 2011; Le Renard, 2010). A rich dialogue has existed between specialists of the French cases and other cases, and a few notable comparative studies have been carried out (Delage, 2015; Engeli, 2009; Giraud, 2005; Lépinard, 2012; Perrier, 2010; Revillard, 2007b, Forthcoming). Yet, there is still a need to fill the gap between the in-depth studies limited to the French context and the large-scale comparative projects in which France is included along with a range of other national cases (McBride, Mazur, & Lovenduski 2010). This middle-scale, in-depth comparative perspective should be developed, as many theoretical insights drawing from the French case need to be tested on other cases.

Second, France has experienced, like many other countries, a growing influence of political science perspectives on the study of women's movements and feminism. This "institutional move" (Revillard and Bereni, Forthcoming) has been fruitful in France as elsewhere, but it has also led to overlooking traditional research questions of social movement theory, such as why and how movement organizations and campaigns emerge, develop, and die and how movements select their strategies and targets. The dimension of the social movement agenda that has been the most addressed in the French case relates to social movement framing strategies, which have been at the center of a series of studies on the campaign for gender parity (Bereni, 2015; Lépinard, 2007; Scott, 2005). Yet, many other questions should be brought back into the picture, in line with France's important tradition of research on social movements and activism (see the "Social movements" chapter in this volume).

Finally, there is still a need for a more systematic dialogue between French studies on the French case and comparative research on women's movements and feminism. Until now,

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exchanges have been more commonly from the outside in (French works discussing and integrating international research) than from the inside out (French works being discussed in the international arena). Although scholars working in France and on France increasingly participate in international academic arenas, most research carried out in France and on France is not included in these English-speaking venues. This is partly because the French body of research is mainly written in French and published in French-speaking journals. However, a more important obstacle to the internationalization of French research has to do with the discrepancy between the paradigms and methods that prevail in Anglophone political science and those which are dominant in the French social sciences. In research on women's movements and feminism as in other areas, this gap has come to be a strong obstacle to international intellectual exchanges. This is why this collective book, gathering Francophone and Anglophone scholars from diverse intellectual traditions, and pointing to the similarities and differences between various ways to study the case of France, is such a valuable intellectual project.

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NOTES

¹ For an overview of this research field, see (Banaszak, 2008; Beckwith, 2000, 2013; Ewig and Ferree, 2013; Ferree and Mueller, 2004; McBride and Mazur, 2008).

² By comparative research, I not only refer to the works designed to be comparative but also to research works on national cases that are informed by and dialoguing with comparative literature.

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