


Domesticity and Political Participation: At Home with the Jacobin Women

Political Research Quarterly
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–11
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DOI: 10.1177/10659129221079865
journals.sagepub.com/home/prq


Sandrine Bergès¹ 

Abstract

The exclusion of women from political participation and the separation of private and public spheres seem anchored in human history to such an extent that we may think they are necessary. I offer an analysis of a philosophical moment in history, the early years of the French Revolution, where politics and domesticity were not incompatible. I show how this enabled women to participate in politics from within their homes, at the same time fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers. The republican home, on this interpretation, was a place of power and virtue, a merging of the public and the private sphere where political ideals and reforms could be born and nurtured. This conception of the home was derived in great part from a reading of Rousseau's writings on motherhood. As the influence of French revolutionary women became more visible, they were severely repressed. The fact that they could not hold on to a position of power that derived naturally from the ideals they and others defended, I will suggest, was caused both by the fact that the framework used to allow women political power was insecure, and by the gradual replacement of republican ideals by liberal ones.

Keywords

political participation, gender, domesticity, public and private sphere, French revolution, feminism

Private and Public Sphere: When Did Things Go Wrong?

This paper investigates a brief philosophical moment in European history—the French Revolution between 1789 and 1793—when it was possible for women to participate in politics. This moment failed to amplify. I ask why it did and propose the following answer. Women philosophers of the French Revolution wanted political influence. Republican ideals, together with Rousseau's writings on motherhood, had opened up a space for women to participate from within their homes, fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers in a way that mattered politically. The republican home, as a place of power and virtue, represented a merging of the public and the private sphere and a place where political ideals and reforms could be born and nurtured. Yet as women's influence became more visible, they were severely repressed and the idea that the home could be anything other than a place to nurture children slowly disappeared.

I will argue that the failure of domestic participation to thrive, or even survive, was a combination of two factors. First, while it was Rousseau's ideas that had led to a conception of domesticity as politically powerful, these ideas did not hold up to the scrutiny in the light of

Rousseau's views on women's nature. Secondly, as republican values gave way to liberal ones from 1795 onward, the family as a political unit gave way to the individual and the home lost its political aspect. In fact, it turned out that even the strongest supporters of political womanhood did not offer unconditional support, and were quick to withdraw it. I will conclude that while the efforts of the Jacobin women did not lead to women's political emancipation, the ways they found of making the home central to politics are worth investigating, as they may help us pursue ways of increasing women's political participation.

The pairing of the public and political, or the private and domestic, has not always been clear-cut, mostly because family life has not always been thought of as separate from politics.¹ Carole Pateman argues that civic republican thought, such as eighteenth-century philosophers engaged with, to some extent enabled women's

¹Department of Philosophy, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

Corresponding Author:

Sandrine Bergès, Department of Philosophy, Bilkent University, Bilkent, Ankara 06800, Turkey.
Email: sandrineberges@gmail.com

citizenship through their participation within the family: “The eighteenth-century doctrine of republican motherhood” she says “provides an illustration of the multiple layers of meaning of motherhood as a political status” (Pateman 1992, 38). Partly because of Rousseau’s writings on what it meant to be a mother, and the French Revolution’s cult of the lactating woman, women who were mothers, or had to potential to become so, saw their status change. They were no longer simply the means through which children were fed but they sustained the nation itself (Jacobus 1992). Such glorification of motherhood may not have sufficed at the time to win women citizenship, nor indeed much improvement in their status at all, but the obstacles put in their ways were not principled, and the suggestion that mothers mattered politically was a very serious one. Pateman asks: “Why should the republican mother not be a citizen? There was, from a feminist perspective, no rational reason at all” (Pateman 1992, 37). And this lack of reason, Pateman carries on, coupled with the impetus toward finding arguments for women’s citizenship, was what led philosophers such as Mary Wollstonecraft to argue for equality (Pateman 1992, 38).²

