Gender and Politics in Interwar and Vichy France

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Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 257 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-969557-7.

Gayle Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). 266 pages. ISBN 978-0-8071-3616-4.

Sandrine Sanos, *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). 369 pages. ISBN 978-0-8047-7457-4.

Geoff Read, *The Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014). 289 pages. ISBN 978-0-8071-5521-9.

One of the defining paradoxes of interwar France was the coexistence of a deep-rooted belief in national decadence with the development of a wide range of innovative organisations, cumulatively mobilising millions of people, as a means of fighting this supposed decline. While women played a key role in perpetuating the belief that the Republic was deteriorating, created numerous politically-oriented groups and entered into the government as ministers for the first time, these facts have barely entered into scholarly analysis of the state of France's political culture. Beginning in the 1960s a narrative of stagnation tended to dominate scholars' interpretations of the interwar years. Reflective of the times, gender was absent from such analyses, as scholars defined 'politics' in certain ways and assumed that political actors were men. The influential political scientist Stanley Hoffman, for example, insisted that this was a period of stalemate, essentially the consequence of a

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failure to modernise during the Third Republic (1870–1940).[1] Hoffman argued that peasants, small business and the bourgeoisie coalesced to advocate for protectionist measures and resist social and economic reforms.[2] This conservative agenda was facilitated by governments that sought to limit economic change, which contributed to ministerial instability: during the interwar period, the French government changed forty-seven times, compared to thirty in Poland and Romania, nine in Great Britain and an average of one per year in Weimar Germany, Belgium and Sweden.[3] For Anglophone and Francophone proponents of the idea of a systemic crisis, the Third Republic appears fundamentally flawed, crippled by an intrinsic defect rather than a democratic government that opened spaces for dynamic groups and movements to effect real change.[4]

Three decades later, however, Kevin Passmore developed several powerful critiques of Hoffman's thesis that argue it glossed over significant political divisions that had led to key changes in France's political culture.[5] Gender played a key role in his reassessment. Seeking to broaden the category of 'politics' beyond government ministries and economic factors that contributed to policy decisions, Passmore argued that the actions of many French people – including women – constituted a type of 'social politics'.[6] Passmore, and others who worked in this vein, found that women in political groups used social programmes to promote their respective agendas.[7] This merging of social and political action demonstrated that women played a key role in influencing French politics in new ways.

Passmore's critique of the 'stalemate society' approach has since been bolstered by other recent monographs, such as those of Philip Nord and Alice Conklin, both of whom emphasise continuities between the pre-war and post-war periods. While neither take a gendered approach, they both reveal that questions over the vibrancy

[1] Stanley Hoffman, ed., *In Search of France* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

[2] For a recent historiographical analysis of the 'stalemate society' and its implications, see Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington, *France and Fascism: February 1934 and the Dynamics of Political Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 18.

[3] Jenkins and Millington, *France and Fascism*, 25 note 83.

[4] For Francophone examples of scholarship on the Third Republic's supposed intrinsic flaws and inability to enact meaningful reforms see Michel Winock, *La fièvre hexagonale. Les grandes crises politiques de 1871 à 1968* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1986); Christophe Charle, *La crise des sociétés impériales, Allemagne, France, Grande-Bretagne (1900–1940): Essai d'histoire sociale comparée* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2001) and Michel Crozier *La Société bloquée* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

[5] Kevin Passmore, 'The French Third Republic: Stalemate Society or Cradle of Fascism', *French History*, 7, 4 (1993), 417–49; Passmore, 'The Construction of Crisis in Interwar France', in Brian Jenkins, ed., *France in the Era of Fascism* (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 151–99.

[6] See especially Passmore, '"Planting the Tricolor in the Citadels of Communism": Women's Social Action in the Croix de feu and Parti Social Français', *Journal of Modern History*, 71, 4 (1999), 815–51.

[7] Laura Lee Downs, '"Each and every one of you must become a chef": Toward a Social Politics of Working-Class Childhood on the Extreme Right in 1930s France', *Journal of Modern History*, 81, 1 (2009), 1–44, and '"Nous plantions les trois couleurs", Action sociale féminine et la recomposition des politiques de la droite française: Le mouvement Croix-de-Feu et le Parti social français, 1934–1947', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 58, 3 (2011), 118–63; Magali Della Sudda, 'Socio-histoire des formes de politisation des femmes conservatrices avant le droit de suffrage en France et en Italie. La Ligue patriotique des Françaises (1902–1933) et l'Unione fra le donne cattoliche d'Italia (1909–1919)' (PhD diss., École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2007).

or decline of the Third Republic remain fruitful. For Nord, the interwar era was a formative time for the elites in social Catholic and nonconformist groups who went on the build the 'French social model' (much esteemed by the French themselves) that developed during the Fourth Republic.[8] Conklin maintains that the roots of anti-racism – the idea that race is a social construct rather than biological fact – can be traced to the politically-active French anthropologists in the 1930s, who helped popularise an idea that would become more widely accepted by 1950.[9]

Francophone scholarship also focuses on the question of what constitutes innovation, although it too tends to gloss over the influence of women and gender. Pascal Ory and Danielle Tartakowsky, for example, have argued that the left developed new forms of political participation and cultural programmes.[10] This line of argument, however, ignores important cultural initiatives that were developed by the right, which explicitly sought to intervene into French politics.[11] Indeed, the idea that the left was the primary source of innovation is gendered in the sense that Ory and Tartakowsky focus on rites, rituals and programmes that were dominated by men, such as demonstrations, parades and programmes aimed to develop writers and artists. Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that programmes developed by the right took a different form (physical education, social centres, summer camps) primarily because they were organised and implemented by women.[12]

