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# Revolution and Republicanism: Women Political Philosophers of Late Eighteenth-Century France and Why They Matter

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I present the arguments of three republican women philosophers of eighteenth-century France, focusing especially on two themes: equality (of class, gender, and race) and the family. I argue that these philosophers, Olympe de Gouges, Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland, and Sophie de Grouchy, who are interesting and original in their own right, belong to the neo-republican tradition and that rediscovering their texts is an opportunity to reflect on women's perspectives on the ideas that shaped our current political thought.

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## 1. Republicanism, Context, and the Women

Feminist philosophers have been somewhat reluctant to welcome or participate in the revival of republicanism in contemporary political philosophy. Their reluctance is in part accounted for by a number of historical portrayals of republicanism as a political construction by men and for men. This seems true, in particular, of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's very sexist brand of republicanism. These portrayals, however, are drawn from a rather selective memory of the past—one that leaves out women philosophers' contributions to republican ideals and arguments. The work of bringing these philosophers back into the history of republicanism, and in so doing presenting a more accurate and less masculine picture of that school of thought, has already begun with Mary Wollstonecraft [Halldenius 2015] and Catharine Macaulay [Green 2012; Coffee 2017] as the focus of recent and on-going research. In this essay, I will argue that discussions of republicanism will be enriched by the recovery of a different set of women philosophers, those of the French Revolution. I will show how three women, Olympe de Gouges (1748–93), Marie-Jeanne Phlipon (Manon) Roland (1754–93), and Sophie de Grouchy, Marquise de Condorcet (1764–1822), by engaging—sometimes very critically—with Rousseau's work, contributed to developing republican arguments that are remarkably modern in their treatment of gender, class, race, and the family.

It is not surprising that the French Revolution should have influenced the political writings of women philosophers. Women had always written philosophical texts, and

during the revolutionary period their philosophical activity increased significantly. But what is particularly interesting, and what I will be discussing here, is a sub-category of women who wrote political philosophy. Olympe de Gouges, Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland, and Sophie de Grouchy belonged to the republican philosophical tradition, a group of philosophers who, since the Renaissance, had attempted to revive a number of Roman republican ideals.

One way in which Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy belonged to the republican tradition was by holding that liberty primarily meant non-domination. They argued that it was impossible for a dominated individual to be either a good citizen or a good person, which was a standard view for eighteenth-century republicans. However, their views were distinctive in two ways. First, unlike most of their contemporaries, they did not focus only on the domination of the poor by the rich, or of the people by the king, but also on the way women's citizenship could be established by ending the domination of men and society over them. Second, not being bound to the perspective of the male citizen in their analysis of domination led them to consider the case of slavery—in the case of Olympe de Gouges, extensively. Here I will present and discuss the distinctive aspects of these three philosophers' political writings and show how they may help illuminate some aspects of current debates on republicanism.

Are there any reasons why Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay are now being included in the republican canon but Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy are not?<sup>1</sup> One misconception may have led to their not being included, namely the thought that these women were activists rather than philosophers, and that no matter how interesting they are from a historical point of view, they do not belong in the philosophical canon.

While there were few women thinkers of the seventeenth century or early eighteenth century who wrote political philosophy,<sup>2</sup> by the end of the eighteenth century, this was definitely no longer the case. Women philosophers of that period, like their male counterparts, wrote in a variety of genres and media, responding to earlier political writers, and offering original philosophical analyses of the events unfolding around them.

Why this surge of political writings by women? One reason has to be a general increase in publications by women. Carla Hesse [2001] notes that there was a noticeable rise in publications by women during the revolutionary period, in particular, in France. Between 1789 and 1800, there were a total of 329 publications by women. In the previous three decades, the numbers ranged between 55 and 78. And between 1811 and 1821, it came down to 299 (presumably because many of the writers of the Revolutionary years had been guillotined).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although both Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay were connected in various ways to the French Revolution, and in particular influenced the political thought of the Girondists, who were the political party that Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy were affiliated to, I will not discuss them here as I choose to focus on their French counterparts.

<sup>2</sup> Women have always written political philosophy—one of the earliest fragments signed by a woman's name, Perictione I's 'On the Harmony of Women' [Plant 2004: 76–8] touches on home politics and the possibility of women being rulers. Nonetheless, there were fewer women writing political philosophy before the eighteenth century, as witness Broad and Green [2009] and Green [2014]'s similar sized companion volumes, *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700*, and *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1700–1800*.

<sup>3</sup> Hesse [2001: 32, 37] reports that in England, while there was a regular increase of women in print, it was not as dramatic as in France. Between 1780 and 1789, 166 women were published, and the following decade, 191 [*ibid.*: 39].

While women of the French Revolution did write, much of the writing done was journalistic, or took the form of speeches given at the many political forums available at the time. This is perhaps why writers from that period tend to be neglected by philosophers. But such an argument, it seems, would not constitute a good reason for leaving those philosophers out of republican studies. On the contrary, because the philosophers of the French Revolution were engaging with the concrete idea of a republic, and coming to grips with what it could mean, politically, to dispense with arbitrary power, studying their texts affords the perfect opportunity to do history in the manner favoured by historians of republican thought, that is, contextually. But if we cannot dismiss writings simply because they are responding to current events, there are other attributes of such writings that may make them unsuitable for inclusion in the philosophical canon. Below I discuss two such aspects and show that in the case of the philosophers I discuss, the objections do not apply.

There is, perhaps, a tendency to assume that writers who were politically active in the revolution could not also find the time to write ‘proper’ philosophy. This is what Mary Shelley [1840: 266] assumed of Roland, when she wrote that

Her fame rests even on higher and noble grounds than that of those who toil with brain for the instruction of their fellow creatures. She acted. What she wrote is more the emanation of the active principle, which, pent in a prison, betook itself to the only implement, the pen, left to wield, than an exertion of the reflective portion of the mind.