The French Revolution and the fact that it seemed to open the possibility that women as well men should become citizens was a source of inspiration for Wollstonecraft. It seemed for a short period that women—in particular those associated with the Girondins—could expect to be treated as potential citizens in the new French republic.³ The Girondins made particular efforts to include women in political debates, with two of their most influential clubs being open to both sexes, and one of their most prominent writers, Condorcet, defending women’s right to citizenship as early as 1790.⁴

Although the early days of the Revolution opened up the possibility of women becoming citizens who could participate actively in politics, French women’s expectations did not come to be fully realized, and whatever advantages they gained (including some non-negligible ones, such as the right to divorce) were taken away from them during the Terror and later by Napoleon. The attempt and failure to bring gender equality make the study of the French Revolutionary period particularly interesting for those wanting to understand how women’s place in the public and private domain came to be established, how it was negotiated, and what went wrong such that there is still as much inequality as there is.

The rest of this paper will be divided in four further sections. In Section Two, I will focus on the attempts of one philosopher of the French Revolution to develop political influence while maintaining her place in the home by following Rousseau’s writings on republican motherhood: Manon Roland. I will show that her attempts ultimately failed. In Section Three, I will investigate the

place of the home within republicanism and show that there was at least an open door for women to participate in politics from within the republican home. This section will focus on the life and works of Louise Kéralio-Robert. In sections four and five, I will suggest that there were two main reasons why women had not successfully established themselves as full citizens by the end of the revolution. First, it was in part because the ideals that they had used to build up their political presence, ideals drawn from Rousseau’s writings, were not sufficiently clearly in their favor. Secondly, the model of participation they had focused on was a republican model, and that republicanism gave way to liberalism very soon after the revolution.

Manon Roland at Home: Writing as Acting

The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau were received enthusiastically by the women of the late 18th century (Trouille 1997). This was despite some fairly aggressive comments about women and their nature, and in some cases warnings to women that his words were not for them.⁵ In the preface of his best-selling philosophical novel, *Julie or The New Heloise*, for instance, Rousseau warns that the collection of letters, the “honest ravings” of provincial’s brains, presented in the novel is a more suitable read for women than philosophy, but that its topic makes it unsuitable for unmarried women (Rousseau 1997, 2). No advertising campaign could have worked so well as this warning. But while many female readers became instant Rousseau fans, women were not perhaps, as easily manipulated as this suggests. Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, who confessed herself “half in love with Rousseau” was also one of his most ferocious critiques (Wollstonecraft 1989, vol 6, 387, Brooke 2019).

And among women who did not openly criticize Rousseau’s system, many found ways of adapting it, which left them free to pursue the sort of life he had in mind for virtuous and free men, but as women. Marie-Jeanne (Manon) Phlipon Roland, for whom the *New Heloise* was a revelation, was one of these women. While she embraced Rousseau’s views on the virtues of domesticity for women, she also somehow managed to become a prominent figure of the French Revolution. In this section we will look at how she subverted Rousseau’s concept of domesticity, so that, also drawing ideas from Roman republicanism, she was able to become a political actor, as well as a more traditional housewife.

Madame Roland was born in Paris in 1754 and she was executed there in November 1793, as part of the extermination of the members of the Girondin faction by the Montagnards. At the time of her arrest, she was notorious:

admired and respected by the Girondins, vilified by the Montagnards, as having taken part in a “female triumvirate,” hiding at the end of a “labyrinth of intrigues” (Robespierre, *Le Défenseur de la Constitution* 140).⁶ Roland was accused of influencing the male Girondists with sexual favors, and leading France into war despite Robespierre’s resistance to it (Linton 2013, 157). In the Summer 1792, Danton had cast doubt on the election of her husband, Jean-Marie Roland, to the ministry of the Interior, because, Danton had said, everyone knew that it was she, not he, who made the policies and appointments.⁷

While there was certainly a lot of gender prejudice in Danton’s and others’ characterization of Manon Roland’s political activity, we have good reasons to believe she was indeed active. We have a fairly extent account Manon Roland’s role in the rise and fall of the Girondins in the *Memoirs* she wrote while awaiting her trial in prison. While these may not reflect exactly what happened, we also have access to letters she wrote to friends during that period, which show that she was in fact quite involved in the political affairs of the Revolution. Here, I investigate her attempts at participating in the political thought that shaped the revolution while attempting to remain faithful to Rousseau’s ideals of feminine domesticity.