While the four books under review here are all Anglophone works and differ dramatically in terms of subject matter, methodology and goals, the narrative they produce reflects a tilt in the historiography whereby historians use gender to reveal that the interwar period was less of an era of stagnation or decline and rather one of dynamism and innovation. Focusing mostly on masculinity, the authors explore the ways in which the formation of new ideas and novel forms of organisation contributed (perhaps in ways that may seem counterintuitive) to an increasingly regressive political culture. Reflecting the influence of colonial and transnational studies, all four monographs are deeply aware that France was a part of the wider world and show that gender – as an ideology, organising principle and practice – shaped politics in powerful ways. This review will proceed by summarising each book and then by analysing two themes that form a particularly important focus for controversy: the categorisation of political movements according to traditional left–right boundaries, and the nature and impact of racial thought.[13] The final section will

[8] Phillip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[9] Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[10] Danielle Tartakowsky, *Le Front populaire: La vie est à nous* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); Pascal Ory, *La Belle illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935–1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994).

[11] Caroline Campbell, *Political Belief in France, 1927–1945: Gender, Empire, and Fascism in the Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

[12] Campbell, *Political Belief in France, 1927–1945,* 23, Chapters 4 and 5.

[13] For nearly a decade, some historians have questioned the usefulness of the left/right dichotomy by urging scholars to move 'beyond Left and Right'. See the 2008 issue of *Historical Reflections,* 'Beyond Left and Right: New Perspectives on the Politics of the Third Republic'. Guest Editor William D.

further develop these discussions in order to draw out some key questions for future research. As we shall see, a gendered analysis of political groups reveals some cases in which their ideologies and practices converged and others where they diverged. Examining the extent of emulation between the left and right calls into question the scholarly value of developing categories and typologies that cannot withstand the scrutiny of historical contextualisation and lived experience.

Recent Work on Interwar French Politics and Gender: Innovation and Regression

Each of the following books uses radically different topics, questions and styles to examine the interwar and Vichy periods of French history. In *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (2012), Joan Tumblety uses an extensive and creative source base, which includes get-fit guides, the periodical press, merchandising, the writings of physical culturists, parliamentary debates, military training guides, medical training manuals and archival materials from sporting federations, political groups and the police, to analyse the relationship between the state and the individual through the body of the citizen-soldier. She demonstrates how 'the conviction that the degeneration of the French "race" might be reversed through the right kind of physical activity became institutionalized across French society through novel organisations and activities to an unprecedented degree'.[14] Analysing not only discourse and representation but also reception and practice, Tumblety argues that a small group of physical culture experts, most of whom were trained in French medical faculties and had links with the military, exerted a remarkable degree of influence in French society. Overwhelmingly influenced by degeneration theory and trained in neo-Lamarckian eugenics, these physical culturists believed in the 'principle of the inheritance of acquired characteristics . . . fatigue and nervous disorders engendered by intellectual or physical overwork (*surmenage*) could be passed genetically on to future generations' (6). Physical culturists agreed that although degenerating, French bodies could nonetheless be made stronger by improving the environment in which individuals lived and worked.

One of the most methodologically important aspects of Tumblety's study is her persuasive demonstration of the widespread impact of physical culturists' ideas and writings. They published a variety of get-fit guides that political groups from across the spectrum used as the pedagogical basis for the sporting societies they established in the 1920s and 1930s. These groups joined the physical culturists in making debates about male degeneration so pervasive that their concerns became a top priority in the Chamber of Deputies as politicians sought to address the problems of *surmenage*. Deputies quickly honed in on the physical exam given to all army conscripts (young

Irvine) 34, 2 (2008) and, more recently, Emile Chabal, ed., *France since the 1970s: History, Politics and Memory in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

[14] Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

French men were subject to universal conscription), the *conseil de révision*, which measured their level of physical fitness. After the First World War, it became an article of faith that French men were failing the *conseil* at increasing rates (although, as Tumblety points out, this was not necessarily the case). Perception was more important than reality, however, as physical culturists believed the failure rates were due to *surmenage,* which led the state to increase physical education in schools and shorten military service. Politicians and social commentators of all stripes began to practise physical culture daily and used the same language about muscles and ugliness as physical culturists (126–7). These widespread fears about the weakened state of French male bodies were then widely perceived as justified after France's defeat by Nazi Germany in 1940. The head of the new Vichy government's sporting commission, Jean Borotra, pointed to Germany's 50,000 sports fields and lower proportion of medically unfit conscripts as key contributors to French defeat.[15]

Tumblety persuasively explores how the physical culturists' claim that *surmenage* caused degeneration was based upon neo-Lamarckian eugenics and was fundamentally gendered. Regardless of one's political conviction, many believed that national degeneration was located in the male body, which, as Tumblety pessimistically concludes, was a stereotype that survived liberation and remained strong throughout the remainder of the century. For Tumblety, physical culturists focused more on the male than on the female body, embracing conventional ideas about women's nurturing nature and maintaining that women's bodies were destined for childbirth. Such attitudes perpetuated a conservative ideal of femininity and were driven by a pervasive concern that a depopulation crisis threatened the vitality of the French nation. In this vein, opportunities for women's sport and physical exercise were limited in order to emphasise women's alleged gentle nature and elegance (101–2). While the institutionalisation of masculine physical culture was new, the programmes that came about because of it increased the number of people concerned about the state of male bodies, which led in turn to greater social pressure for all men to conform to rigid expectations lest they be blamed for national catastrophes.

