Women in Revolution 1789-1796

Author(s): Olwen Hufton

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WOMEN IN REVOLUTION 1789-1796 [1]

THE HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION HAS RECEIVED at best limited attention. If Marie Antoinette, Madame Roland and Claire Lacombe have inevitably found their biographers and hagiographers, the ephemeral *clubs des femmes* their panegyrists and their critics,[2] and the *tricoteuse* has been pushed into a respectable place in the most luxurious of pictorial histories,[3] the attitudes of working women and their revolutionary experience remain an enigma, conceded but passing reference even in works concerned exclusively with the attitudes and activities of the working classes. Yet their rôle was both unique and important and their attitudes demanding of consideration. This short study is an attempt to begin to redress something of the balance by isolating a type of woman on whom information abounds, the working woman of the towns; the sort of woman the *sans culotte* most likely went home to, the sort of girl the married soldier at the front most probably left behind; the woman of the bread riots, of the revolutionary crowds, the "mother heroine" figure of the *fêtes nationales*, carrying her banner with the proud device, "*J'ai donné un* (*deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six*) *citoyen*(*s*) *à la*

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[1] This work was undertaken in response to a request for a paper on this topic by the history society of Balliol College, Oxford in 1969. It makes no claim to be anything other than a preliminary discourse on an immense topic. It perforce leans most heavily on my knowledge of Bayeux during the Revolutionary period and in particular on material found in Arch. Dépt. Calvados L. *Registres du bureau de district de Bayeux*; LX *Assistance*; LM *Police*; and on parallel material in the Arch. Dépt. du Côte d'Or and of the Doubs to which pointers were given in G. Langeron, *Le Club des Femmes de Dijon pendant la Révolution* (Dijon, 1929) and H. Perrin, "Le club des femmes de Besançon", *Annales Revolutionnaires,* ix and x (1917-18), pp. 629-53, pp. 37-63, pp. 505-2, pp. 654-72. Both these studies were undertaken while Mathiez was professor in Dijon and range wider than the titles would suggest. The references to the economy of the poor of eighteenth-century France are largely based on the Arch. Dépt. of the Aveyron, Haute Loire, Indre et Loire, Loir et Cher and the Lozère, série Lx, *Assistance*.

Much of the inspiration for the work was found in R. C. Cobb, "Quelques Aspects de la mentalité révolutionnaire (Avril 1793 — thermidor an II)" in *Terreur et Subsistances 1793-5* (Paris, 1965), pp. 3-53 in which the attitudes, enthusiasms and preoccupations of the *sans culotte* are so imaginatively outlined that the task of giving such a flesh and blood individual a wife was much lessened. It is to be regretted that when this piece was written Mr. Cobb's *The Police and the People* (Oxford, 1970) which opens up so many other avenues for pursuing women in Revolution had not been published.

[2] The general bibliography on this currently fashionable subject is found in M. Cerati, *Le Club des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires* (Paris, 1966).

[3] F. Furet and D. Richer, *The French Revolution* (London, 1970), p. 208.

République" (I have given a citizen to the Republic) and ultimately the worn-out, disillusioned, starving hag who sank to her knees in the Year III to demand pardon of an offended Christ.

To appreciate the nearness of women to the Revolution one must understand their rôle in the family economy, an appreciation crucial to our theme. One must start with the recognition that the family economy of the working classes, whether in town or country, was their natural economy: the family needed the work of each of its component members to support the whole. Hence, in a rural context, the man who had sufficient land to provide for the wants of his family had sufficient to employ that family. In the event of his not having enough, he or his family or both must seek an alternative source of income. In the case of the towns this was doubly true, for nowhere could the wage-earner, unless he practised some highly specialized craft, expect to earn more than he needed for his own personal maintenance, the rent of a shelter and possibly the upkeep of one child — a fact which the *Comité de Mendicité* spelt out in 1790 for all who cared to read its debates.[4] Once this has been recognized, then the importance of the earning capacity, the labour and the sheer ingenuity of women and children becomes readily apparent. They were expected by their efforts to make a contribution and an important one to the family economy. Female labour can be easily categorized: for the unmarried, domestic service where payment was largely in the form of food and shelter but where a girl might raise enough to purchase the sheets and household linen which commonly constituted the dowry of the working girl; for the married, domestic industry in the form of spinning wool and cotton and the manufacture of lace.[5] The last employed the largest numbers at least in Northern and Central France and in country as well as town. The value of lace lay almost entirely in the handiwork, for the quantity of linen or silk thread involved was slight and no expensive equipment was needed. Highly dependent upon the dictates of fashion, a luxury industry with an aristocratic and an international clientèle, it was on the eve of the Revolution, the most flourishing female industry in France even if the lacemaker only received a pittance for labours which would ultimately take her sight. In towns, women made up the bulk of the garment trades — seamstresses, milliners, corset-makers, embroiderers, ribbon-makers, glove-makers and so on — and lastly, in any community, poor women, the lowest cipher on the employment market, performed the heavy and distasteful tasks such as load carrying. Nothing was too menial. They carried soil, heavy vegetables to and from market, water, wood — anything.[6] In the large cities, they found employment as rag sorters, cinder sifters, refuse collectors, assistants to masons and bricklayers — one can so easily multiply the examples. Where work could not support the family, then the mother had to have recourse to ingenuity. She taught her children how and where to beg or hired them out for a minor fee to other women who wanted to elicit pity at markets and fairs by the appearance of a large family or trailed her infants round from door to door with long and pathetic stories.[7] She had a whole legacy of mendacity to bestow if nothing else: the children of Rodez, Richeprey, Necker's empissary in the Rouergue declared, are taught individual hard-luck stories by their mothers to impose on the passer-by to demonstrate a special claim to assistance.[8] In the salt court of Laval alone, 2,000 women, mothers of families, were brought to trial annually for petty salt smuggling between Brittany, an area of free salt, and the Maine, against a mere 150 of the opposite sex.[9] The importance of the mother within the family economy was immense; her death or incapacity could cause a family to cross the narrow but extremely meaningful barrier between poverty and destitution.