This was certainly not a fair assessment of Roland, who wrote thousands of pages of memoirs, historical, and personal, as well philosophical essays, letters, and so on. Marie-Jeanne Phlipon Roland, although she was also a prolific writer, did not help Hesse’s numbers grow, because most of her work was unpublished till several years after her death. Nonetheless, her *Historical Notices* [Roland 1827] and much of her *Private Memoires* [Roland 1864], as well as several letters to the newspaper editor Brissot (some of which he published anonymously) constitute exactly the sort of applied philosophical reflection, or ‘live political debate’ Quentin Skinner [1969] advises us to look for in documents that are outside the canon, in order to situate philosophical thoughts in their historical context. Olympe de Gouges, although she is remembered mostly for her *Declaration of the Rights of Women* [Gouges 2014: 57–112] and perhaps for the pamphlet which led to her execution, *Les Trois Urnes* (The Three Urns) [Gouges 1793], wrote and published over 150 texts—plays, novels, novels, revolutionary pamphlets, newspaper articles, and short philosophical treatises.<sup>4</sup>

Sophie de Grouchy, Marquise de Condorcet, also did little to swell up the ranks of published women of the Revolution, as she published only one work in her own name, *The Letters on Sympathy* [Grouchy 1798; Bernier and Dawson 2010]. The *Letters*, written during the Terror but published in 1798, as an appendix to Grouchy’s translation of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* [Smith 2002], offer a political commentary within a more general philosophical discussion. That is, Grouchy uses her own philosophical engagement with Smith to deduce a number of observations and recommendations for the rebuilding of France along republican principles. In shorter journalistic works that she published anonymously Grouchy also defended republicanism at a time when it was not yet accepted as a possible solution for France.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, some of these texts were short: pamphlets had to be printed on a poster which could then be pasted throughout the city. But even counting these as journal articles would leave Gouges with a nice long CV, especially considering she died in her thirties.

<sup>5</sup> See Bergès [2015] for a description of these articles and arguments for their attribution.

One further possible justification for not studying journalistic writings *qua* philosophical writings might be that they were polemical tools aimed at a particular set of reforms rather than abstract universal reflections on the human condition and society. This is misguided at least in the following sense. Some proposals for political or social reform are not philosophical, in that they do not take the time to defend the principles on which the proposed reforms are based, but rely on previous attempts at justifications (or in some cases assume that no justification is needed). This is mostly true of contemporary politics. A position is assumed, as either liberal or conservative, or something else, and serves as a set of often ill-defined first principles from which practical proposals are derived. During the Revolutionary period, however, these positions had not yet been defined in France. Even though England already had the Whigs and Tories, France was in the process of creating these distinctions, with parties being named after parts of France that had elected their members (the Girondists), meeting places (the Jacobins), or position in the assembly room (the Montagnards—at the top—and the Left and Right on either side). Alternatives to monarchy were being considered, such as the models of England's constitutional monarchy and America's federal republic, but also older models of democracy and republics of ancient Greece and Rome. This meant that belonging to a group or a party did not come with a set of ready-made, previously defended first principles, but that in order to be persuasive, a political writer had to put forward a philosophical defence of the position they were drawing their proposals from. In that sense, any political writer was also a philosopher.

The women philosophers of late eighteenth-century France I am concerned with had, to a much larger extent than ever before, a political voice. They were also typically and openly concerned with problems relating to their position as women, and they were powerful and influential enough that they were sometimes able to convince their readers to push certain reforms. Not only does reading these authors constitute an important historical lesson in what women can and will do when they are not repressed, but it is also a valuable philosophical resource, one which enables us to trace the feminist critical engagement with current and contested political theories to a much earlier time.

## 2. Adapting and Subverting Rousseau's Republicanism

Republicanism is a philosophical perspective derived from the Romans (Livy, Cato, Cicero, Plutarch).<sup>6</sup> It is a philosophical tradition that has a longer history than liberalism, or libertarianism, and perhaps for that reason it is harder to pinpoint its leading principles, even at a particular time in its history. For the purpose of this essay, I will understand the principles of eighteenth-century republicanism as (roughly) the following: an understanding of freedom as independence or non-domination, a virtue-led politics, and an emphasis on political participation.

First, republicanism claims that citizens must be free from domination. To be dominated does not necessarily imply that one's freedom is restricted by external

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<sup>6</sup> Neo-Roman republicanism, which places an emphasis on freedom as non-domination, and is defended by Skinner [1998] and Pettit [1997], takes its cue from these Roman authors. There is also a neo-Athenian republicanism, which draws on Aristotelian conceptions of citizenship and the good life. It is arguable that at least historical republicanism is in fact influenced by both the Romans and Aristotle [Honohan 2002]. Certainly, as I represent it in this section, late eighteenth-century neo-republicanism drew on both traditions.

impediments. Republican freedom is thus a sort of freedom that is distinct from either positive or negative freedom. From a republican perspective, it is possible to act according to one's own will (positive freedom) and without any external impediments (negative freedom) and yet not be free. This is the case of the slave who has a benevolent master who lets her do what she wills, or the wife who has no legal identity outside of her husband's but is married to a kind man who lets her do as she wants. Neither is free, because both are under the dominion of someone who can choose to exercise control over them. The slave can be sold, the husband can change and become more controlling. Thus, for republicans, freedom is not so much about what one can or cannot do, as about the sorts of relationship one has with others in the world, whether someone else has an ultimate say in how one may live one's life.

Second, eighteenth-century republicans tended to believe that the flourishing of the state depended on the characters of its citizens. That is, a stable, successful state is not merely a well-run state, but a state in which citizens exhibit the sort of virtue they jointly value, and that they believe will make the state stronger. In other words, it is the citizens that make the state. Conversely, good laws do not simply exist to maintain peace and to create spaces for citizens to interact with each other without stepping on each other's toes (or property) but to help shape good relationships between citizens so that they respect each other and are drawn to helping each other achieve the goods they commonly value, and so that they do not attempt to dominate each other.

Third, and this is a consequence of the second principle, republicans believe that citizens have a duty to participate in the workings of the city, whether by participating directly in government, or by participating in the upbringing of the next generation of citizens. That is, the character of a good republican citizen includes the desire to help the state succeed. And acting upon this desire fully leads to whatever form of political participation is best suited for a particular citizen.

