

April in Paris 1999

By George Simons

April in Paris, 1999. Lovers young and old stroll along quays of the Seine. Blossoms add a rosy tint to the sunlight along the paths of the Tuilleries. The ability to display a sense of both history and timelessness while promoting radical innovation is one of the glories of French culture. Audacious acts of architecture quickly become part of the landscape here. The *Pyramide du Louvre*, has made peace with the *Tour d'Eiffel*. The French seem to operate from and at the same time define "good taste."

April in Paris, 1999. It is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first volume of *Le deuxième sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir's shot across the bow of society. Historically, its publication marked the opening of the current phase of feminist thought and activism around the world. Like Betty Friedan in the US, Beauvoir alerted us to the fact that, "One is not born a woman, one must become one. And, to become one is to undergo a mutilation, sometimes real, but always symbolic, that serves to prevent a human being of the female sex to become a subject."

April in Paris, 1999. The spring lingerie show appears in the windows of Paris' premiere department store, *Les Galeries Lafayette*. The vitrines feature live models. They are carefully instructed not to make eye contact with window-shoppers on the other side of the glass. Protesters mix with those who have come to satisfy their curiosity. A graffito urging the flesh-and-blood mannequins to "take it all off" appears overnight on the sidewalk. A passersby lifts shoulders in a classical Gallic shrug and mutters to no one in particular, "*Plus ça change, plus de la même chose*" - the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Are women subjects or objects? Most debates in France are hammered out on the philosophical level before practical action is taken.

Beauvoir saw the status and role of women in society as culturally created, and therefore culturally transformable. In France and throughout Western Europe social architecture has been altered to create freedom and equality for women. New laws about maternity and paternity encourage the death of the patriarch and the birth of the father, the man who, as well, is liberated by recognizing his femininity.

It has often been said that France and the US differ in that the US enjoys the *liberté* and the *égalité*, but not the *fraternité* found in the French social values system. This is perhaps one of the keys to understanding how women's role continue to progress in our respective countries. The US tends to focus on women's *rights* and their exercise, while the French have tended to look on the *nature* of women's *participation* in society as critical.

In practice, this has meant social legislation to respect and support the nature and roles of women in home and family as well as at work and in public life. France like its partners in the EU is supportive of such things as generous maternity leave and (re)education policies.

Equality before the law is a sacrosanct French principle, which in diversity matters requires more uniformity of treatment and fewer exceptions when justice is applied to minorities. There is a tendency, however to see the relationship of the sexes as being of a wholly different order than ethnic or regional diversity. Because women and men live together domestically in families and as partners, and this sphere requires a separate set of initiatives.

French women now possess social equality with men in respect to work, family, finances, and the ability to control conception and childbirth. Social rights, however, are dependent on the attitudes of individuals and institutions for their enjoyment so the struggle is always waged on two fronts.

Much of this boils down to how one sees and acknowledges the differences between women and men. In this respect the French have traditionally insisted, "*Vive la différence!*" As Geneviève Fraisse, philosopher and politician insists, "From the eve of the Revolution, fear of the confusion of the sexes has been a fantasy of democracy... To think that feminism wants to erase the difference of the sexes is absurd."

Parity (*parité*) is the term heard more frequently when women's roles are discussed. It currently pertains to efforts to bring greater numbers of women into public life -- in France women hold only about 5% of seats in *Parlement*, for example, the second lowest percentage in the EU. For the sake of comparison, Finland, where women currently make up more than 50% of representation, was examining such legislation as a restriction on women's opportunities.

Since 1993 the French debated the value of "reserving" places for women as a matter of public policy. It was a plank in the presidential campaign of Jacques Chirac, and Lionel Jospin argued for a five-year national debate on the subject. The acceptance in France this year of laws of parity, albeit in a less potent version than proposed, shifts the debate to their application and consequences.

Related to this is the current debate about the nature of the civil contract of couples living together without marriage (PACS). This is often positioned as a gay initiative, but in fact is of concern to all couples living together with commitment and duration. The French are deciding whether such couples should enjoy parity with traditionally married spouses. This has significant financial implications for the couples involved.

Fraisse and those who think like her insist that female culture is a reality beyond biology and something worth defending and any attempts at parity, e.g., quota systems that ignore it reduce women again to being objects rather than subjects. Others disagree and find legislative endeavors at parity, false in theory but true in practice. Those familiar with French culture will realize that the distance between theory and practice can be enormous. While seen by some outsiders as frivolous or even hypocritical, this gulf frequently provides dynamism and richness in to French political debate.

Femininity and masculinity seem more highly defined in French society and less confused with victimization and machismo than in the US. To the French, US women often seem childish and petulant in their effort to become ersatz men, while US women accuse their French counterparts as being so oppressed that they refuse to recognize their oppression.

Gender dynamics are played with rather than played down in the French workplace and flirting on the part of both sexes is commonplace and, more often than not, harmless. Inappropriate humor is more likely to be discouraged for its bad taste rather than for its stereotyping and lack of political correctness.

While sexual harassment is a serious criminal charge in French law, workplace behavior is rarely challenged in this context. When conflicts do occur they are more likely to be resolved in the interpersonal sphere and via the resources in one's network -- who will speak to whom in this respect. Thus there is much more encouragement to work things out than to seek legal shelter.

With a great desire to protect the private sphere, the French, today are caught in the dilemma of how to reconstruct *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* in a way that harmonizes with rather than destroys the traditional roles of women and men in society. If the successful transformation of the Gare d'Orsay into the Musée d'Orsay--train station to world class museum--is any indicator, the French will do it in their own way and with their own sense of timing.

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