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[4] C. Bloch and A. Tuetey, *Procès Verbaux et Rapports du Comité de Mendicité de la Constituante* (Paris, 1911), p. 77: "un homme valide peut gagner au delà de ses besoins et faire subsister deux ou trois individus avec lui" ("a healthy man can earn more than his needs and can give subsistence to two or three people in addition to himself"); but on p. 379, an older and wiser *Comité* admitted that a man paying tax equivalent only to the proceeds of one day's labour (about a fifth of the work force) could not do as much as that.

[5] The lace industry as a massive employer of women and girls has been strinkingly neglected in standard economic histories such as E. Levasseur, *Histoire des classes ouvrières et de l'industrie en France avant 1789* (Paris, 1900-1) or P. Léon, *Economies et Sociétés Préindustrielles* (Paris, 1970). On the massive numbers employed in the *généralité* of Caen, J. C. Perrot, "L'Industrie et le commerce de la dentelle dans la region de Caen", *Actes du 81e Congrès des sociétés savantes, 1956* (Caen, 1956), pp. 215-37. Unfortunately his study stops in 1792.

A contemporary feminist, Madame de Coicy, concerned to draw the attention of middle-class and aristocratic women to their subservient position in the household, emphasized the equality achieved within the working class home of the mother of the family because of her important participation in the family economy.[10] Indeed one might, considering the importance of her rôle, go further than Madame de Coicy, and claim for her social supremacy within the limited context of the family. Restif in *La vie de mon père* has painted a patriarchal society but it is comfortable landowning society which is thus depicted. In its lower echelons society was far from being so. The strains involved in keeping a family together were immense. Poverty is an acid: it corrodes or dissolves human relationships. But it was easier for a father to opt out than for a mother to do so — easier for him to return home via the *cabaret* suitably anaesthetized with cheap alcohol to the squalor of home and hungry children and easier for him as well to clear off altogether, to turn temporary migration into permanent disappearance, or in the words of the Curé d'Athis, "They lose heart: they weary of the strain of keeping a family on a wage barely adequate for one person and having done so they gather their few remaining garments into a bundle and hit the road, never to be seen again by their families".[11] The divorce lists of the Year II confirm just this factor: in Metz, for example, 268 working women sought divorce, the grounds, separation, the duration of that separation commonly nine or five years, coinciding perfectly with the strains of dearth in 1785 and 1789.[12] The results of the inquiry conducted by the bishops into the state of their dioceses in 1740 and 1770-4 are no less explicit: I am overwhelmed, wrote the *curé* of Bort, near Clermont, with women who come to me not only beseeching bread but accusing their husbands of threatening them that if they do not let the youngest children perish they will leave them and that alone they can manage but that even working all day they cannot feed their families;[13] while a *curé* of Tours described a hierarchy of hunger in which he referred not merely to rich and poor. Women, he said, are not the first to die but they feel the pangs of hunger first because they deprive themseves to feed husband and children, and he made the inevitable and lengthy comparison with the pious pelican of the *adoro te* who gave her blood to feed her young.[14] This is not to say that women did not drink, thieve, lie, prostitute themselves, indulge in every criminal practice one can think of, but that in general they clung more devotedly to their families and that this was widely recognized.

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[6] Mercier, *Tableaux de Paris* (Amsterdam, 1782), "Les portefaix".

[7] O. Hufton, "The Rise of the People", in *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. A. Cobban (London, 1969), pp. 297-8.

[8] *Journal des Voyages en Haute Guienne de J. F. Henry de Richeprey* (Rodez, 1952).

[9] A. Callèry, *La Fraude des Gabelles sous l'ancien régime* (Paris, 1882). Also Arch. Nat. AD IX 426 on similar practices in Touraine and Arch. Dépt. Ille et Vilaine C 3475 on the Vitré area.

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[10] Mme. de Coicy, *Les femmes comme il convient de les voir* (Paris, 1785), p.4.

[11] Arch. Dépt. Calvados, H. Suppl. 1308.

[12] J. L'Hôte, "Le divorce à Metz sous la Révolution et l'Empire", *Annales de l'Est,* 5th ser., iii (1952), pp. 175-83; the figures offered for Toulouse by M. Cruppi, *Le divorce pendant la Révolution* (Paris, 1909), pp. 150, 161 show that two thirds of those seeking divorce were working women on the grounds of abandonment.

[13] Arch. Dépt. Puy de Dôme C 897.

[14] Arch. Dépt. Indre et Loire C 304.

Indeed in time of dearth the importance of the mother within the family grew beyond measure. It was not merely that her deviousness, her relationship with baker, pawnbroker and priest became more important than before[15] — there was no laicized parish rate as in Protestant countries and the poor had to depend on the voluntary alms of the faithful administered by the *curé* — nor just her assiduity in rooting out what food there was but that when all else failed it was she who had the right to spill over into riot, not the father of the family. By the end of the *ancien régime* this was tacitly not openly expressed: indeed one perhaps has to go back to Aquinas for the last discourse on the right of a starving mother to thieve bread for her young; but it certainly was, under certain circumstances, permitted to her to do so with impunity. She had to do it collectively and it evidently had to be a very abnormal year. The sort of women who were punished after a bread riot up to and including 1789 were those who in the course of rioting had destroyed property or shown themselves violent towards persons. It was this criterion which allowed administrators usually to pick out a handful for punishment — not that their share of the pickings were any greater. She also had to be doing it for her children, though it was rare to see a grandmother called before the courts either.[16] I am not saying that men were never involved in bread riots — indeed during the Revolution they were markedly so — but that predominantly the bread riot was female, or rather maternal, terrain. One can make further generalizations about the women involved in these riots. In Bayeux, Troyes and Orléans those arrested in 1789 did not, with one exception, appear on the lists of those in those particular towns given an annual subvention by the *bureaux de charité*, so they were not paupers but women who in normal times could manage, proud women who were not counted among the destitute and who were fighting to remain so and to hold their families together.[17] There is little doubt the most

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[15] Often *bureaux de charité* dealt directly with the mother of the family and it was her piety, thrift and readiness to work hard if she was able which were the conditions for relief being given: Arch. Dépt. Lozère, J 570 *bureau de charité de Florac*; E 1000 *bureau de charité de Villefort*; GG 12 *bureau de charité de Saint Etienne Vallée Française*.