Interwar physical culturists played a key role in narrowing already conservative gender ideologies, which speaks in intriguing ways to the findings of Gayle Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite. The authors uncover an important new development that occurred in the mid-1930s: a transnational network of fascism that was gendered and set on destroying democratic politics. At once a biography of Laetitia Toureaux and history of transnational fascism, *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (2010) reconstructs the conservative gender norms embedded in French political culture by analysing Toureaux's horrific and highly-publicised murder. A naturalised French citizen of Italian origin, Toureaux was killed on the Paris metro in May 1937 with an eight-inch dagger stuck so deeply in her neck that its tip 'embedded in the marrow of Toureaux's spinal column'.[16] The murder

[15] Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body,* 207.

[16] Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 35.

was probably a professional hit, as the blow that killed her was delivered 'with a single, exquisitely accurate stroke that did not even knock her off her seat, let alone create much blood at the scene' (187). The question of who killed her and why frames the book, which is written in an engaging manner yet grounded in extensive archival research. Indeed, the authors intend *Murder in the Metro* to be an introduction to the Cagoule rather than a definitive work, which may be why it lacks the scholarly apparatus of the other works under review. Readers will need to look elsewhere for a rigorous engagement with the massive literature on far-right politics and data on phenomena such as arms trading and weapons caches. Instead, the authors focus on humanising Toureaux and demonstrating how she refused to internalise the conservative gender norms of the 1930s: loved by her family, respected by her co-workers, she was also a devotee of dance halls (*bal musette*). It was her desire to increase her own social standing by joining right-wing political networks that led eventually to her demise.

Toureaux's killer was probably an assassin from the Italian secret service working for Mussolini's Fascist Party. It is likely that he was provided with information about Toureaux's habits and routine by the Cagoule, a dangerous group of hyper-masculine right-wing French terrorists. Toureaux's involvement in politics was complex and suggests possible motives for her murder. She was a police informant who passed along information on the political activities of communists and socialists at the factory in which she worked. It is also likely that she was working for the Cagoule by running secret messages, following suspects they deemed dangerous and recruiting potential members. Finally, she may also have been an agent for the Italian secret service, passing intelligence from Paris to her Italian connections. The authors argue that Toureaux sought to live an independent life that was unusual for a woman with her socioeconomic background, enabling her to become particularly closely enmeshed in a network of fascist sympathisers. Unfortunately for Toureaux, these networks led to her murder. Her work as a spy made her vulnerable: in particular, she seems to have come into possession of sensitive information about a high-profile, politically driven murder that had happened in Paris several months before, and her killers were especially concerned that she might alert the police to the fascist activities of the Cagoule and Italian secret service. For this reason they murdered her.

Using files on the Cagoule that are located in several different police archives, police records on Toureaux's murder, and newspapers, Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite's primary argument is that historians have underestimated the significance of the Cagoule and downplayed the threat that the group represented to the Third Republic. Created in response to the May 1936 election of the anti-fascist Popular Front, the Cagoule was exceedingly well-funded, had one of the largest arms stashes in Europe outside of the military, was obsessed with masculine conceptions of virility and was willing to use violence – including murder, bombings and a planned coup in November 1937 – to bring down the Third Republic. Socialist Popular Front leaders such as Prime Minister Léon Blum (who survived an assassination attempt by the Cagoule in 1937) and Interior Minister Marx Dormoy (killed by Cagoule

members in 1941) believed that the Cagoule represented a serious threat to French democracy. During the Vichy regime, Pétain's circle included prominent Cagoulards, although the authors downplay an accusation made in 1945 by the attorney general (*procureur general*) that Pétain himself was a part of the group (209). Most importantly, the Cagoule had strong connections with Italian fascists and Spanish nationalists, who were at the time fighting Spanish republicans in the Civil War that erupted after the nationalists brought down the democratically-elected Spanish Popular Front in 1936. This 'nexus' constituted a fascist network that had the money, weapons and willpower to destroy progressive democratic politics (128).

Tumblety blends social and cultural history in her use of archival and published sources; Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite draw on methodologies from both social and political history in their analysis of police and government archives. In contrast, the final two books under consideration here focus primarily on discourse, while also highlighting the intersections between race, gender and politics. In her dense intellectual history of several prominent far-right thinkers, *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France* (2013), Sandrine Sanos argues that gender, race and sexuality must be examined together to evaluate the French far right and fascism, which was best embodied by the New Young Right (*Jeune Droite*). Formed in 1930 the *Jeune Droite* was a small group of intellectuals led by Thierry Maulnier, Maurice Blanchot and Robert Brasillach, who disseminated their ideas through journals, newspapers and literature. These published sources are what Sanos uses in her monograph.

Sanos adds to an already large literature on the *Jeune Droite* by maintaining that it redefined far right and fascist politics by insisting that aesthetics (particularly art and literature) were the highest form of political expression.[17] This is a bold argument, for to claim that a small group of men redefined radical politics would require an analysis of the reception of their ideas. However, Sanos maintains that this is a question for social historians of the right and favours instead an approach that uses psychoanalytic methods to analyse ideas themselves.[18] In the context of the work of Tumblety, Read, Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite, and the 'social' historians that Sanos cites (but does not engage with), it would appear that the influence of the *Jeune Droite* was located in their own small circles and several journals whose circulation, readership and influence remain vague. For Sanos, anti-Semitism and colonial racism were

[17] Sandrine Sanos, *The Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2013), 4.