In part III, of the personal section of her *Memoirs*, and in particular eight very rich pages at the beginning, Roland discusses her first reading of Rousseau’s *New Heloise* and the way it influenced her view of domesticity and politics. The part starts with twenty-one-year-old Manon, devastated by the death of her mother. A family friend, knowing her to be a fan of Jean-Jacques (as he was commonly known), gave her a copy of Rousseau’s *New Heloise*. This turned out to be a revelation, which in her *Memoirs* she likens to that which she experienced at the age of eight when she first read Plutarch. Plutarch, she said, taught her to be a republican, to value public virtues and liberty. Rousseau, in the *New Heloise*, showed her “the domestic happiness which I could claim for myself, and the ineffable delights I was capable of experiencing” (Roland 1864, vol II, 169—my translation).

In the novel that led Roland to discover that she could have a valid purpose in life as a woman, *The New Heloise*, Rousseau’s heroine, Julie, starts off as a bright but morally immature young woman, who is seduced by her tutor. But Julie is forced to give up her lover after her mother dies, and made to marry an older man. Rather than finish her life in quiet despair, Julie grows in her marriage and becomes a better version of herself. Julie devotes her entire time and energy to domestic pursuits. The couple has children, whom she makes it her business to care for entirely, with the guidance of her wiser husband in designing their education and routines. She also busies herself with the families that live on her husband’s

property, caring for them, and helping them see that the countryside offers them rich and beautiful life, and preventing the inevitable exodus of young peasants to the city. Julie is the “sensible virtue” of the household, that is, in eighteenth-century speak, she is all compassion, while her husband its “living reason” (Rousseau 1997, 432). Julie is all “heart” and she finds loving and nurturing those around her a natural extension of her new, truer self. And with this very gendered distribution of roles and natures in place, all in the family are happy (including Julie’s ex-lover, welcome as a guest and dear friend by her husband), and the village itself thrives, saved by Julie’s care, from the endemic move of peasants to the big city.

It would be easy to read this as Roland’s account of her discover of *The New Heloise* as the story of her relinquishing an ill-fitting male model of participation for a more achievable female one. And to some extent that is what happened. When she had read Plutarch, the young Manon had wished she’d been born a man (Roland 1913, 374). But with Rousseau’s *New Heloise*, she could now find a role for herself that was both useful to the republic and allowed her to retain what she could not change, her womanhood. In order to adopt this interpretation, we would have to understand her life as that of a clever woman, who reveled in domestic work, and reluctantly found her intelligence put to the service of her country, simply because it was there to be used and the men around her needed it.⁸ This is to some extent the narrative Roland herself pushed, and in her own defense at her trial she argued that she was a mere housewife, and as such could not present a risk to the political leaders of the Republic. But this narrative fails to account for Roland’s later political activities: once the revolution started, she clearly no longer wanted her role in it to be passive.

A different narrative finds that Roland, at the time she wrote her *Memoirs*, regretted having taken a backseat role in her husband’s career and wanted to embrace her political agency more directly. Finally admitting to herself that she was the better writer and the better thinker of their couple, she realized that the work she had done for him was his most valuable contribution. When she makes that discovery, her enthusiasm for domesticity fades. She realizes that she could have had a career as a writer—she says that had she lived, she would have wanted to become the French equivalent of Catharine Macaulay, that is a republican historian and philosopher, also known as a defender of women’s rights, and one of Mary Wollstonecraft’s inspirations (Roland 1905, 264; Walker 2002, 128).