[16] Even after the bread riots of the Year III, administrators were reluctant to imprison women who had been violent but who had babies at the breast: Arch. Mun. Bayeux, *Registres des délibérations du corps municipal, 2-3 floréal an III*.

[17] Arch. Dépt. Calvados C 2643 and C 955; Arch. Mun. Rodez Cité BB 9 CC 318, "Femmes prévenues et condamnées pour sédition"; Bibliothèque Municipale Orléans MS. 585, "Evènements arrivés à Orléans de 1788 à 1804", cited briefly in C. Bloch, "Les femmes d'Orléans pendant la Révolution", *Révolution Française*, xxix (1902), p. 62-3.

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significant social division of the *ancien régime* was quite independent of order or class but lay between those who could make the proud claim, "There is always bread in our house" and those who could not; and within those who could not, those who could claim there was adequate in normal times and those who had fallen below. That the latter were recruited from the former there could be little doubt and that most were recruited in times of dearth when prices rose and the family parted with what little property it had to buy bread and probably ran into debt seems equally axiomatic. The woman of the bread riots owed her intensity to her appreciation of the need to stay on the right side of the line between poverty and destitution. She lived constantly on her nerves but for her there was a worse state — it might be called living on her wits, on the caprice of voluntary charity.[18]

It is with the type of woman who had to struggle to stay on the right side of the line that one is mainly concerned — though the destitute should not be forgotten: they comprised after all a fifth of the total population of France in 1790; but the destitute were not protesters, not rioters. The line between poverty and destitution was a psychological as well as a physical boundary, on the other side lay passive demoralization, the point at which the poor gave up and expected nothing.

The bread riots of the French Revolution then, whether the march to Versailles on 5-6 October 1789 or, to a less extent, the *journées* of Germinal and Prairial of Year III were *par excellence* women's days. Where bread was concerned this was their province: a bread riot without women is an inherent contradiction. How much they understood of the political implications is more open to speculation. Between October 1789 and Germinal Year III a lot happened to them however which was strongly to influence what ensued. It is their revolutionary experience in so far as it can be examined collectively that must now be outlined. Where did the Revolution impinge on the family economy of the poor: how did it alter the often delicate balance between poverty and destitution: and how far did these issues affect the attitude of women to Revolution?

[18] The line between poverty and destitution, between *pauvreté honnête* and *indigence*, was one to which moralists, physiocrats and administrators alike made constant reference. The first condition was to physiocrats and administrators inevitable (Bloch and Tuetey, *op. cit.*, pp. 315-16) and to moralists like St. Vincent de Paul, even virtuous; only the second condition was to be feared because of the misery and degeneracy it entailed. The aim of both *ancien régime* and revolutionary administrators was to prevent the merely poor slipping into the ranks of the indigent. O. Hufton, "Towards an Understanding of the Poor of Eighteenth-Century France", to appear in a Festschrift collection for Alfred Cobban (London, 1972).

In answering these questions it is difficult, given the research that remains to be done, not to be stranded between broad vapid generalizations on the one hand and a multiplicity of particularities on the other. One must at the same time distinguish between long term trends and sharp immediate results: not everything which seemed so blatantly obvious in 1795 had been so in 1790. No one had any conception then, and the question needs exploring much further, of the extent to which the economy of the poor was bound up with the abuses, institutions and society of the old régime. One does not know yet what happened to the 200,000 Breton families who had lived by salt smuggling when the *gabelle* was abolished. Cities such as Toulouse, Dijon, Rouen, Montpellier, Bayeux or Angers made cogent complaints of the disappearance in each case of hundreds of thousands of *livres* with the destruction of *parlements, états,* and the wealth of the church; money spent on consumer goods, as workmen's and servants' wages and as charity, and at least in one of these cases the laments were justified and it is clear that the economy of whole cities could be jeopardized if they were dependent upon *ancien régime* institutions.[19] If a veil of ignorance as yet persists here, one can state more categorically the almost uniform drying up of luxury industries, many of them the preserve of women — partly due to the emigration of a wealthy clientèle, partly to the suspension of international trade and partly to the emergence of much more austere fashion. The lace industry, for example, depended on fichus, cravats, ruffles, petticoat edging, the paraphernalia of a girl on a swing in a *fête galante.* The economy of the working population of Le Puy, Chaise Dieu in the Massif, innumerable Norman towns and several in Flanders simply collapsed: hence the Norman and Velay lace riots of the Year II.[20] Velvet, silk brocade, ribbons, embroideries — all these ceased to command a clientèle. In the classical gown alone is succinctly expressed the decline of at least five industries. Straight, austere, untrimmed by lace or ribbon, made of lawn, cambric or wool over a straight shift, it hid the waist and even put the stay maker out of business.[21]

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[19] The dependence of a city on the wealth of the church is pointed to in J. McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under the ancien régime, A Study of Angers in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester, 1960), pp. 103-28; and O. Hufton, *Bayeux in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 271-83. The dependence of a city on *ancien régime* institutions destroyed by the Revolution is shown in D. Higgs, *The Ultra-Royalist Movement at Toulouse under the Second Restoration* to be published shortly by Johns Hopkins. Arch. Dépt. Côte d'Or C 3687 *Dénombrement des citoyens de la ville de Dijon* shows that out of a population of some 21,000, 1,800 were directly employed full-time as servants by the church and court officials. This is without counting the lesser officials of minor courts, wig-makers, barbers and tradesmen dependent upon the business of the courts.