[18] For examples of such social history, Sanos cites Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Samuel Kalman, *The Extreme Right in Interwar France: the Faisceau and the Croix de Feu* (Ashgate: Aldershot, England; Burlington, Vermont, 2008); Kevin Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). In using psychoanalytic methods to explore the intersections between psychology, the unconscious and health, Sanos favours in particular the work of Carolyn Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) and *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

central to *Jeune Droite* aesthetics and were intertwined rather than parallel in far-right discourse. Most importantly, according to Sanos, the entanglement of anti-Semitism and colonial racism was revealed by how the *Jeune Droite* discussed their overriding concern: the state of French 'civilisation'.

Like French physical culturists and the Cagoule, the *Jeune Droite* believed the very essence of French civilisation to be under threat. While the physical culturists sought to regenerate France by strengthening male bodies through physical education, and the Cagoule to defend France through hyper-masculine violence, the *Jeune Droite* focused on a novel type of aesthetics. Of the three groups, the *Jeune Droite* was the most extreme in how they cast the source of France's supposed degeneration: a fragmented sense of self, male bodies that had lost virility and a national community bereft of its organic sense of unity. The originality of Sanos's argument lies in her assertion that the *Jeune Droite* used a new language, that of abjection (the state of feeling disgust, lack and ambivalence), to express their vision of the nation.[19] For Sanos, 'abjection . . . tied together self and bodies to the social and nation in a political discourse clamouring for regeneration' (12–3). Abjection was a consuming force for the *Jeune Droite*, as 'they tried to find a solution to a fragmented and unstable self haunted from within by (sexual) difference' (13). The *Jeune Droite* asserted that the advent of the Popular Front was evidence that French culture was increasingly divided by 'barbarians' (Jews, colonial subjects, Asians, refugees) and had lost the cohesive force necessary to sustain a national community (74–6). While the *Jeune Droite* was a product of French culture where ideas about civilisational decline were pervasive, it was the concept of abjection that made them distinct. Leaders of groups that Sanos calls 'more traditional', especially the largest, the Cross of Fire/French Social Party (*Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français;* PSF), were obsessed by decadence and disorder rather than abjection (249).

The *Jeune Droite's* solutions to the so-called civilisational crisis reveal the political nature of cultural aesthetics as well as the role of far-right intellectuals in redefining French politics. Sanos, for example, contends that author Maurice Blanchot 'helped displace decadence, disgust, and abjection onto figures that were held to be both cause and consequence of the political and cultural impasse of French civilization' (128–9). While refugees, immigrants, foreigners and colonial subjects were all figures that decentred the French sense of self and suggested its increasing alienation from the nation, it was the 'Jew' that came to most perfectly symbolise the abject. Sanos argues that the writings of the popular Louis-Ferdinand Céline best exemplified how the Other symbolised the abject and was rooted in both anti-Semitism and

[19] Sanos seeks to use the concept of the 'abject' to build upon the work on the *Jeune Droite* by literary scholars and cultural historians. The literary scholars include Alice Kaplan, *Reproduction of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). The historians include Paul Mazgaj, *Imagining Fascism: The Cultural Politics of the French Young Right* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), Nicolas Kessler, *Histoire politique de la Jeune Droite (1929–1942): Une révolution conservatrice à la française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

colonialism. Céline wrote in his infamous 1937 anti-Semitic pamphlet *Trifles for a Massacre* (*Bagatelles pour un massacre*) that a 'Negroid Judaisation' had perverted the French male body and thus the nation's social body. Describing Jews as a product of miscegenation, he derided them as 'the garbage of Africa, the garbage of Asia . . . there is a Toussaint L'Ouverture in every Jew. I would send them all over there, to Saint-Domingue, the Caribbean; that would be a good environment for them' (174). In this way, colonial racism and anti-Semitism shaped Céline's writing, including his iconic 1932 *Journey to the End of the Night* (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*). While the *Jeune Droite* rejected Céline's racial vision as too biologically deterministic, his anti-Semitism found expression in a newspaper that grew in popularity under Vichy, *I Am Everywhere* (*Je suis partout*). In sum, the aesthetic politics of civilisation that the *Jeune Droite* promoted created the conditions for Céline's ideas to prosper and ultimately find expression in a type of fascism that prospered during the Vichy regime.

While Sanos focuses on the intersections between race, gender and sexuality in the beliefs of far-right intellectuals, Geoff Read offers an innovative study of race and gender in the eight major French political formations of the 1920s and 1930s in *The Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (2014). Of the books discussed thus far, Read's is the only one that gives equal space to masculinity and femininity; it also goes to the greatest length to integrate women's voices into French politics. In doing so, he uses the newspapers of each group (including affiliated women's newspapers) and the personal archives of their leaders to conclusively demonstrate that women joined and played key roles in all of the interwar political formations, albeit with varying degrees of influence. Moreover, he argues that the French left and right operated within a common political culture that used gendered and racialised language in debating issues such as access to citizenship, the implications of pronatalism and women's suffrage. All groups embraced the idea of masculine virtue as the basis of a 'new man', for example, but used it for different ends. The right sought to uphold a patriarchal organisation of French society through the idea of the male breadwinner (which presupposed that women would not work but stay at home to raise children), while the left promoted a sense of fraternity among men in the public sphere (which excluded women and reinforced stereotypes of their natural domesticity). Fascists and communists went further in their efforts to create a 'new man', and, Read argues, both embraced an anti-intellectualism that they saw as necessary to bring dramatic political change.