Although these three aspects of republicanism are not essential to all versions of republicanism (neo-republicanism tends to focus on liberty and treats virtue and participation as instrumental at best), in the eighteenth-century version I am looking at, at least, they are intrinsically dependent on each other. Independence, participation, and virtue all come together to form the republican ideal of freedom. In order to help make the state what it ought to be, one needs to be virtuous, as otherwise one will not have a strong enough idea of what a good state would look like, or the strength to pursue it against conflicting interests—as George Danton, for instance, found out to his and France's detriment. But one cannot develop virtue if one is not independent—both materially and spiritually. One needs some control over one's time and activities to learn and grow, some capacity for planning. And as virtue is—in the eighteenth century just as much as in antiquity—a product of reason, one also needs to be in a position to think for oneself. Last, virtuous participation both guarantees and necessitates independence—participating in politics is the only way to ensure that one's vision of the good has a chance of being implemented, and one cannot participate if one is not free to do so. This interplay of independence, virtue, and participation is, I will show, essential to the republican arguments of Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy.

## ***2.1 Rousseau's Republicanism and the Revolution***

Despite Rousseau being perhaps the best-known proponent of republicanism since antiquity, he is often left out of discussions of the history of republicanism. This is

in part because Philip Pettit has argued that Rousseau only marginally fits his conception of neo-republicanism as for Rousseau the concept of non-domination is instrumental to democracy, rather than upheld as a value of its own [Pettit 1997: 19, 2002: 14].<sup>7</sup> However, this is only a real concern if we focus on Pettit's rather narrow and technical sense of 'neo-republicanism', rather than, more generally, as I plan to do here, on a set of political ideas and arguments that drew on the Roman republican tradition. In that latter sense, Rousseau was a republican.

One consequence of Rousseau being left out of philosophical discussions of historical republicanism is that other French philosophers, who are—rightly—perceived as influenced by Rousseau are also excluded. Annelien de Dijn [2015: 2] notes that one factor in the exclusion of Rousseau from the republican canon is the influence he supposedly had on the Jacobins responsible for the Terror (despite the fact, she says, that Rousseau died well before the revolution began). But Rousseau's influence was far and wide: it was not limited to the Jacobins, nor did all those he influenced accept the entirety of his thought.<sup>8</sup> Like many French intellectual women of the late eighteenth century, Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy admired Rousseau. But as most philosophers would, they engaged with him, rather than accepted his arguments as they were. In particular, given his famously sexist views, they adapted the arguments they liked to a world view in which they, as women, could be what they were, philosophers, and what they thought they ought to be, citizens. But in all their work, they chose to adhere to what they saw as the central axioms of republicanism, spelled out by the Roman authors two of them (Roland and Grouchy) had read, and reiterated by Rousseau.

In the following three sub-sections, I will develop my argument that Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy were part of the republican tradition by showing how their arguments made use of the three elements I identified as being central to that tradition in the late eighteenth century: liberty as non-domination, virtue and character, and participation.

## 2.2. *Non-domination in Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy*

Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy were all three committed to the concept of freedom as non-domination, and all three rejected monarchy because of the potential for domination that it represented, rather than because they regarded the actual king as a tyrant. For Roland [1799–1800: 170], liberty was guaranteed by virtue, and the loss of liberty would engage corruption:

The rule of the general will is the only one that can maintain public happiness: from the moment power grants independence to some parts of the state [but not others], corruption is introduced and will manifest itself by enslaving the oppressed.

Even when despotism is not actually active, the slightest deviation from the rule of the people, she says, could lead to enslavement. And, in an essay written in 1777 for the Academy of Besançon, Roland writes that no republic is perfect if it allows slavery, whether Helots in Sparta, or anywhere in the world where women are in (metaphorical)

<sup>7</sup> In a recent paper, Annelien de Dijn [2015] took on Pettit's criticism and argued convincingly for reinstating Rousseau in the republican canon.

<sup>8</sup> Certainly, Wollstonecraft who was influenced by him, rejected a number of his views. Yet she is included in the republican canon.



chains, ‘the rust of barbarity covers their proud masters and ruins them together. The poisoned breath of despotism destroys virtue in the bud’ [Roland 1864: 337].

If Roland’s reflections on domination were an adaptation of Roman thoughts onto the politics of her day, Grouchy’s concern with the effects of domination went beyond the political and delved into the moral and psychological effects of domination. Being dominated, that is, being under the rule of one who had the ultimate say over your life whether or not they used it, stunts the moral and emotional development of citizens.

Their respect [of the French for their King] is annihilated as is their love: the heart of the French people, cured from this stupid and vain passion, has risen to the love of laws and country. Their soul, exalted by generous sentiments, will not go back to crawling at the feet of a prince. A king is the most infantile of rattles degrading the childhood of nations: the French no longer want rattles: they are grown [Condorcet and Paine 1791, 2: 21].

But as much as monarchy itself, Grouchy blamed unjust laws and institutions for domination claiming that they

alone make it the case that it is man, and not the law that dominates man; that a great function is anything other than a difficult one to fill; that it offers personal rewards other than the honour of having fulfilled it well, or glory, if its nature allows the showcasing of great talents; that other titles are required for obtaining it than services rendered and public esteem; other means to gain it than to be perceived to be worthy of it [Bernier and Dawson 2010: 88].