The *Memoirs* offer a complex story of the relationship between Manon Roland and Rousseau’s ideals of domesticity. Certainly, there is something that should alert us in the juxtaposition of young Manon’s sublimating of her bereavement pain into the admiration of Rousseau, and

Rousseau's story of a young woman sublimating her desire for her young lover into domestic virtue and happiness. Is Roland describing a change of direction in her life path, which eventually resulted in the woman she had become before she died, rather than a lifelong allegiance to Rousseau's feminine idea? A letter written at the time to her friend Sophie Cannel seems to suggest that change and progress are what she has in mind: any woman above average, she wrote, would find herself improved after reading *Heloise*, or at least desiring to improve herself (Roland 1864, 168, note).

In the narrative of her own life, Manon sees this time of mourning and recovery as transformational: she becomes, not just a child who wishes she were a Roman general, but a young woman who is preparing to take her place in society as a useful home-maker. This is partly borne out by the ensuing discussion of how to perform one's domestic duty: domesticity became more important to Roland after she read Rousseau, so explaining what she sees as the duties of a woman to her family and home seems a natural continuation of the discussion of Rousseau's *New Heloise*.

The section on domestic duties is important because it carries a broader political message, namely, that domestic happiness ought to guide politics more than general ideas about the common good, and that politicians should study the way in which families are happy or unhappy before deciding on which government is best (Bergès 2016a). But the way in which Roland discusses domestic duties in this passage strongly suggests that she does not, after all, wholeheartedly embrace Rousseau's position in the *New Heloise*.

The difference between Roland and Rousseau is not that Roland wants women to do less domestic work. Roland is demanding of women: "I expect a woman to keep her family's linen and clothing in good order, to feed her children, order, or herself cook dinner" (Roland 1864, 344.) Even in homes where there are servants, she says, the woman of the house should be involved in the family's upkeep: help with the laundry and pick dinner. Roland came from a middle-class background (married to a minor aristocrat) where it might be expected of women to have some skills in housewifery. She was morally outraged by women who did not at least feed their own babies, and was greatly disapproving when Madame d'Eu, a neighbor of hers when she lived near Amiens, sent her newborn out to a wetnurse: "Good God! How strange a newly delivered woman to be found alone without a child seems to me"! (Roland 1913, 53). In this, if nothing else, she was strongly influenced by Rousseau, who believed that mothers' milk and care were the best way to start a child's education. Nonetheless, Roland's account of domesticity differs in several important ways from Rousseau's.

There are several ways in which Manon Roland's view of domesticity differs from Rousseau's Julie's. For one thing, while she is perhaps rather demanding of women in terms of the domestic jobs she would have them take on (doing the laundry in the 18th century is no trip to the laundromat!), she also insists that it need not take up too much of their time. The more she'd ever spent on domestic work and organization herself, she says, was 2 hours per day. And, she adds confidently, there is no need for anyone who has either help or a small family to spend more time than that on domestic duties. Julie, on the other hand, always finds some way to use her time for the benefit of others, so that by the time she is to go to bed, she has not done anything for herself.

Another, significant, difference between Roland and Rousseau's view of women's domestic duties concerns the place of such duties in a woman's overall life. The time Manon Roland does not spend on her domestic duties can be given over to what she really cares about: reading and writing. She tells the reader how as a young woman, she wrote pages and pages of philosophical essays (which were published after her death by a family friend), and as a married woman, she worked with her husband on his encyclopedia of textile manufacture, and later on his ministerial speeches and letters. But Rousseau's Julie has no time for that, and the reader gets the sense that this is supposed to be a good thing: "She no longer studies, she no longer reads; she acts." (Rousseau 1997, 455).

Roland read *The New Heloise* at 20. What would her response be as a mature adult? It is telling that when Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote Roland's life for one of her two volumes on the *Lives of Famous French Men*, she said of Roland that: "Her fame rests even on higher and nobler grounds than that of those who toil with the brain for the instruction of their fellow creatures. She acted." (Shelley 1840, 266). Shelley grants that Roland was a writer—she had, after all, had to have read the *Memoirs* in order to prepare her biography—but she thought that her writing then was also "an emanation of the active principle," the pen being the only tool she had left to defend the republic.