The *Republic of Men's* discussion of the political groups is occasionally somewhat disjointed, as Read lists the groups on a spectrum from left to right, labels them ('centre', 'centre-right', 'fascist', etc.) and discusses their primary characteristics and traits. For example Read categorises the *Croix de Feu*/PSF as 'fascistic right' and the PPF 'fascist' without providing the conceptual parameters for making such an assertion. While many historians consider the PPF fascist, there is considerably more controversy about the *Croix de Feu*/PSF, a debate which has spurred important methodological discussions over the extent to which 'fascism' is even a useful

concept.[20] In terms of gender and politics, Read's fascist designation gives the reader the impression that each group's gender ideology is the same. In discussing the 'fascist new woman' of the short-lived far-right league French Solidarity (*Solidarité française*), Read argues that 'the absence of such fascist new women in the much more significant *Croix de Feu* or PPF suggests the overwhelming hegemony of the traditional image of femininity on the far right'.[21] It would be interesting for the reader to know how Read would engage with the arguments of Kevin Passmore and Laura Lee Downs, who have persuasively demonstrated that the gender ideology of the *Croix de Feu*/PSF was complex and in many ways *distinct* from all other political formations in France.[22]

Such are the challenges of a comparative methodology, and the overall value of Read's comparisons is to highlight both how and why political beliefs shifted during the interwar period. Perhaps the most prominent change was gendered, and on the left. The Communist Party moved from an egalitarian rejection of biological essentialism in the 1920s to accepting policies based upon women's supposed 'nature' in the 1930s. In terms of race, however, the Communists remained committed to their belief in the egalitarian fraternity of all people. Read argues that the shift in the Communists' gender ideology came from the fact that they had to work with the most steadfast defenders of French Republicanism – the Radicals – as a part of the Popular Front coalition. The Radicals were the most regressive political party when it came to expanding women's rights during the interwar period because they believed that women were conservative and religious, and, if given the vote, would support anti-republican Catholic groups. Political parties on the left (Communists and Socialists) and the right (the *Fédération Républicaine* and *Croix de Feu*/PSF) all accepted some form of women's enfranchisement. Only the Radicals repeatedly blocked women's suffrage bills, which placed the Communists and Socialists in an irreconcilable position when they joined the Popular Front. Perhaps the best example of the shift in the Communists' position on women's issues was the disappearance of their support for equal pay for equal work in the 1930s, a position they had supported in the 1920s.[23] In this case, anti-fascism and women's rights were incompatible.

Altogether, these works reveal that interwar elites and people who supported different political organisations produced new ideas about masculinity and civilisational decline that were increasingly rigid. Moreover, these ideas furthered the conservative shift in French politics that was to place considerable pressure on those who supported progressive egalitarianism. Yet if the authors agree that

[20] See especially Michel Dobry, 'La thèse immunitaire face aux fascismes. Pour une critique de la logique classificatoire'. In Michel Dobry, ed., *Le mythe de l'allergie française au fascisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003); Kevin Passmore, 'L'Historiographie du fascisme en France', *French Historical Studies*, 37, 3 (2014), 469–99.

[21] Read, *Republic of Men*, 63.

[22] Passmore, '"Planting the Tricolor in the Citadels of Communism"', 815–51; Downs, '"Each and every one of you must become a chef"', 1–44, and '"Nous plantions les trois couleurs"', 118–63.

[23] Read, *Republic of Men*, 211.

there was something new about interwar politics and also that such trends are best understood through the lens of gender, they nonetheless disagree on the nature of politics itself in this period, as well as on the particular role of race in political thought and practice.

What Constitutes 'Politics'? Convergence, Divergence and Historical Contextualisation

In grappling with the aftermath of the horrors brought about by Second World War scholars sought a better understanding of the historical roots of fascism and communism beginning in the 1950s. They did so by claiming that specific political temperaments existed and could be explained by using classification schemes.[24] Many debates ensued over how best to define fascism, and by extension, the 'left' and the 'right'. Such methods led scholars to assert that a phenomenon like fascism had an essential nature that fundamentally distinguished it from other types of politics.[25] Over the past decade, however, monographs by Laura Lee Downs, Jessica Wardhaugh, Susan Whitney and others have been less concerned with definitional issues, favouring instead comparative methods that contextualise political groups according to their own time and place.[26] Each historian focuses on how rival political formations borrowed modes of representation and forms of organising from one another and used them for different ends. This newer work has uncovered surprising commonalities in terms of the form of politics (rites, rituals, symbols) and significant differences, often in programmatic content.

Making a significant contribution to this recent vein of scholarship, Tumblety insists that politics in French physical culture was determined less by traditional ideas of 'right' and 'left' than by gender and race. As she elucidates: 'if physical culture has an inherent politics, I would venture that it lies in the naturalization and perpetuation of the myths about sex-difference and "race" on which it always in this period seemed to depend' (230). In other words, there was nothing inherently fascist about eugenics. Communists and Socialists similarly believed that the French male body was weak (especially when compared with the German male body) and espoused neo-Lamarckian ideas to regenerate French masculinity. Read likewise uses gender to explore cases where politics lacked an essentialist identity. While he categorises the eight political formations that he studies along a political spectrum stretching from left to right, he also argues that 'fascism was a mimetic phenomenon, and the fascist

[24] Passmore, 'L'Historiographie du fascisme en France', 469–99.

[25] One of the first and most influential critiques of how the 'classificatory logic' impeded scholarship on French politics was political scientist Michel Dobry's 'Février 1934 et la découverte de l'allergie de la société française à la Révolution fasciste', *Revue française de sociologie*, 30, 3/4 (1989), 511–33.