Neither Roland nor Grouchy focused to a great extent on the plight of women when discussing domination. Unlike them, Gouges applied republican ideals of freedom to understanding the position of women in society.<sup>9</sup> In particular, she argued that without the possibility of divorce, marriage was merely a relationship of domination:

Virtue enchained is a form of heroism that not everyone can attain. The perpetuity of marriage may have produced more horrors than the overreaching ambition of conquerors and the implacable cruelty of tyrants who swamped the earth in barbarian times. At least it was possible to flee their presence. No laws, raised to the level of dogma, forced people to await their blows. In an indissoluble marriage one must live with one’s enemy, at times one’s assassin, one must kiss the hand that will do harm and be caught between the cruel choice of living abjectly or dying unhappy. [Gouges 1790]

### 2.3 Republican Virtue

Republicanism in the eighteenth century was also a theory of virtue. This is true in two ways. First, it takes virtuous citizens to build a republic, at the very least citizens who value each other’s freedom sufficiently to want to guarantee it. But although it is possible to value other’s freedom for purely instrumental purposes, that is, because only if everyone is free and valuing freedom can we be certain that domination will not take place, it also fits comfortably into a virtue system. For Grouchy, Roland, and Gouges, domination is morally distasteful, and one of its greatest downsides is the effect it has on the characters of the citizens. Citizens who are dominated are not morally capable of working towards making their state better. Second, because the effect of the domination is a weakening of the character of the dominated, citizens who are not free

<sup>9</sup> In that sense Gouges was quite close to Wollstonecraft, and certainly Wollstonecraft did apply republican ideals to arguments for the emancipation of women. For a discussion of Wollstonecraft’s republicanism see Coffee [2014], Halldenius [2015].



cannot be virtuous. As Gouges puts it in the passage quoted above, one cannot be virtuous if one is in chains, or at least, it requires a certain heroic character that most of us do not have (this possibility of heroism will allow for a few select individuals to rescue an enslaved people, even though they themselves are in chains).

## 2.4 Political Participation

The centrality of virtue and character in eighteenth-century republicanism implied that a reform of the educational system was necessary.<sup>10</sup> But more than schooling, it was upbringing that could teach future citizens to respect each other and work together towards the creation of a Republic. And such upbringing, according to eighteenth-century republican thinkers, had to come from the home. This was a central aspect of Rousseau's views on education. He advocated a peaceful, well-regulated home life away from the chaos of the city, where mothers would be entirely devoted to the virtuous upbringing of their children, teaching them to love each other, while the father would concern himself with politics, but also the intellectual guidance of his (male) offspring. Thus, while discussing the place of virtue in the republic, we come to the concept of participation. For Rousseau, to participate in the Republic is not primarily to go to the city and debate politics. Because he advocates a rural republicanism, participation is often limited to the home and its surrounding land. Men work the land, or direct its work, while women nurture the virtues of citizenship in their own children, but also in those of the peasants working their land, if they are landowners.

Even if they did not agree with Rousseau's understanding of the place of women in the Republic, Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy all saw the value of a quiet home upbringing, where virtues are nurtured not only by the mother but by both parents, in an environment free from the alluring vices of the city. So Grouchy [1798: Letter I] argues that an important part of the upbringing of an upper-class child is to visit the poor, learn to recognize human suffering and acquire the urge and the ability to alleviate it. And Roland, describing her admiration of Spartan women, explained that the role they played in the growth of their republic was through the nurturing of virtues:

More sedentary, more enclosed ordinarily in republican governments, left to domestic tasks, nourished by this patriotism which elevates the soul and sentiments, they laboured towards the citizen's happiness and that of the state, through the peace and order reigning inside their homes, and the care they take to cultivate in their children the germs of courage and virtues that must be perpetuated as well as liberty. Focused on their families, they could not set any other ends for themselves than that of being cherished for the qualities that are needed in the home and that they would be recommended for. The love of little things, seeking vain distinctions is a feature only of superficial societies, where each brings pretensions devoid of real merit to sustain them [Roland 1864: 344].

Gouges, perhaps drawing on her own lack of formal education, argued that a 'natural' upbringing was more likely to create citizens who think of each other as equals. In doing so she appeals to the concept of emulation. This concept was at the

<sup>10</sup> Wollstonecraft was very aware of this, so that her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792] is to a large extent a proposal for educational reform. Thus, she dedicated the second *Vindication* to the Marquis de Talleyrand who was then engaged in writing a paper for the reform of the French educational system, and at least considered the suggestion that women should be educated in the same way as men. Gouges delayed the publication of her *Rights of Woman* because she was waiting for Talleyrand's paper to come out.

time a disputed one with some writers, such as the novelist and Rousseau's disciple Bernardin de St Pierre, regarding it merely as a form of competition that would set people against each other. But Gouges, drawing on a theatrical tradition which she inherited from her natural father, the playwright Pompignan, a close friend of Jean Racine, understood emulation as a form of mimesis, that is, the tendency described by Aristotle [2013] in the *Poetics* to want to imitate others in order to learn from them, and thus a way in which we may become more virtuous.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.5 Feminist Republicans?

Republicanism written by men before the twentieth century is often unappealing to feminists because its concept of citizenship seems to preclude women's participation on at least two counts.<sup>12</sup> First, according to eighteenth-century French philosophers, a republican citizen must be sufficiently educated to have the confidence to speak in public, and to read the dozens of articles and pamphlets that are distributed every day. Women in the eighteenth century were less likely to have this level of education than their husbands. Second, in order for men to go about the business of the city, in revolutionary France just as in Ancient Rome, Athens, or Sparta, there must be someone at home to take care of the family, someone to mind the shop, feed the babies, keep the children's clothes in order and the pantry filled. French revolutionary republicanism relies on there being a servant class just as much as the Romans did—and that class includes most women, even the rich if they are married.

That women in eighteenth-century France thought they could adapt republican views to argue for their own right to citizenship allows us to rethink this more recent interpretation of republicanism as a very male-focused political theory. At the very least, it should not be the case that the works of republican women are dismissed because other women claim that republicanism is bad for women.

