

## From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France

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‘Horrible, horrible, it’s horrible.’

‘Oh my! This is gorgeous.’

...

‘You are gonna catch a cold.’

...

‘Well if I stood next to her I would be the happiest man on earth.’

This is how a group of male bystanders reacted to two female models wearing mini-skirts walking down a generic French street in the mid-1960s. The scene, part of a two-minute clip about a new item of clothing, ‘mini skirt’, was broadcast on the French evening television news program in 1966. The last part of the clip allows a few young women to explain why they chose to wear miniskirts: ‘because I like it’, ‘because it looks young’. A young female sales assistant concludes the short film by putting forward that the main criticism against young girls wearing miniskirts comes from older women jealous of not being young enough to wear such items of clothing.<sup>(1)</sup> The *mini-jupe* had made its appearance in French fashion the year before, provoking passionate reactions among French men, women and youth. As this clip reveals, a large section of French society interpreted mini-skirts as cultural and generational statements that forced parents to confront the possibility of sexual emancipation and wrought tensions among generations.

The issue of youth culture and fashion is but one of the themes in Sarah Fishman’s new book *From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France*. Fishman, who has previously authored two important monographs *The Battle for Children: World War II, Youth Crime and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth-Century France* and *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940–1945*, returns to the topics of gender and youth to analyse afresh how ideas of gender and family relations developed in post-war

France. In publishing *From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution* Fishman makes important contributions to the dynamic historiography of the aftermaths of the Second World War in European societies (and the question of what French historians call *sortie de guerre*) but also to the on-going debates about the time-span in which historians need to consider the events of 1968 and the sexual revolution.

Fishman analyses how and why ideas about women and men's lives as well as perceptions of gender roles have changed in the 20 years that followed the Liberation of France in 1944. This timeframe allows her to articulate a nuanced approach to notions of continuity and rupture between the Second World War (when an ultra-conservative, collaborationist government established in the spa town of Vichy governed France) and the post-war period when the provisional government, followed by the Fourth Republic (established in 1946) sought to reject many of Vichy's traditional ideals. She convincingly demonstrates that while 'the immediate postwar years ... fuelled a strong rejection of Vichy's extreme backward glance', conservative ideas about men, women, children and family relations did not disappear after 1944 (p. xv). The book ends just before the events of May 1968 and allows Fishman to consider changing gender relations in the backdrop of France's economic recovery (*Trente glorieuses*), the growth of the welfare state and the rise of affluence and mass consumerism. She thus convincingly argues that the 1950s were a turning point for ideas of gender, family and sex (p. xxiii).

*From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution* relies on three sets of sources that allow Fishman to outline changing social trends concerning a broad range of topics connected to family relations and gender roles, from courtship, love and youth sexuality to spousal relations – to name but a few. Firstly, it examines guide books and pamphlets intended to instruct various audience about dating, marriage, or childrearing. Women's magazines constitute the second corpus of sources. More specifically, Fishman analyses in depth *Elle*, the French magazine which was highly influential among urban, middle class women. *Confidences*, *Antoinette* and *Constellation*, which were less wide-spread than *Elle* but were aimed at more rural or working-class readers, also feature in the book. Fishman uses the magazines to get a glimpse into the issues discussed in their advice columns. Many readers wrote to these papers in the hope of obtaining advice on relationships with lovers, children and husbands, homemaking and, at the end of the period considered in the book, sexuality. Male and female journalists and (pseudo-)psychologists replied to some publicly, and in other cases privately. Some of the women's magazines discussed in the book even had offices open for 'consultations'. *Marie-Claire*, for example, had a clinic where a 'psycho-technician' would see both (female) readers and their children. While Fishman acknowledges that this inexpensive prescriptive literature does not give insights into the actual behaviours of parents, teenagers, and couples, she outlines that they nonetheless suggest 'social ideas about the way families and individuals should operate defined certain behaviors as unacceptable, shaped social responses, and influenced how people interpreted their own actions and situations.' (p. xvii). Recently Claire Langhamer has also emphasised the position of negotiation in which the agony aunt found herself as a figure who 'mediated between the prescriptive and the subjective, operating in a blurred space where norms are rendered practical'.<sup>(2)</sup>