[20] On the dependence of certain regions on the lace industry before the Revolution, J. C. Perrot, "Le commerce et l'industrie de la dentelle dans la généralité de Caen à la fin de l'ancien régime", *Actes du 81e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes, 1956*), (Caen, 1956), pp. 215-17; V. Thuvenon, "La dentelle du Puy, la situation présente, son avenir", *Bull. Soc. Acad. du Puy,* vii (1922), pp. 1-34. On the collapse of the industry after 1793, Hufton, *Bayeux . . .*, pp. 241, 248; Thuvenon, *op. cit.*; and *Recueil des évènements qui ont lieu au Puy et aux environs depuis l'an 1775 jusqu'en 1815* (Le Puy, 1931), p. 322.

The second categorical statement that can be made is that ultimately when dearth and disease came in 1794 all the poor were to be affected by the total failure of French Revolutionary legislation on poor relief.[22]

This legislation was to be the culmination of the enlightenment, the creation of a social utopia in which the poor were to be legislated away. Reduced to its simplest what was aimed at was: the assumption of the property of the *hospices* which catered for the old, the sick and the orphaned as *biens nationaux* and the direction and financing of them by the state; the total abolition of almsgiving, and *bureaux de charité* and the creation instead of work projects to employ the able-bodied poor at wage rates slightly below those current in the particular locality, that is work for the unemployed adult male; lastly, an annual subvention to the fathers of large families based on the numbers and age of the children. On paper it was at the time unparalleled in the history of philanthropy but those who drew it up neither had an idea of the numbers or kinds of people involved — they imagined a problem of unemployment, not a problem of the living wage; nor had they any conception of the value of the property of the *hospices* — they imagined it was huge and that just as the property of the church would allow the financing of the constitutional clergy, so the assumption of hospital property would go a good way to financing both the new *hospices* and the work projects. Two years were spent in compiling some sort of reliable figures but when this was realized, it became apparent that the issue was not mainly unemployment but the subvention of huge numbers of women and children, figures so immense that the *comité* saw that it did not have the means to cope. Even before the war came to reduce government finances to havoc, the government tacitly admitted failure in this respect. The net result was that the traditional methods of according relief were destroyed without any substitute. Moreover, in its need to raise money in 1795 the government assumed the property of the *hospices,* and the hospitals were made totally dependent upon the state just at the time when the war was demanding every penny the government could muster; many, especially in small towns, were simply obliged to close and that on the eve of the epidemics which chronic malnutrition inevitably brings in its wake. The frail safety valves of a society facing dearth were taken out.

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[21] At Bayeux the lace-makers viewed the coronation of the Empress Josephine as heralding the first real break the industry had had since the end of the *ancien régime* in heralding the advent of a court with more sumptuous clothing which others would wish to copy.

[22] The historiography of this failure is extensive but scattered. There is no overall adequate study. L. Lallemand, *Le Révolution et les Pauvres* (Paris, 1898), is largely concerned with legislation as is M. Bouchet, *L'Assistance publique en France pendant la Révolution* (Paris, 1908). But there are innumerable local studies: e.g. E. Chaudron, *L'Assistance Publique à Troyes à la fin de l'ancien régime et pendant la Révolution, 1770-1800* (Paris, 1923); M. Accapias, *L'Assistance Publique dans le Puy de Dôme sous la Révolution* (Clermont Ferrand, 1933); J. Dubois, *L'Assistance dans le district de Bar pendant la Révolution* (Paris, 1930); Hufton, *Bayeux . . .*, pp. 236-49; J. Adher, *Recueil de documents sur l'assistance publique dans le district de Toulouse 1789-1800* (Toulouse, 1918); P. Rambaud, *L'Assistance publique à Poitiers, jusqu'en l'an V* (Paris, 1912); X Renouard, *L'Assistance publique à Lille de 1527 à l'an* VIII (Paris, 1912); etc.

Lastly, there was of course inflation and dearth which in some areas prevailed even with the maximum and certainly existed when it was withdrawn. Inflation and dearth which were to place a strain on the family economy of the poor in the traditional way and to demand that the women of the poor play their accustomed rôle but in circumstances which were markedly changed.

All these facets were glaringly apparent by the Year III but no one could have envisaged them in 1789. Indeed to do so is to pass from winter to winter without considering spring, summer and autumn. It is to imply that right from the beginning all looked bleak for all the poor: they did not necessarily, why should they, identify their fate with cleric and *émigré*, *parlement* and *états*. They did not necessarily see that they had any common interests with the indigent and destitute — quite the reverse. The hand that gave to some, under the *ancien régime*, or any régime, invariably took from someone else. The Trappist monastery of Bonnecombe near Flavin in the district of Rodez was in the habit of dispensing 300,000 *livres*' worth of bread annually to the destitute of the area but the grain used was drawn from the tithe paid in the main by the little landholders of the area.[23] Now the destitute lost their bread and the little landholders retained a share of the crop which they much needed. The bishop of Mende usually accorded an annual 10,000 *livres* in bread to the destitute of the town but much of this came from tithe and seigneurial rights paid by the poor in the country.[24] It all seemed and it all was incredibly complicated. It is not surprising that administrators of towns, districts and departments spoke half of the time in the future or conditional tense: when lists had been compiled, when

[23] Arch. Dépt. Aveyron 5L236 *Assistance Publique*.
[24] Arch. Dépt. Lozère, H. 495.