Republicanism is also regarded by some with scepticism because of its emphasis on non-domination understood as independence. The requirement that they should be independent puts a lot of women in a double bind. They are, on the one hand, required to nurture independence in their children, to help them become good citizens, and on the other, they cannot do this and be financially independent—they need to rely on a man's income to allow them to stay at home and educate their children. On this picture, citizenship means different things for men and women: for men, it requires independence, economic and otherwise, but for women, it requires only that they educate their sons to be independent, and their daughters to be nurturing of male

<sup>11</sup> Emulation in late eighteenth-century France was a popular and contested concept. Jacques-Henri Bernardin de St Pierre [1789: 199, 204], a disciple of Rousseau who believed in the ultimate goodness of human nature, thought that emulation was always harmful because it was in fact a sort of competition that engendered jealousy and all sorts of other social ills. But others disagreed, and believed, following Cicero, that emulation was nothing more than the imitation of virtue:

Emulation is used in two senses, and denotes both a merit and a fault. For the imitation of virtue is called 'emulation' (with this we have no concern, it being praiseworthy) and the name is also given to the grief felt by the one who has failed to obtain what he had desired and another possesses [Cicero 1927: IV, 17].

For accounts drawn from Cicero, see Roubaud [1786: 85–9], Marmontel [1823: 99]. See also section 4.1 of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Phillips [2000] and Pateman [2007]. A notable exception is Laborde [2008].

independence.<sup>13</sup> This criticism, however, is better directed at a liberal conception of independence than a republican one, as republicanism does not preclude the interdependence of family members.<sup>14</sup>

Independence, from a republican perspective, only requires that one should be in a position to think through what one wants, and what one needs to do, but does not preclude the idea that one's plans necessarily include others. The difference between a person who has to take a relationship into account when making a plan, and one who is dominated, is that the dominated individual will hit a wall earlier on in their planning, that is, if they can even begin to plan. A twenty-first century western woman can contemplate leaving her family to start a new life. She might decide that she can't, or that she won't, but it will make sense for her to think about it. The same is less true for an eighteenth-century woman, as any planning she might consider doing will be voided by her legal status and that of her children. So independence in a republican sense is not about the absence of ties to others, but about being able to think about how best to accommodate these ties in one's planning.

In the next two sections, I show how Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy developed republican arguments that were remarkably contemporary from a feminist perspective given their emphasis on equality not just for men and women, but also across class and race (Section 3); and their views on the family (Section 4).

### 3. Equality: Class, Race, and Gender

The concept of equality is of course central to the thought of the French Revolution, but the aim of the revolution was not the achievement of universal equality—no one tried to bring equal political rights to all (women, for instance, were nearly always excluded) or to redistribute wealth in order to achieve economic equality. Instead the focus was on diminishing the extreme social, political, or economic inequality that had existed under the Ancient Regime.

#### 3.1 Grouchy on Class and Economic Inequality

The rejection of the systems of the old regime was common to all revolutionaries. But for republicans, there was also a deep link between equality and liberty conceived as non-domination. For those who do not consider each other as equal are more likely to engage in relationships of domination, that is, of one agent imposing their arbitrary will on another. In the *Letters on Sympathy*, Grouchy argues that while economic inequality is not to be expected or even desired—as different people will make more or less with what they are given, even if they are given equally to start off with—extreme economic inequality is the source of most of society's ills. Not only do extreme riches encourage corruption, extreme poverty, theft, and deception, but Grouchy argues, inequality itself means that virtue is unlikely to develop anywhere in society.

<sup>13</sup> Young [1995] makes this point in a response to Galston [1991] in which he argues that single parenthood is bad for the economy.

<sup>14</sup> Certainly, Wollstonecraft's republicanism fits that description. In fact, her concept of independence is best described as relational autonomy. See Mackenzie [2016] and Coffee [2018].

The central argument of Grouchy's *Letters* is that virtue, moral or political, is born out of sympathy, the ability and propensity to feel other's pain and to want to relieve it. Grouchy claims that we first experience sympathy as an infant in the arms of a nurse, and that we learn progressively to feel sympathy for the physical and mental pain that any other person experiences, whether or not we are close to them. But in order for this to be possible, we do need to see the suffering other as a human being, as someone just as capable of experiencing pain as we are. Extreme inequality means that this does not happen: the very rich and the very poor do not regard each other as being part of the same species, so they cannot sympathize with each other and will not apply the laws of morality and justice in their dealings with each other.

It is because the extreme inequality of fortunes, and the great distance there is between one class and the other, render men strangers to each other. Virtues cannot recognize each other unless they be placed, by chance, at the same level. The powerful man and the worker in his employ are too far removed from each other to be able judge one another. And because their respective duties seem to get lost in the distance between them, the one may oppress the other nearly without remorse, while the other will in turn cheat him with impunity, even believing that he, in this way, bringing justice to himself [Grouchy 1798: Letter VIII].

Although there is definitely a feminist background to Grouchy's *Letters*, one which reflects her husband Nicolas de Condorcet's [1790] paper 'On Giving Women the Right to Citizenship', and perhaps in fact inspired that paper, it does not have an obvious feminist agenda.<sup>15</sup> Humanity in general is the focus of her discussion; women are explicitly included in the arguments (indeed, the very first teacher of sympathy is the wet-nurse, the most prominent example given of a good teacher is Sophie's own mother, and mothers and fathers are equally enjoined to participate in a child's proper education) but they are not given separate consideration.

### 3.2 Roland's Equivocal Feminism

Whereas Grouchy's writings can be thought to presuppose gender equality, it is much harder to draw the same conclusions from Roland's writings. There are good reasons to claim—as has been said of her contemporary and acquaintance Louise Kéralio-Robert—that Phlipon Roland was opposed to the feminist ideas that were developing around her, from Condorcet to Olympe de Gouges [Geffroy 2006; Sepinwall 2010]. Indeed, one historian argues that Roland did not regard the revolution as an excuse to go beyond previously established gender boundaries, but that she made it a matter of principle to respect them till the end [Dalton 2001].

Some of Roland's writings seem to suggest a form of the theory of complementarity, a belief that women and men need to live according to their different natures in order to flourish together. This is clearest in an essay she submitted to the Academy of Besançon in 1777, in which Roland wrote that in ancient republics, women were less free and more tied to their home than in other societies, because within the home they could best fulfil the role that was theirs [Roland 1864: 344].

Other excerpts suggesting the same attitude can be found in her memoirs and in her correspondence. They range from positive claims about what a woman's duties are, to arguments for the superiority of men to women:

<sup>15</sup> Her arguments on marriage, divorce, and legitimizing children born out of wedlock in Letter VI can and probably should be read as feminist.