Roland *was* a writer—Shelley is doing her an injustice by saying she was only one when she could no longer act. But she was also an actor. And it may even be true that some of her writing was a substitute for the kind of acting which, as woman, she could not perform. Much of her writing during the revolutionary period was epistolary, letters to friends who could act, telling them what they ought to do for the revolution. She also wrote in her capacity as her husband's unofficial secretary at the Ministry of the Interior, drafting several documents that turned out to influence the course of the revolution, including a letter which led to the dismissal by the king of all his ministers. This sort of writing is very much a form of acting—her words were intended to carry a certain weight

and to bring about certain consequences. But at the same time, they were words, and at the time she died, Roland still considered herself close enough to Rousseau's ideal for women: a quiet housewife who ordered her family's dinner and kept but a few hours to herself each day for private study.

Louise Kéralio Robert: The republican home as political forum

In the previous section, we saw how Manon Roland had modified Rousseau's domestic ideals and views on women's role in society so as to shape a life for herself that was both domestic and politically active. In this, *Private and Public Sphere: when did Things Go Wrong?* will investigate another aspect of Rousseau's thought, his (rural) republicanism, and show that this too may have seemed helpful for women wishing to combine politics and motherhood. I will draw on writings by Louise Kéralio Robert, a friend and associate of Roland, who seemed to embrace such a reading of Rousseau. Kéralio was not merely influenced by Rousseau, but, like Rousseau himself, and many of her contemporaries, including Roland, she also drew inspiration from Roman republicanism. I will argue that her case suggests there is some evidence that the eighteenth-century home was in fact part very much part of the public forum, and that there was also a longer republican tradition that meant, for some French revolutionary thinkers, at least, that politics began at home.

Roman republican history was a powerful source of inspiration for many actors of the French Revolution. Most had read Plutarch and Livy, and cited them generously in their speeches and pamphlets (Sellers 2004). While most Roman exemplars were men, readers were also aware of the famous women of Roman history. Portraits of women such as Lucretia gave an insight into the role played by the home and the family in Roman politics.⁹ One particularly powerful example and role model for the revolutionary hostess was Plutarch's Cornelia, the powerful and virtuous Roman matron who gave everything to her country and hosted and even when all her sons were dead, carried on hosting Rome's luminaries in her villa. Women like Cornelia were central to the making of Roman political and cultural life, and the fact that they were virtuous, and focused only on the public good meant that they were accepted as such (Barnard 1990). And what is particularly relevant here is that these women were influential from their homes, *qua* mothers or wives, rather than because they took on male roles.

The Roman matron was a model for republican women who wanted to retain their place in the home. Rousseau saw this and his version of republicanism, sometimes

called "rural republicanism" (Hunt Botting 2006, 29) also made the home central to the flourishing of the public good. Rousseau's views, developed in his project for a *Constitution of Corsica*, but also in his *Emile* and *New Heloise*, placed the home at the center of politics, on the grounds that it was better for citizens to exercise and develop their virtues close to home than to try and put them to work in the cities, where they would be likely crushed or at least ineffectual.¹⁰

A good republican citizen could contribute better to the common good by staying at home, and making sure that all those that lived in and around the home were exposed to virtuous examples and teaching. This was in part the message carried in *The New Heloise*. The Wolmars, Julie and her husband, are not republican—indeed their home, l'Etange, is organized on a feudal model—nonetheless they exemplify, to some extent, what Rousseau sees as the ideal form of republic. Julie and her husband not only live exemplary lives themselves, but they participate in the life of the peasantry in their domain by helping them make the best of their rural existence and dissuading them from abandoning this fruitful and healthy life by running away to the city.

Although it is her husband who rules the domain, Julie's role, as we saw in the previous section, is non-negligible. She is the "heart" of her home, and it is her virtuous love that retains the peasants at least as much as her husband's rational rule (Rousseau 1997, 432). Like Plutarch's Cornelia, she participates in social transformation, not through direct action, but by using her emotional knowledge to shape the characters of all those around her. Nicole Fermon has argued that the *New Heloise*, in that sense, is central to Rousseau's overall political program, which is to reform the ancient regime by reforming morality and domestic life (Fermon 1994).