[26] Laura Lee Downs, *Histoire des colonies de vacances* (Paris: Perrin, 2009); Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934–1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Susan Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009); Linda Mitchell and William D. Irvine, eds., 'Beyond Left and Right: New Perspectives on the Politics of the Third Republic', *Historical Reflections*, 34, 2 (2008), 1–146.

new man resembled his Communist counterpart in many respects. The fascist new man too was youthful, physically imposing, and prone to violence . . . in response, many in the centrist parties began to imitate them' (89–90). In this way, Read uses the concept of 'totalitarian drift' to describe the political polarisation of the 1930s. Politics changed as a moderate centre was hollowed out and groups and people shifted to the 'totalitarian' margins. Like Tumblety and Read, Sanos emphasises the idea of context — that individuals were aware of the language and ideas around them and adopted them to their own set of beliefs. Of the *Jeune Droite*, she maintains: 'they were consumed by similar concerns but translated them differently . . . each group defined its politics throughout the 1930s in relation to the others'.[27] In these ways, political beings and bodies were malleable and subject to their cultural contexts.

The compelling evidence that emulation was gendered and shaped each group's perception of its politics suggests reasons why the Cagoule embraced terrorism to overthrow the Third Republic. While Cagoulards were not alone in their fears that French civilisation was in crisis and that a feminised left and the racialised Other were to blame, no other group – and specifically the massive and powerful *Croix de Feu*/PSF – was willing to take such serious steps (including strategic violence) to realise their desire to destroy the Popular Front. Indeed, the Popular Front's election in April–May 1936 served as a catalyst for the Cagoule to embark upon a campaign of terror. In this way, the Cagoule's *strategy* diverged and became fundamentally different from that of other political groups. Moreover, most male members of the Cagoule were misogynistic – nearly all had mistresses, celebrated sexual conquests as markers of their masculine virility and shared women for sexual partnerships amongst themselves.[28] Again, gender was inseparable from politics in that a Cagoulard man proved his masculinity through violence and sexual dominance.

While it is possible to consider this as an example of Cagoulard 'politics' influenced by sex-difference, Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite conceive of politics in terms of fundamental ideological competition rather than modes of convergence/divergence. They argue that the case of the Cagoule reveals the intrinsic difference of the extreme right in both political form and political content, which is why they call for more work that explores 'the nature of the extreme right in pre-WWII France' (4). Such studies, they argue, should be informed by 'a more nuanced understanding of the complex political realities and competing ideologies that deeply divided the French population in the 1930s' (4). Of the four books under review, *Murder in the Metro* is the one most firmly grounded in lived experience and intensive archival research, which is perhaps why Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite see more of an essential difference between the left and the right than do Tumblety, Read and Sanos. Toureaux was brutally murdered directly because of her *political* allegiances to fascists, connections that she cultivated due to the material realities of her lived experience.

[27] Sanos, *Aesthetics of Hate,* 5.
[28] Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro*, 119.

The Impact of French Racial Thought

Race was interconnected with gender and at the heart of interwar politics in a number of key ways. Nevertheless, the authors of the books under review here disagree not only over how the French thought about race but also over the implications of racial thought in determining political change. In the minority, Read argues that 'with some notable exceptions – most obviously in the Communist Party – everyone accepted that races were a biological reality'.[29] In contrast, both Tumblety and Sanos emphasise that French racism was cultural rather than biological.[30] Even in the sites where the most virulent and vulgar racism and sexism were dominant, far-right intellectuals like Brasillach (who believed that Céline was an anti-Semitic prophet) and his newspaper, *Je Suis Partout*, rejected biological racism. As Sanos explains, 'far-right intellectuals held that the French nation was not a pure racial entity . . . most insisted that they refused Gobineau's legacy that had been so readily adopted by Nazi ideology and instead adamantly defined their own antisemitism in contrast to a German "racist" version developed through the prism of racial purity. They believed the French nation was made of different individuals held together by culture, tradition, and civilization. Still, their idea of the nation relied on a racialised understanding of Jewishness and of "culture"' (217).

In a similar manner, Tumblety maintains that 'racial purism was not a feature even of the most racist of French racial theorizing in this period' (7). Instead, she argues that physical culturists presumed that 'race' was white and that blackness was 'exotic' and beyond France's national borders.[31] Physical culturists thus perpetuated a 'hierarchy of race based upon colour and ethnic difference' that was gendered and embedded in colonialism. To illustrate the intersections between gender and race Tumblety discusses the influences of Georges Hébert, perhaps France's most significant physical culturist, whose pedagogical approach to physical fitness was adopted in sporting societies throughout France. His programmes and the science behind them probably reached millions of people. A leading primitivist, Hébert believed that the black male body was fit and strong because it lived closer to nature, while the French male body lived a modern sedentary life that rendered it weak and vulnerable to physical and intellectual overwork. Modernity had disrupted the natural state of things, as the white male body had (temporarily) lost its place at the top of a racialised hierarchy. Hébert and the many physical culturists who used his pedagogies believed that proper physical education would remedy this unnatural phenomenon and return the white male body to dominance. This racialised hierarchy was cultural determinism understood through the lens of eugenics: a man's body could be improved through physical exercise and changes to his environment. The improvements would then be passed on to the next generation. Women, on the other hand, experienced a higher

[29] Read, *Republic of Men,* 113; see also 14.

[30] On cultural racism in France, see also Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *La République raciale. Paradigme raciale et idéologie républicaine, 1860–1930* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006); Reynaud Paligot, *Races, racisme et antiracisme dans les années 1930* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007).

[31] Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body,* 7.

degree of rigidity when it came to biological determination, which is why Tumblety claims that they had fewer opportunities for physical education. As she suggests, 'the broad and deep purchase of binary notions of biologically rooted sex-difference in this period is striking: women were always addressed in terms of their maternal destinies, and muscles were only counselled if facilitative of that role' (13).