I expect a woman to keep her family's linen and clothing in good order, to feed her children, order, or herself cook dinner, this without talking about it, keeping her mind free and ordering her time so that she is able to talk of something else, and to please, at last, through her mood, as well as the charms of her sex [Roland 1827: 198].

I believe, I will not say better than any woman, but perhaps better than any man, in the superiority of your sex in every respect. You have strength, first, and all that comes with it and from it, courage, perseverance, great ideas and great talents. It is your job to make laws in politics and discoveries in science. Rule the world, transform the surface of the globe, be proud, terrible, clever and learned; you are all of this without us, and in all this you must dominate. (29 July 1783, to Bosc) [Roland 1900: 256–7].

Although, as we will see in the next section, she did mitigate her views on the place of women in society when she realized that if she wanted the revolution to go her way, she would have to be active in it, there is nonetheless a case to be made for a view of gender relations which privileges difference over equality.

### 3.3 Gouges on Slavery

Olympe de Gouges defended gender equality most famously in her *Declaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne*, in which she took up, point by point, the *Declaration of the Rights of Men*, switching the gender perspective of each and thereby demonstrating how thinking of women as having equal rights to men did not result in absurdity. She also wrote several other texts in which she discussed female poverty, divorce, and forced entry in convents [Gouges 1790]. But here I want to bring into focus another aspect of Gouges' work on equality. Thinking about equality during the revolutionary period led a number of philosophers to turn to the question of slavery. If we consider all human beings to be equal, then, they argued, slavery cannot be justified. Theirs was therefore a different take on the question from that of their republican predecessors, the Romans, for whom slavery was first and foremost a point of reference for the absence of liberty. The Romans did not, on the whole, believe in equality, but they believed that those who were lucky enough to make it to the 'superior' strata of society should lead lives as different as possible from that of slaves [Skinner 2000].

Olympe de Gouges, one of the first revolutionary authors to turn to the question of slavery, asked why, if we are all equal, the enslaved are represented as being inferior. In her play performed in 1789 and published in 1792, *L'esclavage des noirs ou l'heureux naufrage* (*Zamore and Mirza, or the Lucky Shipwreck*), a play destined to interest the public in the horrors of slavery, the slave trade, and the treatment of black human beings throughout the world, she proposes that it is education which is to blame for this illusion of superiority which leads some human beings to enslave others. Education, she says, teaches one class to place themselves above another. The masters no longer consider themselves merely human: 'art' places them above nature and 'instruction' makes them think of themselves as gods. On the other hand, it is lack of education that keeps the slaves from rebelling against their lot. They become 'habituated' to horrendous treatment, and education would 'open their eyes' to it.

This difference is a very small thing, it only exists in colour, but the advantages that they have over us are huge. Art placed them above nature, education made gods of them, and we are but men. [...]

Most of those barbarous masters treat them with a cruelty that makes nature shiver; our species, too unhappy, has become habituated to such punishments. They make sure that we are not educated: if our eyes were to open, we would be horrified at the state to which they have reduced us, and we would shake this yoke, both cruel and shameful [Gouges 1792: 6].

On the other hand, at no point does Gouges suggest that only educated slaves are worthy of their freedom: educated slaves would become ‘horrified’ and would attempt to free themselves, but not necessarily succeed. Zamore’s own education is assumed by others to be a threat to the masters, and is even described as unnatural.

What crime have you committed, both of you? Ah, I see, you are too educated for a slave, and your education had disastrous consequences for he who gave it to you [ibid.: 19].

You do not know this wretched race: he would slit our throat without a second thought. Here is what we must always expect when we educate slaves. They are born to be savages and tamed like animals [ibid.: 23].

Education for Gouges, it seems, is more of a tool for oppression than it is one for progress. In the state of nature, we are equal, but education brings about a false sense of inequality, which is perpetuated by the choices educators make.

#### 4. The Republican Family

Although it is not central to the way in which the political philosophy of the eighteenth century is represented in contemporary discussions, the family in fact held a central role in the writings of philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and Mary Wollstonecraft [Botting 2007]. The popularity, in particular, of Locke’s [1693] *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and of Rousseau’s *Emile* led to a flurry of writings on educational reform, with a particular emphasis on early infancy. What happened in the home, before children were too young to be sent out to school or delivered into the hands of a tutor or governess, was thought to be crucial to the moral, emotional, and intellectual development of children. This development, in turn, was perceived as a major constituent of a healthy nation, be it a monarchy or a republic. Burke regarded the hierarchy of the family as a guarantor of the political order, and Rousseau saw well-functioning families as building stones of a republic, units in which the ideals of republican citizenship could be fostered and preserved [Burke 2014: 35; Botting 2007: 66–7].

Rousseau’s writings on the family had become hugely popular during his lifetime through *Emile*, a part-fictional, part-treatise work on education, and *Julie or the New Heloise*, a novel telling the story of a woman repenting an early love affair and becoming a perfect republican wife and mother. Like many of their contemporaries, Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy admired Rousseau, sometimes to the point of apparently forgiving him his worst excesses of misogyny [Trouille 1997]. But they admired him as philosophers, that is, they engaged with him. And as far as his discussions of the family and of women’s place in the family were concerned, it is clear that they felt they had something more to contribute than their male counterparts: that is, they could rely on their experiences as daughters, wives, and mothers to judge whether what Rousseau had to say about women’s role in the family made sense. But while Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy differ to some extent in their agreement or disagreement with Rousseau, all three remain within his republican perspective. That is, their concern is that women’s place within a republic should be

explicated, and that it should be made clear how women can best benefit the republic.