Manon Roland, we saw, attempted to combine domesticity and republicanism. Kéralio Robert argued further that the domestic life that was proper for women was a form of political participation in itself. She did so by appealing to Rousseau's rural republicanism, which held that the home was the heart of the republic, the place where the republic started, and where its flourishing was guaranteed. Women, being the heart of the home, on this model, were therefore very much part of the political life, even if they never set foot in a club. This model suited Kéralio Robert, who believed that women must learn to prefer domestic work to politics, and that this distribution of roles was essential to the well-being of the nation. This reasoning enabled Kéralio Robert to claim political power for women, without thinking that she was in any way undermining the integrity of the republic, or participating in "behind closed doors" intrigues.

Louise Kéralio was a historian, political philosopher, and printer. Kéralio, who had been elected at the Academy

of Arras in 1787, was already a published author when the Revolution came. Her most notable works were a history of Elizabeth I and an anthology of writings by French women in several volumes which was interrupted by lack of funds.¹¹ At the beginning of the Revolution, Kéralio started a newspaper, *Le Journal d'Etat et du Citoyen*, which she edited and wrote for, together with her father, and later her husband, Pierre-François-Joseph Robert. Given her own journalistic activities and her efforts to publicize women's political and literary accomplishments in her own work, one might expect Kéralio to defend the political participation of women. Yet, when fellow newspaper editor Jacques-Pierre Brissot challenged her for celebrating in writing the women who fetched the King from Versailles and brought him and his family to the Assembly, she made it clear that she did not in fact encourage women to be present in the public forum:

[W]omen should not make a great spectacle of themselves. [...] A love of publicity is bad for modesty, from the loss of that comes distaste for domestic work, and from idleness, principles are forgotten and from lack of morals arise all of public disorders. [...] We should be forced [when we need their political input] to pursue women inside their homes, their presence should be hard to obtain, and rare, offered as a favour. (MS Archives Nationales, 446AP/7, 31 - my translation)

But while Kéralio thought women should confine themselves to their domestic world, she did not believe that this meant that women's socio-political activity was any less important than men's. When the first constitution was drafted, Emmanuel Sieyès proposed that women would only be "passive" citizens and as such would not participate directly in the building and running of the republic but would benefit from its reforms.¹² Kéralio's response was immediate and clear:

We don't understand what [Sieyès] means when he says that not all citizens can take an active part in the formation of the active powers of the government, that women and children have no active influence on the polity. Certainly, women and children are not employed. But is this the only way of actively influencing the polity? The discourses, the sentiments, the principles engraved on the souls of children from their earliest youth, which it is women's lot to take care of, the influence which they transmit, in society, among their servants, their retainers, are these indifferent to the fatherland?.. Oh! At such a time, let us avoid reducing anyone, no matter who they are, to a humiliating uselessness. (*Le Mercure National*, 20 August 1789, my translation).

How did Kéralio reconcile her view that women should stay home, with the claim that women had an "active

influence on the polity"? The answer lies in the fact that, like Roland, Kéralio was an admirer of Rousseau. Like Roland, she was a reader of Rousseau, and was convinced that there was a place for women in a republic that was central to the flourishing of the nation, even though that place was in the home rather than in the Assembly. She agreed with Rousseau that state reform had to go through the reform of family life, and that women had a crucial role to play there nurturing republican values and giving birth to new citizens.¹³

Although she did not disagree with Sieyès that women should stay home, rather than participate in debates taking place in public *fora*, Kéralio believed that the home was just as important a place for the making and cultivating of the republic as the Assembly was. Women could participate, she argued, by nurturing republican values, not just in their children, and husband, but any one they came into contact with, that is, servants, tradespeople, neighbors, friends who came to visit, and, of course, those frequented a woman's circle, or salon, as it came to be called a century later. The 18th century home was not isolated in the way that homes today are. And being at home often meant being in the way of a great traffic of ideas and values. The housewife then was in a position either to let this traffic run over her, or direct it. And by directing it, as Roland and Kéralio certainly did, she could participate in the nation's politics.