Thirdly, Sarah Fishman uses juvenile court cases from four different regions so as to reflect the diversity of France: Paris, the industrial region of the North, the rural region of the Drome located in the Vosges Mountains and finally the Bouches-du-Rhone region centered on the Mediterranean port city of Marseilles. As she explains in the introduction, 'juvenile court case files represent a rich source, beyond the world of journalists and moralities for uncovering both changing material realities and social attitudes about families' (p. xxi) most of whom were from poor, rural, working class or immigrant backgrounds. All three set of sources allow Fishman to delve into a fascinating ethnographic-like analysis of gender norms and conception of childhood in post-war French society.

The book is split into eight chapters, the first of which opens with a discussion on how French families experienced the end of the war. Firstly, Fishman explores the impact of homecomings of prisoners of war on French family lives and also the disruption caused by those American soldiers who remained on French soil after the Liberation.<sup>(3)</sup> Secondly, the chapter analyses how women's wartime role in managing households shaped new expectations for post-war families and society. Politically, the historiography has so far largely

insisted that the end of the war had led to *women's suffrage*. Simultaneously, the roles of women within the home began to shift too. As Fishman argues, post-war France moved away from Vichy's understanding that maintaining a home required sacrifice and self-abnegation on the part of women: housekeeping progressively became something that women ought to study and analyse as part of the growth of domestic sciences. Thus work inside the home was increasingly seen as work that required skills and ingenuity (p. 12). Using juvenile case reports, Fishman demonstrates that the role of men in families too began to be conceptualised differently by social workers. While prior to the war the latter thought of fathers as absent/present figures 'after the war, fatherhood was becoming a relationship' (p. 15). To be sure, the prescriptive literature still put forward that male authority at home was necessary and desirable to husbands, wives and children; however, parenting was increasingly seen as a collaborative effort and a shared responsibility, hence the growth of contemporary anxieties over the figure of the 'authoritarian wife'. As a result of the mounting attention social workers paid to fathers, they investigated family structures more closely. Nonetheless, the decisive factor in assessing children's cases and whether they ought to remain in their families (rather than be sent to a foster family, a group home or a private institution for troubled youth), was parental affection for a child. As Fishman convincingly demonstrates, this trumped all class bias or racial prejudices.

The second chapter discusses the influence of publications by three key thinkers: Sigmund Freud, Simone de Beauvoir, who published *The Second Sex* in 1949, and Alfred Kinsey, who authored two studies of male and female sexuality published in 1948 and 1953 in the US and translated into French shortly after. Fishman compellingly reveals how the ideas developed by these thinkers progressively penetrated French society and served as base for a new language that psychoanalysts such as Françoise Dolto (4), but also journalists and social workers, employed to speak about parenting, children and intimate relationships. Relying on a detailed analysis of juvenile court cases and women's magazines, Fishman demonstrates how varied spheres of French society, including parents and non-experts, appropriated psychological language, feminist ideas and new understandings of sexual behaviours and desires to analyse current issues.

The third and fourth chapters, titled 'Marriage and parenting in the 1950s' and 'Children and adolescents in the 1950s' highlight changing ideas about family members and the family as a unit. While society still expected women to marry (and most women still saw marriage as an important part of their destiny) important aspects within marriage such as the relationship between spouses and birth control began to change. As a result, a new way of thinking about sexuality and family relations developed. Interestingly, it moved away from wartime moral and religious arguments and relied far more on practical and psychological principles. Consequently fatherhood, motherhood and childhood too were redefined in the 1950s, in part owing to the popularisation of Freudian ideas and the developing science of education: children were seen as individual beings whose emotional experiences could have dramatic repercussion on their adult psychological states. In this section Fishman also meticulously researches the changing patterns in youth culture and the consequence of the growing affluence on French society and children more specifically. While the section does reference the influence of American culture, it could perhaps put a little more emphasis on the full significance the Americanisation of French culture had for French children and youth.(5)

By the 1960s, France had entered what Fishman calls a 'post-psychology era' in which Freudian terms were used in all types of publications from psychiatric journals to catholic writing (chapter five, p. 115). The second strand of chapter five contributes to studies of post-war affluence (6) by looking at gendered consumption and the limits of affluence among working class families investigated in juvenile court cases. As Fishman shows, in spite of the government's role in spreading affluence through various welfare measures, many families continued to live in poverty. These families were often offered public loans, which consequently created debts; these presented the French government (and social workers) with a perfect opportunity to attempt controlling families' budgets in a somewhat paternalistic fashion.