This eighteenth-century debate on the place of women and family in the republic can be contrasted with the more recent one led by twentieth-century feminists such as Susan Moller Okin and Iris Marion Young. Okin [1989] and Young [1995] both felt the need to reintroduce the family as a point of discussion in political philosophy, in particular in response to John Rawls' [1971] treatment of the family as a unit of a liberal state, headed by a *paterfamilias* very much like Rousseau's. In order to understand the mechanism of a liberal nation, Okin and Young argued, we need the perspective of all the individuals that make up a family, not simply of the unit or its 'head', as this will falsify the results and almost certainly result in the unjust treatment of some family members. The feminist response to Okin and Young's critiques of liberalism has resulted, as we saw in a previous section, in feminist philosophers' reluctance to embrace liberalism, and by extension, republicanism. For this reason, I think we need to take the criticisms of Rousseau coming from Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy very seriously.

#### 4.1 *Olympe de Gouges on the Family in the State of Nature*

While Rousseau is famous for placing a great deal of political importance on the family, and on the place of women within it, the family does not really feature in his state of nature theory [Pateman 1980: 29]. Rousseau's state of nature consists of two distinct stages. The first is one where human beings live as solitary creatures, peacefully, and merely seeing to their simple needs in a plentiful world. The second stage, where human beings meet and gather into primitive societies, is as bad, it seems, as Hobbes's—a world in which the human drive to compete for glory leads men to fight each other and unable to collaborate towards a peaceful and happy life.<sup>16</sup>

As soon as men had begun to appreciate one another and the idea of consideration had taken shape in their mind, everyone claimed a right to it, and one could no longer deprive anyone of it with impunity. [. . . V]engeances became terrible and men bloodthirsty and cruel. This is precisely the stage reached by most of the Savage Peoples known to us; and it is for want of drawing adequate distinctions between ideas and noticing how far these Peoples already were from the first state of nature that so many hastened to conclude that man is naturally cruel and needs political order in order to be made gentle, whereas nothing is as gentle as he in his primitive state [Rousseau 1997: 166].

Rousseau claimed that the primitive societies he imagined were violent, and that they were so because human beings are not naturally suited to living together, and that they are liable to jealousy, brought on by a spirit of competition, and tend to resort to violence in order to resolve conflicts.<sup>17</sup> Not being social means specifically that human beings will not, in Rousseau's state of nature, form family units. Rousseau claimed that primitive humans only briefly got together in order to reproduce, and that the process of rearing children was short and minimal. This is highly implausible: human children are simply not physically capable of fending for themselves until

<sup>16</sup> The use of 'men' here is not archaic: women in both Hobbes and Rousseau are mostly left out of the discussion except when mating and reproduction are considered.

<sup>17</sup> These hypotheses about primitive societies have been rejected by those in a position to test them, i.e., anthropologists, who have found that early human societies were not, on the whole, violent, at least not amongst themselves. See Widerquist and McCall [2017: 131–8].



they are several years old, and this is a sufficiently long period that bonds will be created between a child and a parent, especially if they live in isolation from other human beings, and in an environment that is sufficiently congenial that they have no pressing business to attend. Moreover, unless their sexual encounters are very few and far between, it is likely that the female of the species will find herself with young children to look after through most of her adult life. Rousseau, it seems, is failing to imagine what primitive women and children's lives would be like in his first state of nature, drawing his conclusions only from speculating about the adult male of the species.

Olympe de Gouges in her 1789 *Le Bonheur Primitif* (*The Primitive Happiness of Mankind*) argued, against Rousseau (and Hobbes), that primitive societies were in fact peaceful and happy, and that much of that happiness was rooted in people's ability to love each other:

For man's happiness, and for natural law, the finest institution was the respect they felt for the sacred ties that united spouses; two beings were only bound together according to their reciprocal feelings; the temple of hymen was the summit of a mountain. There, in front of the sun, they promised each other enduring love and an indissoluble friendship [Gouges 1789: 11].

Relationships being the basis of primitive societies for Gouges means that families will also be part of those societies. It means also that human beings will be better able, and hence more willing to work together, in order to grow the food they need to survive, and so on. This is key to Gouges' disagreement with Rousseau. On the one hand, Rousseau sees the initial attempts at co-operation as leading to jealousy and competition, and only becoming tolerable by being constrained by laws. Gouges, on the other hand, believes that the experience of raising children together means that human beings can engage in 'emulation', that is, a sort of imitation of what they find admirable in each other, which, if it were done from selfish motivations would amount to competition, but which otherwise leads to human progress.

There are a hundred of you. In less than a century, there will be a thousand. The earth is large enough to fulfil your needs; but you must carefully help Nature. You must cultivate the earth, and as you make discoveries, you will see emulation spreading among you. Let your goods be held in common, your portions be equal, your clothes and houses the same, your habits simple and sweet. [. . .] All men must contribute to the public good without distinction, without any exemption whatsoever except infirmity or sickness. Nursing women will be exempt from public works [ibid.: 13–14].

Olympe de Gouges saw competition not as something harmful leading to violence, but as the promise of progress through co-operation in early human gatherings. Her picture of the origins of human societies is therefore quite different from Rousseau's.

Starting with a different origin story means that we can develop both a different account of human nature and a different program for social and political development. Gouges' political theory, although, like Rousseau, republican, is built on the assumption that human beings are naturally inclined to co-operate. Strip away the corrupting influences of bad institutions and they will succeed in doing so.

#### 4.2 Marie-Jeanne Roland's Rural Republican Family

Roland embraced Rousseau's views on the family much more straightforwardly than Gouges did. That is, she believed that the best form of society was rural republicanism,

because a rural population is more likely to develop the required virtues for defending the ideals of liberty than luxury-loving city-dwellers would be. In his *Constitutional Project for Corsica*, Rousseau makes the link between rural life and a healthy nation very clear: a rural lifestyle makes for healthier citizens who have more children (because they are healthier and less prone to boredom and debauchery). But he also links them because he believes that '[p]easants are much more attached to their soil than are townsmen to their city' [Rousseau 1763: 10], and that peasants are more likely to be patriotic and to put in the work necessary for defending country and constitution. A reliance on agriculture more than on financial power, he says, equates work with freedom in the sense that peasants who produce the food they need to live on are independent of external powers [ibid.: 10].