estimates had been submitted and approved, if old régime officials would speedily turn over the information which they had at their disposal, if the government would accept a temporary or provisional estimate while a more accurate one was drawn up — then such and such a thing could be done. It was merely a question of waiting: the period was one of adjustment: Rome was not built in a day. In the meantime indirect taxes had gone for good; there were two good harvests and bourgeois ladies (as opposed to aristocratic ones who had done the same thing in the eighteenth century but under another name) formed *clubs des femmes* whose function was to collect voluntary alms (the government pretended not to notice) to help the destitute until new legislation was implemented. The *club des Amies de la Verité et de la bienfaisance* of Dijon formed in 1791 is utterly typical.[25] The wives of department and district authorities and town officials met every Sunday; gave the populace an example of attending the mass of a constitutional priest and swore not to employ a servant or purchase from a shopkeeper or dressmaker who favoured a non-juror; and they ran lotteries to help families suffering from temporary dislocation and who might have cause to regret the old régime. One cannot as yet draw a clear picture of the working woman in 1790-1. In Bayeux, in Orléans, there are sporadic references in 1791 to women forcing *assignats* upon peasants at the market who reluctantly exchanged their produce for paper money,[26] but the image is shadowy, unclear: she is a thing of bits and pieces.

In 1792 she emerges in anger at the interruption of supplies, particularly milk, which the country failed to deliver to the town,[27] and increasingly her voice is heard as the protagonist of price fixation. From mid-1792 local attempts were made to stabilize prices and in Lyons and the large cities of the east, Besançon, Chalons, Vesoul, the impetus came from the local *club des femmes* whose recruitment expanded in the course of that year and changed rapidly in character from the rather precious early women's associations. Until they were forcibly closed by the Convention about a fortnight after the elimination of the Hébertistes, this was the common platform of the *clubs des femmes* and "any other business" was confined to the war effort. Indeed it is with the war in the spring of 1792 that one really gets an indication that women had come to have an emotional investment in the Revolution and an intense one at that. Something of this investment is reflected in the tons of household linen — often the main assets of a working class family, the woman's dowry intended to last for life — which were sacrificed as bandages for the wounded. Chalons gathered together 20,000 pounds of sheets for this purpose; Bergerac in the Dordogne ran a close second and when the deputy of the area asked the Convention for a public expression of thanks he was told that instances of such patriotism were too common for special mention.[28] Women of Pontarlier, a frontier town, contributed their wedding rings — the most pawnable piece of property any woman had — to clothe volunteers; in Besançon street walkers and women who had toiled all day turned up when they had put their children to bed to knit stockings for the soldiers at the front.[29] In the summer of 1792 when war fever ran high, innumerable addresses were drawn up and sent to the Assembly wherein women stressed their patriotism and swore to feed their children the right sort of milk: the milk of "bons principes, amour de la constitution, haine des tyrans" ("good principles, love of the constitution, hatred of tyrants"), or more specifically hatred of the Austrians, and the Piedmontese, milk of liberty and equality, or the uncompromising mixture on which the mothers of Clermont swore to nourish their young "un lait incorruptible et que nous clarifions à cet effet avec l'esprit naturel et agréable de la liberté" ("a milk we shall purify with the natural, sweet spirit of liberty").[30] Moreover and much more significantly, they undertook personally to conduct the internal war while their husbands and sons went to the front: the war against traitors at home and not only actual traitors but potential ones, the children of traitors. On the outbreak of war against Austria the women of Lons le Saulnier, Mâcon and the Côte armed themselves with pitchforks and pans and declared they would defend their homes and children in the absence of their men, and if their men were defeated (the Legislative took exception to the implication) then they would make a last stand.[31] The women of the district of Tarbes in the summer of 1792 armed themselves with kitchen knives and their children with ladles and set out to meet the Spanish. The women of

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[25] Langeron, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13.

[26] Arch. Mun. Bayeux, "Registres des déliberations du corps municipal", September 1791; G. Lefebvre, *Etudes Orléanaises* (Paris, 1963), ii, pp. 53-5.

[27] Arch. Mun. Bayeux, "Registres des délibérations du corps municipal", July, 1792; Arch. Comm. Troyes, D4 fol. 72 23 January 1793.

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[28] Moniteur no. 99, 29 Dec. 1793; no. 130, 10 Pluviôse Year II.

[29] The club at Besançon was in fact expressly formed to cope with the war effort: Perrin, *op. cit.*, p. 634.

[30] *Adresse des citoyens de Clermont Ferrand à l'Assemblée Législative*, cited by M. Villiers, *Histoire des Clubs des Femmes et des Légions d'Amazones* (Paris, 1910), p. 72.

[31] A. Laserre, *La participation collective des femmes à la Révolution Française* (Paris, 1906), p. 281.

Port en Bessin erected coastal defences lest the English should take them unawares.[32] As early anticipated victory turned into early defeat, antipathy turned more and more against those suspected of internal conspiracy. There is little to equal in hatred and vindictiveness the venom poured out by women on fleeing priests and the relations of *émigrés*. September 1793 saw a spate of professions and declarations, a popular theme "Comment peupler la terre avec d'autant de Marats" ("how to people the country with so many Marats") wherein women volunteered to breed little spies who would report on their playmates who were not being brought up on principles of *civisme* so that these unpatriotic mothers and children could be not corrected but *exterminated* and France's progeny could hence be purified.[33] Old ladies called out in Lady-Macbeth-type language that children at the breast of a traitor should have their brains dashed out. When Pourvoyeur, a police official, spoke in the Year II of the bestialization of women and compared them to tigresses and vultures anxious for blood, the language seems rather strong but the evidence to support it is not lacking.[34] Citoyenne Defarge, *tricoteuse*, the one stock image on which anyone can draw of women in Revolution, the hag knitting stockings for the war effort as the internal conspiracy is annihilated before her eyes, is a grim expression of the same thing and she is undoubtedly real.[35] In every outward manifestation in 1793 women were more frenzied, more intense, doubly gullible, doubly credulous, doubly vindictive and the only exception to this is that they were less publicly garrulous than their men — but here it may merely be a question of lack of opportunity.