Chapter six looks at the impact of the democratisation of education in the 1960s on 'Youth, women and *jeunes filles* (young girls)' and the developing generational gap of the decade. This chapter is important in nuancing some of the dominant narratives on 1960s French youth culture. For example, a survey published

by *Elle* in 1960 to which over twenty thousand ‘young girls’ had responded (most of whom were from educated urban middle-class families) indicated widespread conservative tastes: the respondents overwhelmingly preferred Albert Camus to Françoise Sagan whose *Bonjour tristesse* (1954) had shocked much of French society. 38 per cent of respondents also judged New Wave films as being ‘exaggerated’ (p. 154).

The introduction to the subsequent chapter ‘dating and courtship’ underscores a paradox that a growing number of French youth faced in the 1960s: ‘by the early 1960s, most observers ... recognised that young women’s lives now included educational and professional aspirations. Yet many values and expectations about gender remained firmly in place’ (p. 162). For example, the double standard over the virginity of future husbands and wives prevailed: while flirting was accepted and sometimes encouraged, female magazines insisted that women ought not to go ‘too far’ before their wedding day. Even Orientation Nuptiale, one of the first dating services, reminding its female clients to respect the rule of ‘common morality’ (p. 172). To be sure, not all unmarried couples followed this rule. However, while in previous decades the prescriptive literature would have advised unmarried pregnant women to marry the father of the unborn child, in the 1960s this type of recommendation became less frequent and single motherhood began to be seen as a morally acceptable and financially possible option for young girls. This was in part supported by French family policy that guaranteed full access to family allowance and benefits to single mothers.

The final chapter ‘Something old, something new: marriage and children in the 1960s’ wraps together issues on domestic violence (with the French system offering limited recourse to women but increasingly protecting children), women’s sexuality (with a discussion of the growing anxiety concerning frigidity), adultery and divorce. While stigmas of divorce had lessened since previous decades, the act of divorce still represented a social and financial burden that weighed more heavily on women than men. The last couple of sections in the chapter deal with children and teenagers’ sexuality and the new instructions – to be found in the prescriptive literature and women’s magazines – that it was the role of parents to exchange information about sexuality with their children.

*From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France* is a clear, convincing account of post-war France which engages with a number of important discussions in modern European history. The originality of sources, the attention to the language deployed in the documents analysed and the focus on children within developing gender relations is especially valuable. Throughout the book, Fishman introduces elements of transnationalism and comparison with other European countries and with the US which will no doubt be of interest to all historians and students of gender, sexuality and childhood in the modern period.

## Notes

1. My translation. ‘L’apparition de la mini-jupe’, ORTF, 1ère chaîne (Collection: Journal Télévisé de 20 H), 30 avril 1966, available on the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel, INA < <http://fresques.ina.fr/jalons/fiche-media/InaEdu01069/l-apparition-de-la-minijupe.html> [2]> [accessed 14 September 2017]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, 2013). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The literature on this topic is vast and Fishman’s reliance on juvenile court cases allows us to understand how families were impacted by the end of hostilities. See also Bruno Cabanes et Guillaume Piketty, *Retour à l’intime au sortir de la guerre* (Paris, 2009); Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do. Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago, IL, 2013); Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad, *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace* (New York, NY, 2005); Daniella Doron, *Jewish Youth and Identity in Postwar France: Rebuilding Family and Nation*, (Bloomington, IN, 2015). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. On Dolto see the ongoing work of Richard Bates, especially Richard Bates, *Psychoanalysis and Child-Rearing in Twentieth-Century France: The Career of Françoise Dolto* (PhD thesis, University of

Nottingham, 2017).[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, CA, 1993).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Rebecca J. Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (New York, NY, 2011).  
[Back to \(6\)](#)

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