The ways in which elites used race and masculinity to construct hierarchies of difference between men, women, colonial subjects, Jews and immigrants are thus of central interest to Tumblety, Read and Sanos. One individual who felt such hierarchies acutely was Laetitia Toureaux. While Toureaux experienced sexism, she nonetheless navigated her way through powerful interwar norms that cast the nurturing mother as the pinnacle of womanhood in order to live the type of independent life she wanted. She internalised neither the biological conceptions of sex of the physical culturists nor the misogyny of far-right intellectuals. Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite put it this way: 'gender did not hinder her from leading an extremely independent life very much on her own terms, even if society at large disapproved of her lifestyle. Rather, Toureaux's ethnicity and class were the barriers she perceived to achieving the upward social mobility that seems to have been her ultimate goal' (75–6). In recognising that Toureaux was not representative of most people in the Italian immigrant community, the authors maintain that her life provides an entrée to a deeper understanding of radical right political networks and immigrant social communities. Three million foreigners in France in 1930 constituted 7 per cent of the population, of whom, nearly one million were Italian (11). While treated differently than North Africans in France (who numbered more than a million), Italians nevertheless experienced racism and discrimination. Pointing to the structural barriers that Toureaux faced, Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite explain, 'even as she aspired and worked tirelessly to achieve a respectable bourgeois French identity, she could fulfil this dream only by utilizing her experience and contacts acquired in the ethnically Italian and working-class environment she sought to flee. The very aspects of her life that she most desired to shed actually made her of greatest interest to the people she hoped would assist in her quest for a new identity' (74).

All four works convincingly show that the degree of racism that individuals and groups experienced and perpetuated was contingent upon their ethno-religious background and the specific context in which they lived. However, the authors are divided as to what constituted racial thinking in France and what types of racism were mainstream. In this regard recent studies by Carole Reynaud-Paligot and Alice Conklin supplement the books discussed thus far to reveal that there were a minority of powerful biological racists who contested the cultural racism held by the majority of French people, which ranged from the mainstream racism of the physical culturists and conservative political parties to the more marginal but spectacular racism of the *Jeune Droite* and Céline. Reynaud-Paligot explains that republican racialism was characterised by the belief that 'inferior races' only needed the proper education to gain status that was equal to 'whites.'[32] Republican racialism was thus cultural and

[32] Reynaud-Paligot, *La République raciale,* 2006.

contrasted with a biological racism initiated by Arthur de Gobineau (1816–82) and perpetuated by social scientists George Vacher de Lapouge (1854–1936) and Gustave le Bon (1841–1931). In the 1930s, as Alice Conklin demonstrates, many social scientists were interested in 'debating the problems of how to classify the human races'.[33] The biological end of the debate was epitomised by George Montandon, who, Conklin argues, attempted to 'recast in acceptable scientific terms the perverted ideal' of Gobineau's ideas about a pure master race.[34] Montandon's anti-Semitic writings in the late 1930s and early 1940s were influential and led to his appointment at Vichy's Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question (*Institut d'Étude des Questions Juives*) where he signed 3,800 certificates attesting that certain individuals were racially 'Jewish', which for them meant deportation and death.[35] For these reasons, Read may have overestimated the pervasiveness of biological racism in France while Tumblety and Sanos may have underestimated the influence of biological racism. Yet neither Conklin nor Reynaud-Paligot use gender in their analysis, which suggests that there is still much to be learned about how gender, racism and anti-racism influenced the politics of the interwar, Vichy and post-war periods.

Further Questions: Women, Masculinity and Politics in Interwar and Vichy France

Studying how masculinity, race and ethnicity were shaped by science, colonialism and transnationalism can certainly transform how historians understand French political culture. Taken together, the books under review here reveal that physical and intellectual violence increased during the 1930s, with particularly serious consequences for women and ethno-religious minorities. They also demonstrate that humane conceptions of what constituted an acceptable body narrowed, as ideal men were expected be lean and muscled while, under the influence of pronatalist logic, women were expected to prepare their bodies and minds for their natural destiny of domesticity and motherhood. Until recently, masculinity has been an understudied topic. For this reason, these four studies offer persuasive evidence of how narrowing conceptions of masculinity combined with racism to shape the conservative shift in French politics, leading in turn to widespread support for the authoritarian Vichy regime.

One of the themes emerging from this cumulative consideration is that politics was dominated by men – raising the question of how women shaped French political culture. To answer this question, we need to turn outwards to the broader scholarship on gender and politics during the interwar and Vichy periods, to which the books under review here contribute in an important but necessarily partial way. While Sanos, for example, claims that 'the varied and rich political history on the French right and far right has usually remained impervious to the scholarship on gender'

[33] Conklin, *In the Museum of Man,* 173.
[34] Ibid., 174.
[35] Ibid., 308, 316, 315.

(256), there is in fact a rich literature on precisely this topic.[36] Indeed, work on gender and the right/far right may soon rival scholarship on feminism and social Catholicism.[37]

Most research on gender and the far right centres on the numerically substantial and highly influential *Croix de Feu*/PSF. Political scientist Jean-Paul Thomas has shown that the *Croix de Feu*/PSF remains the largest political movement in French history; Kevin Passmore has recently suggested that it was the most important movement on the right during the Third Republic.[38] The degree of female participation was probably also unprecedented. Read repeatedly states that the *Croix de Feu*/PSF was distinct and that women's role in the movement 'was novel and should be recognized as such'.[39] In this way, Read joins other scholars in a lively debate over the role of gender and the French Right. He takes a position similar to that of Sean Kennedy, Samuel Kalman and several others in arguing that the *Croix de Feu*/PSF had 'overwhelmingly traditionalist' conceptions of femininity and masculinity that limited women's ability to formulate ideology, influence policy and design organisational structures.[40] In contrast, Kevin Passmore and Laura Lee Downs contend that focusing only on discourse and representation underestimates the degree to which women navigated patriarchal assumptions about their own domesticity and maternalism. While Passmore and Downs devote greater attention to familialism than to masculinity, they do show that women convinced *Croix de Feu*/PSF leaders to embrace a type of social action centred on politicised social services (youth programmes and welfare initiatives), the purpose of which was to draw the working classes toward the *Croix de Feu*/PSF's nationalist precepts.[41]