But how far was all this emotion a cover for the uneasy realization that circumstances were rapidly deteriorating? How far was she transferring her discontent, seeking some scapegoat, some acceptable explanation for the suspension of trade, the drying up of luxury industries, the very evident economic dislocation which was by now only too visible? Initially war can seem to unite a society in opposition to a common enemy and anticipated victory can too often seem the panacea to current economic problems. Both respects are deceptive: the last doubly so. The unity involved at a national level is a dissolvent at a personal level. War strikes at the family: it takes fathers and sons and what death does not destroy can be left to the effect of a long separation. This was certainly the hard lesson of the French Revolution. Moreover, the *sans culotte* was not too generous in sharing his new-found political importance: as the backbone of the local *sociétés populaires,* his evenings in the autumn of 1793 and the winter of 1794 were spent outside the home, in endless verbal demonstrations of patriotism and gratitude for liberty.[36]. The *sans culotte,* Chaumette said when he dissolved women's clubs in October 1793, had a right to expect from his wife the running of his home while he attended political meetings: hers was the care of the family: this was the full extent of her civic duties.[37] Others have lingered on the pride of the *sans culottes* in his new-found importance in *société populaire,* section or as a professional revolutionary on commission, but in the meanwhile what was happening to his wife in isolation; how did she respond when he returned drunk on dubious alcohol and the vocabulary of liberty? Obviously the *sans culotte* in his home is a somewhat closed book, but at least one can know that the wife was steadily accumulating experience which was to sour her on the Revolution and all it stood for; that she was to turn against it sooner and with far greater intensity than her man, and in a way which was totally original, totally hers. In 1794 and even more so in 1795 she was to be confronted with the sort of crisis which was to try her particular rôle in society: with a famine which as usual was to hit her strikingly in her family and in her own health.[38] It was to confront her with watching the unit she fought to maintain spilling over into the ranks of the destitute. While her husband was still talking she in some areas had joined the food queues and the minute she did that her loyalty was potentially suspect. For a time it might well intensify her hatred of the internal conspiracy: nourish her antipathy towards malevolent land-owners intent upon starving the people for their own gain by this artificial dearth and hence increase the violence of her disposition. But her nerves, her patience, her physical strength were already being stretched. At what point would she turn against the administration for its failure to cope? Some evidently were put more to the test than others. If the maximum in 1794 largely worked in Paris and ensured basic food at a reasonable price, the same could not be said for the little towns and villages of Normandy, for example, where the reluctance of the peasantry to turn over their food at a fixed price coupled with a deflection of resources to feed the troops in the Vendée and the great gaping mouth of Paris put women into food queues from February 1794 while the black market thrived.[39] When real famine came with the failure of the harvest of Northern France and the great wheat belt later that year she had already been struggling for eight months to keep her family fed and that in a totally inadequate fashion. The death toll of 1795-6 was the result of *cumulative weakening* — not just the shortage of one year. The lifting of the maximum in December 1794 and the rocketing of prices only universalized a problem which in some areas was already advanced.[40] By May 1794, seven months previously, the women of Masannay were already demanding the annihilation of people over sixty in order to increase the ration for the young.[41] The first lace riots had already occurred in the Velay, and the women of Le Puy (if not the men who lived off them) were already identifying the cessation of the lace industry with the disappearance of the Church.

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[32] Villiers, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

[33] Arch. Nat., C 262 no. 580.

[34] Arch. Nat. W 191, Report of 26 Pluviôse Year III. Pourvoyeur found repellent the presence of women at executions "C'est étonnant à quel point les femmes sont devenues féroces. Elles assistent tous les jours aux exécutions". ("It is astonishing how ferocious women have become. Every day they are present at executions".)

[35] Visual evidence of this is found in Furet and Richet, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

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[36] Most *sociétés populaires* did not welcome women or, if they admitted them, did not allow them to speak: Villiers, *op. cit.,* p. 109.

[37] Cerati, *op. cit.,* p. 173-4; on the political machinations behind this closure, S. H. Lytle, "The Second Sex (September, 1793)", *Jl. of Modern History,* xxvii (1955), pp. 14-26.

[38] The point at which food crisis was experienced varied considerably. The artificial food shortage of the Year II provoked by peasant hostility to the maximum and the deflection of food supplies to feed the armies meant that the incidence of hardship varied whereas in the Year III real famine took over and suffering was generalized. The priorities of the Jacobin government and the problems of supply are cogently illustrated in Cobb, *Terreur et Subsistances, 1793-5.* Broadly speaking, the more important and larger the city, the better its chances of adequate provisioning.

The woman had both to procure the food and to cook it; all her husband had to do was eat what she prepared and judge whether he was hungry or not. What she got was often the result of *hours* of waiting. She stood in the endless queues, each one a hotbed of discontent hoping that when her turn came something would be left

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[39] Examples of small towns which felt hardship from mid-1794 were Bayeux, Hufton, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-25; and Honfleur, R. C. Cobb, "Problèmes de subsistance de l'an II et de l'an III. L'exemple d'un petit port normand. Honfleur, 1794-5", *Actes du 81e Congrès des Sociétés Savantes* (Rouen-Caen, 1956). An example of a city experiencing grave difficulty from the beginning of 1794, if not earlier, is Troyes (Chaudron, *op. cit.*, pp. 239-44), perhaps because of its proximity to the army on the frontier. Certainly small towns whose interests had been sacrificed to the larger cities had little ease from the Jacobin policy of price controls and hence little nostalgia for the maximum.

[40] Lefebvre, *Etudes Orléanaises*, vol. ii, p. 294 offers an excellent instance of a large city where the suppression of the maximum was the beginning of major troubles.

[41] Villiers revelled in this kind of story, *op. cit.*, p. 123, but similar instances are not difficult to find: e.g. Le club des femmes de Gevrey Chambertin, "Famille et clocher", *Bulletin paroissial de Gevrey Chambertin*, no. 187 (Dec. 1962).