Roland, who had read most of Rousseau's works, would have been very familiar with his republicanism. In particular she derived a greater insight into Rousseau's fascination with rural economy and its implication for private and public virtue from *The New Heloise* [Roland 1827: 196]. Roland, as we saw, favoured a family modelled on the classical republican one, separate from the state, but at the same time nurturing the virtues that are required for it to carry on. This corresponded almost exactly to what Rousseau proposed in *The New Heloise* and *Emile* where women are at the same time essential to domestic success, and willingly subservient to male authority. In order not to fall into the traps set by city life, which encourage competition and make virtuous living impossible, a rural family has to keep to itself and participate in politics without losing its particular mode of existence. This means that the husband will take occasional trips into the city to vote or argue for or against a policy, but the rest of the family will stay home, nurturing the virtues needed to keep the republic alive and flourishing.

Roland's acceptance of Rousseau's model is tempered in two ways. First, it seems that while she accepts that the family is better kept out of the city, she does not seem to embrace wholly Rousseau's view of the gender division of labour within the family. The home must be kept clean and healthy, the children must be raised, and the work necessary to earn money must be done. But her view is that all of this can be done quickly, if efficiently, so that there is time left for the more important intellectual work of reading and writing. Besides, her own life, as well as her later writings, show that she did not think that these tasks fell naturally and universally to one gender or another. She worked together with her husband, Jean-Marie Roland de la Platière, on scholarly and political projects, and he certainly had a place in the raising of their daughter.

Second, Roland's views about political participation versus the rural family life changed radically during the Revolution, when she realized that in order to help bring about the republic she believed in, she needed to come to Paris and meet people.

While peace lasted, I kept myself to the tranquil role and the kind of influence that seem to me proper for my sex. But when the King's departure declared war, it struck me that we must all devote ourselves without reserve; I went and joined the Fraternal Societies, persuaded that zeal and right thinking can sometimes be very useful in times of crisis. I cannot keep to my home and am visiting all my acquaintances in order to excite us for the greatest actions. (23 June 1791, to Bancal) [Roland 1900: 307].

Thus Roland can be said to embrace a Rousseau-style ideal of the rural republican family, but without the strict gender division that he envisaged, and with the proviso that leaving the country home for the city is at times necessary in order to safeguard the republic.<sup>18</sup>

### 4.3 Sophie de Grouchy on Wet-Nursing

One specific way in which Rousseau's views on the family were influential during the revolutionary period was his argument that mothers should nurse their own children, rather than sending them out to wet-nurses. This view was very popular among women especially as it was seen by many as reinstating women in society, granting them a form of authority, which stemmed from their ability to nurture future citizens.<sup>19</sup>

There were two strands to Rousseau's arguments in favour of mothers feeding their own children. One was that he thought there was 'no substitute for maternal love'—a claim, which he does not in any way attempt to argue for [Jacobus 1992: 56; Smart 2011: 51]. The second was a moral indictment of the wet-nurse, whom he saw as a mercenary, unable to give love because she nurtured other people's children for money instead of her own [Jacobus 1992: 59]. This claim is not defended either, and it is at best implausible—wet-nurses did not abandon their children to feed those of the rich: they either fed them alongside each other (hence the existence of *frères de lait*) or used the milk they would have given to a child who died, or again, carried on producing milk after their own child no longer needed it. Despite his claim that wet-nurses are not capable of giving affection to the children they care for, Rousseau also worries that too strong an attachment will form between the nurse and the infant, making it harder for the child's mother to participate in the education of the child.<sup>20</sup>

Many French women writers, including Roland, agreed with Rousseau that breastfeeding one's own child was a moral duty. Sophie de Grouchy's take on this is interesting. Like Rousseau in *Emile*, she believes that the first experiences of an infant are crucial to her development, and that this involves being breastfed. But whereas Rousseau seems to rely mostly on romantic notions of the mother-infant relationship, Grouchy offers an argument, based on the premise that the physical sensation experienced by an infant feeding and the connection with another human being at the same time leads to that infant developing the capacity for sympathy, which in turn makes it possible for human beings to live virtuously with each other in the absence of tyrannical rulers and institutions. This argument does not rely on the child being fed by its own mother—the infant's experience of connection with another has nothing to do with blood bonds, or the family connections she will later experience. It is merely a matter of flesh on flesh and the pleasure of being fed when she is hungry that is relevant at this stage. This take on Rousseau's views on breastfeeding did not, at the time it was written, have a sufficient impact on readers to help liberate mothers from the no-doubt oppressive opinion that they had to feed their own children, whatever the cost. But Grouchy's argument has the potential to be liberating still, in the sense that it allows us to consider a father bottle-feeding a baby as emotionally and as developmentally valuable as a mother's breastfeeding.

<sup>18</sup> See Bergès [2016a] for a longer discussion of Roland's rural republicanism.

<sup>19</sup> See Bergès [2016b] for a discussion of eighteenth-century arguments for breastfeeding.

<sup>20</sup> There are many problems with Rousseau's condemnation of the practice of wet-nursing. One worth noting is that the economic conditions in eighteenth-century France, especially in Paris, often required working mothers to rely on a wet-nurse, so they could continue their professional activities and earn enough to sustain the family [Jacobus 1992: 71]. Another is that babies were often sent out of the capital in the hope that they would survive their first years. Roland thus spent her first two years with a wet-nurse away from home, after her mother had lost all her previous babies.

## 5. Conclusion

Okin complains that Rawls has a patriarchal perspective, Young that liberal values hold women back, and don't fit with the lives of carers or dependents. Both made it look as though women had been forever excluded from philosophical discussion of how human societies should be organized. But looking at the writings of eighteenth-century republican women philosophers shows that this was not the case. Gouges, Roland, and Grouchy actually experimented with the theories that tried to exclude them, inserted themselves and their perspectives as women into the republican arguments, and tried to figure out how to make them work for them. They were not asking that the theory be modified for them; they were not turning their backs to it. They inserted themselves, their lives, their experience, and their families even, into the theory. Leaving great women-shaped holes in the walls that were built to keep them out, they set up camp, and they philosophized.

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