If Downs and Passmore show that politics in the 1930s were fundamentally gendered and that far-right women played a key role in changing conceptions of what constituted 'politics', how did women influence ideas about masculinity and civilisational decline that all four authors conclude were so pervasive? To what extent

[36] For similar statements critiquing the lack of gender history in studies of the right and far right, see also 9 and 254–5.

[37] For a recent survey of books on French feminism see Jean Pedersen, 'French Feminisms', *French Historical Studies*, 37, 4 (2014), 663–87. On social Catholicism see especially Anne Cova, *'Au Service de l'église, de la patrie et de la famille': Femmes catholiques et maternité sous la IIIe République* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2001); Della Sudda, 'Socio-histoire des formes de politisation des femmes conservatrices avant le droit de suffrage en France et en Italie, 2007; Bruno Dumons, 'L'Action française au féminine; Réseaux et figures de militantes au début du XXe siècle', in Michel Leymarie and Jacques Prévotat, eds., *L'Action française: Culture, société, politique* (Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2008).

[38] Jean-Paul Thomas, 'Les Effectifs du Parti Social Français', *Vigntième Siècle*, 62 (1999), 61–83; Kevin Passmore, *The Right in France from the Third Republic to Vichy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[39] Read, *Republic of Men,* 173; see also 217.

[40] Read, *Republic of Men*, 51; see also 61, and 63; Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français, 1927–1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Samuel Kalman, *The Extreme Right in Interwar France: The Faisceau and the Croix de Feu* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2008).

[41] Passmore, '"Planting the Tricolor in the Citadels of Communism"', 815–51; Downs, '"Each and every one of you must become a chef"', 1–44, and '"Nous plantions les trois couleurs"', Action sociale féminine et la recomposition des politiques de la droite française: Le mouvement Croix-de-Feu et le Parti social français, 1934–1947"', 118–63.

did women intellectuals use aesthetics to promote racialised conceptions of the nation as a way to lament civilisational decline? If women intellectuals were not interested in the idea of the abject nation, is that one reason that the ideas of the *Jeune Droite* were not mainstream? With regard to the Cagoule, since women played key roles in surveillance activities, how dependent was the Cagoule on women? Did women play any role in the Cagoule's strategy to embrace terrorism, and if so, what did their politics reveal about how individuals internalised conservative gender norms? To what extent did Cagoulard misogyny drive women away, thus depriving the group of key agents and thereby weakening it?

Pursuing one of the case studies in Tumblety's excellent book offers a particularly powerful example of how our understanding of interwar and Vichy politics can be transformed by examining women's role in shaping masculinity and race. Like Passmore, Tumblety recognises the significance of the *Croix de Feu*/PSF, arguing that its physical education society, SPES, 'is under-researched and highly significant' (15). In examining the approach to physical culture held by SPES elites, Tumblety also agrees with Read that women were marginalised and that the *Croix de Feu*/PSF helped drive the national obsession with the male body: 'despite the significant female element in SPES leadership and membership, much of the movement's rhetoric situated the quest for national unity and renewal on the site of the male body' (81). However, documents in the *Croix de Feu*/PSF's archives suggest not only that women actually played a more important role in SPES than Tumblety notes, but also that SPES itself had a more transgressive gender ideology than any other physical education group in interwar and Vichy France when it came to *women's* physical education. In particular, SPES leaders explicitly argued that gender was a social construction and for this reason emphasised women's overall health (rather than preparing their bodies for motherhood) and aptitude for competitive team sports (rather than sports that lacked physical contact).[42] The role of SPES in French political culture is just one case in which further research is needed, offering as it does an example of how far-right women and men worked together to undermine the regressive politics of the 1930s. Indeed, this case calls for a deeply contextualised understanding of the concept of emancipatory politics, as the very movement responsible for an authoritarian mass mobilisation against democratic politics also undermined the most dangerously regressive ideas about links between French bodies and the declining state of French civilisation.

Overall these works reveal that many French people who were interested in politics thought about gender a great deal and in ways that make the interwar period a time of dynamic innovation. Gender norms not only structured their lives, but physical culturists, political groups and far-right intellectuals all made gender central to their conceptions of politics. They used gender to shape the form that they believed politics needed to take, whether it was strengthening France by institutionalising a

[42] Archives nationales (AN), Paris, 451AP 155, Maire Presentation, 'Biologie elémentaire: Différenciation des sexes', n.d.; AN 451AP 153, Med. A. Bleu and Maire, 'SPES education physique féminine technique et programme', n.d.; Campbell, *Political Belief in France, 1927–1945,* 107–8, 118–9.

rigid ideal of the male body that reached millions, driving political polarisation by asserting that 'new men' and 'new women' were the basis of national rejuvenation, or conceiving of a new language – abjection – to describe the ills of a decadent nation. Scholarship on the interwar period is thus vibrant, as studies on women, culture, science, colonialism, sexuality, religion, disability and violence all have the potential to transform scholars' understanding of interwar, Vichy and post-war politics.