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and even then her troubles were not at an end. Often what she was confronted with was beyond her knowledge or resources to prepare. Rice was first introduced to Normandy at this time. Some did not have the fuel to boil it; others did not know that it required boiling and merely soaked it in water — what both tried to eat was a hard gritty substance in no way digestible. Then there were the queues for which the only reward was a ration of salt fish which had already begun to go off with the rising temperature of the summer months and which when boiled yielded a stench like ammonia.[42] Just what of all this was a fit meal for a child? Even if the food ration consisted of vegetables, turnips or swedes, fears were not totally allayed for a pure vegetable diet was associated in the popular mind with the advent in children of summer diarrhoea which was a heavy killer of the young. And when malnutrition hardened into real starvation in 1795, when the government had abandoned price fixation and could be identified with the hardship, and when obviously the rich were still well fed, when the family's small saleable possessions had either been disposed of or dumped at the *mont de piété*, and when the riots of Germinal and Prairial had failed to bring relief, then the usual "sexually selective" manifestations of dearth became apparent. It is perhaps unnecessary to recall the classical manifestations of famine: the death of the weakest, the young and the aged, the increases in the number of miscarriages and the number of still births — but one should bear in mind that the latter are the fate of women, that the whole female body is a grim metering device registering degrees of deprivation. A premature termination of pregnancy or infertility through malnutrition are the best things under these circumstances to be hoped for: better than knowing that one is carrying a dead child, motionless within one or that if one gives birth one will not have the milk to feed it. The mothers of Caen in 1795 were allaying the cries of their new born children with rags dipped in water[43] — that way they did not take long to die. Then there was watching one's children grow too feeble to cry. The *silence* of the hungry household was something that struck St. Vincent de Paul in 1660 but it also moved observers in 1795.[44] And in Rouen, in Bayeux, in Troyes the female death toll was far higher than the male — for the reasons suggested by the *curé* of Tours some twenty years previously.[45] If death usually came to the adult from a minor disease playing on a weak body, the chances of confining that disease within the hospitals was non-existent. Even under the *ancien régime*, these were fairly frail institutions catering only for the poor urban sick but the nominal absorption of their property in the Year II by the government and the suspension of payments to them meant that except in the large cities where departmental authorities stalled on putting the property up for sale, the hospitals just closed: ceased to operate. Indeed, 1795-6 became legendary not only for the hardness of the times but for the total lack of any organs of public relief. The mayor of Toulouse in 1816 challenged a group of petitioners about the inadequacy of poor relief with the words: do you prefer the charity of the *philosophes?* He needed to say no more: *la charité des philosophes* was no charity.[46]

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[42] On the diet of the poor of Rouen in this period, Cobb, "Disette et Mortalité, La crise de l'an III et de l'an IV à Rouen", *Terreur et Subsistances*, pp. 309, 339-40; Hufton, *Bayeux*, p. 234.

[43] Arch. Nat. F$^{\text{ic}}$ III Calvados 7.

[44] *Ibid.*: report of 20 Brumaire An IV.

There can be no over-emphasizing that the revolts of Germinal and Prairial mark that frontier, that psychological watershed, that last weapon in the armoury — whichever metaphor one chooses to express the final woman's protest before watching herself and her family spill over into that silent twilight world of the weak and the worn out which is so difficult to fathom because so largely inarticulate: it was her last defence of her human relationships. One can perhaps discount the accompanying cries of *vive le roi*, or the Parisian one for the days of Robespierre, the rivers of blood and the time of cheap bread or the Bayeux one of "quand le bon Dieu était là nous avions du pain" ("when God was there we had bread"), as more an expression of opposition to the present than hankering for the past; though one should take more seriously the women's cries for peace in Rouen and even more in the frontier towns of the East like Besançon and Vesoul where war fever had run so high in 1792. The cry for peace was one for normalcy: to call a halt — their great grandmothers had done the same in 1709 under exactly the same physical conditions.

The aftermath of Germinal had been indicated in terms of suicides, the daily occurrence of women and children fished out of the Seine, economically and emotionally bankrupt,[47] but one might more profitably linger on another aspect: the revival of popular catholicism, perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of popular history in the last five years of the eighteenth century and one in which the rôle of women was decisive.

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[45] The death toll of children was of course the highest of all. On the situation in Rouen, Dieppe and Havre, see Cobb, "Disette et Mortalité . . .", pp. 339-42; the death rate at Bayeux rose overall by some 30% but that of adult males was scarcely affected: Hufton, *Bayeux*, p. 235 and Arch. Dépt. Calvados, Etat Civil, Bayeux, Registres 32 and 33; similarly in the case of an overall rise of some 35% at Troyes, Arch. Dépt. Aube 40H.

[46] D. Higgs, "Politics and Charity at Toulouse, 1750-1850", to appear in the Festschrift collection for Alfred Cobban. According to Dr. Higgs the failure of the Revolution to make any provision for the poor, and the pauperization of the once proud and independent was a fact much capitalized by Restoration governments.

The intensity of religious fervour that emerged from 1792 was without parallel in the eighteenth century. Much remains to be explored of the quality of religious belief under the *ancien régime*: indications point to a general formal adherence to the faith without the existence of any marked degree of fervour and of areas where even formal adherence was diminishing — perhaps that most particularly in the cities which attracted the rural immigrant and where the pattern of religious worship was most easily eroded.[48] Certainly anti-clericalism could always find popular support in the towns perhaps because here the wealth of the higher clerics was most conspicuously on view. Moreover the anti-clericalism which surrounded the implementation of the civil constitution of the clergy was an end in itself: it was not part of a wider movement, part of a programme for the achievement of religious purity. Latreille noted the falling off of observance in the towns from mid 1791 when clerics became involved with the pros and cons of oath-taking and the framework of religious worship became clouded.[49] Without doubt, the equation of "non-juror" with "traitor", the result of the panic surrounding the outbreak of war, made the non-juring church the object of popular violence in which women undoubtedly played their part.[50] The constitutional church never secured any widespread loyalty and a couple of years' absenteeism from worship was the background to the image breaking and desecration of places of worship in which women were often predominant during the

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[47] Cobb, "Disette et Mortalité", p. 315 and the footnote; G. Duval, *Souvenirs thermidoreans* (Paris, 1843), and R. C. Cobb, *The Police and the People* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 161-2.

[48] This is a line of research on which much work is heralded in the imminent future (*Annales, E.S.C.*, xxv, 1970, "*Enquête Ouverte*".) in response to suggestions made by G. Le Bras, *Etudes de Sociologie Religieuse* (Paris, 1955), 2 vols. in which pointers to a decline in religious fervour in the towns at the end of the *ancien régime* are indicated; vol. i, pp. 51, 68; they are also made in P. Deyon, *Amiens, Capitale Provinciale* (Mouton, 1967), p. 425 and *Histoire de Bordeaux*, vol. iv (Bordeaux, 1968), pp. 140-1.

[49] A Latreille, *L'Eglise Catholique et la Révolution française* (Paris, 1964), p. 108.

[50] E. Sévèstre, *La Déportation du clergé orthodoxe pendant la Révolution* (Paris, 1915), p. 192; Uzureau, "La Déportation ecclésiastique dans le Calvados, 1792", *Revue Catholique de Normandie* (1931).

Jacobin period.[51] In short, the women of this study could feel they had actively participated in the disintegration of the Roman Catholic Church: they had done enough to feel guilty, and the existence of this guilt is crucial to an appreciation of why, in 1796, women ended up on their knees and from then on worked wholeheartedly for the restoration of formal religion within France, the Roman Catholic religion of the *ancien régime*, but endowed with a new vigour from below.[52]

When Citoyenne Defarge, ex-*tricoteuse*, put down her needles and reached for a pair of rosary beads, an image to linger on if ever one was, she had to search out her priest and even force the opening of a church. From late 1795 onwards, even in cities which had demonstrated the most intense anti-clericalism, like Paris, this is exactly what women did. They brought back the formal worship of God. Nor can this be shrugged off superficially as both Aulard and Mathiez did in terms of women turning from the *fanatisme* of their particular clubs to the *fanatisme des prêtres*. This is only a half truth. They were not trying to revenge themselves on the Revolution. The cycle of dearth, disease, devotion is a common enough one: one has only to think what fruitful ground the hardship of 1816 would provide for the priests of the mission, but in 1795 there was something extra, contrition. The catholicism of 1795-onwards was the visceral kind: it owed its strength to the rigours of the times, the imminence of death from disease or undernourishment, disillusionment, shame, failure, the sense of contrition which sought as solace the *confiteor* and the *viaticum* and as such the sort of expiatory religion which defies rooting out. Women at Vidouville, in the Calvados, queued to have their tongues scraped free of the contamination of the masses of a constitutional priest and ensuing blasphemies;[53] the wife of a fishmonger of St. Patrice, also in the Calvados, scrubbed out the parish church which her husband had bought for a song as national property to use as a fishmarket and which probably represented his one solid gain from the Revolution, and she and the women of the parish handed it back to a non-juror emerging from exile while her husband couched an impotent letter of protest to an equally impotent departmental authority.[54] The women of Coutances fought with each other over whose babies should be baptized first and the priest in question resolved the problem by a personal estimate of which ones were likely to be dead before he reached the end of the queue; he misjudged in two cases but he sprinkled water notwithstanding on their little corpses. No government could hope to eradicate a church drawing on emotions which ran as deep as this: there was certainly nothing so fundamental in circulation in the last fifty years of the *ancien régime.* Such a movement had its vicious aspects. It was an essential accompaniment of the White Terror, as in the diocese of Le Puy where women sought out local Jacobin leaders, clawed them to death or perhaps ripped them limb from limb while the churches of that most clerical of cities were triumphantly reopened. But oftener the return to religion was quieter, less obtrusive, more symptomatic of the desire for a return to a way of life remembered.[55]

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[51] Perrin, *op. cit.*, pp. 636, 649. In Besançon a midwife, a traditionally anti-clerical figure, led an attempt to lynch a non-juror: Bisson, *Histoire Eccléasitique du diocèse de Bayeux pendant la Révolution*, p. 20.

[52] On the return to religion of townswomen: C. Bloch, Les femmes d'Orleans . . . , p. 66; R. Patry, *Le régime et la liberté des cultes dans le départment du Calvados pendant la première séparation, 1795-1802* (Paris, 1921), p. 60; Hufton, *Bayeux*, pp. 262-4; M. Reinhard, *Le départment de la Sarthe sous le Directoire* (Paris, 1935); Cobb, "Politique et Subsistances au Havre", *Terreur et Subsistances*, p. 251.

[53] Bibl. Chanoine Deslandes, Bayeux: correspondence of the episcopal vicars, an V - an VII.

Women perhaps turned to the church too for another fundamental reason: revolution, war, famine — these are the dissolvents of the family while the church stood at least for its integrity, its sanctity; the hallowing of birth, marriage, death; the cement of something much more intrinsic than the social system. When the cards were down and the scores chalked up, what really was the cumulative experience of the working woman from 1789-95? How else could she assess the Revolution except by examining her wrecked household; by reference to children aborted or born dead, by her own sterility, by the disappearance of her few sticks of furniture, by the crumbling of years of effort to hold the frail family economy together and what could her conclusion be except that the price paid for putative liberty had been far too high?

University of Reading *Olwen Hufton*

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[54] Arch. Dépt. Calvados, "Comptes décadaires", 19 Thermidor Year V.

[55] There was of course nothing incompatible in violence accompanying a religious revival. On women in the White Terror and personal vendettas transmitted by them down the generations, Cobb, *The Police and the People,* p. 146.