Both Roland and Kéralio believed that the home was a political place, and that women in the home were political actors. Both attempted to make use of this ideal of the republican home, and, following the models of republican matron portrayed by Plutarch, and developed by Rousseau, they did their best to participate in the building of the French Republic. But both soon came to the realization that the domestic stage would not allow them sufficient political influence to achieve what they wanted to achieve, to be as useful as they knew they could be. The women of the revolution, like the men, perceived themselves as virtuous in the roman way, that is, they had civic virtues which placed their desire for the good of the republic above any personal consideration, so that a good life for them involved doing what they could for the republic. To some extent, this could be done from the home, as the republican matron did have an important role to play in late 18th century France as in Rome. But this was not enough. And both Roland and Kéralio saw this. For Roland this manifested itself in a desire to leave her home, every day to visit revolutionary clubs:

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 (Roland 1900, 307).

For Kéralio, the recognition of the limits of the Rousseau model of domestic participation was made clear when she needed to set up her printing business. In November 1789, a few months after her response to Sieyès, she petitioned the Bureau of Royal Administration of the Book Trade to set up her own press, quoting article 11 of the *Rights of Man*. But the Bureau responded that article 11 did not apply to women and that she could only become a printer if she was the widow of a printer.¹⁴

In the final two sections, I argue that there are two clear markers in the fall of the republican housewife: first the background women like Roland and Kéralio used to construe their persona as political actors who were also good housewives was flawed. Rousseau never intended for women to acquire political power by staying at home, and this was reflected in the attitude even of men who were in general sympathetic to women's political participation, such as the Girondin who was friend and correspondent to both Roland and Kéralio, Jacques-Pierre Brissot. Secondly, Roland and Kéralio's personas were grounded in republican ideals, but these ideals started to give way to liberal ones as early as 1795 and the home could not hold the same place in a liberal democracy as it did in a republic.

Gender prejudice and Republicanism

One striking aspect of French revolutionary feminism is that many of those who saw themselves as women's allies and defenders of women's rights were prevented from offering their full support because of their background allegiance to Rousseau's political thought. This was true already to some extent of Roland and Kéralio, in that their Rousseau-inspired political stance meant that they saw their participation as on the whole limited to the home. Here I will show how Rousseau's influence also prejudiced the attitude of one male contemporary of Roland and Kéralio, who while in general supportive of women's citizenship, nonetheless did not fully embrace its consequences. This partial ally was Jacques-Pierre Brissot, whom we discovered in his exchange with Kéralio, did not approve of women entering the Assembly.

The exchange between Kéralio and Brissot took place in the Fall 1789. Kéralio had written in her newspaper a praise of the women who walked to Versailles to fetch the King and his family and brought them to Assembly. Brissot had published a response in which he described the women who walked to Versailles as "revolting" and their entering the Assembly to deliver the King as akin to a religious transgression.

While such a response was not particularly shocking, Edmund Burke's description of those same women when they escorted the King to Paris was far more unpleasant:

[...] the royal captives who followed in the train were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women. (Burke, 1986, 165).

Brissot's description, if less dramatic, is nonetheless disturbing. No-one looked to Burke for a defense of women's rights, but Brissot was in principle and in practice a great supporter of individual women, an admirer and promoter of their work. He was close to Kéralio, Manon Roland, and Olympe de Gouges. He had been responsible for the French Theatre agreeing to put on Gouges's play on slavery, after they had sat on it for several years. He had also invited Gouges to join his Society for the Friends of the Blacks. Brissot had offered Manon Roland her first outlet for her political writings, publishing some of her letters to him in his newspaper, anonymously, but described as of "A Lady from Lyon" or "Une Romaine". Brissot and Kéralio were colleagues, who had agreed to publicize each other's papers and occasionally lent and borrowed money to and from each other in order to meet a printing deadline. Brissot was also a great admirer of Catharine Macaulay and had been responsible for bringing her work to the notice of French readers. Clearly, Brissot was an ally, who was not afraid to support the activism of strong women. But when such an ally also argues, politely and with restraint that women should not do politics openly, then it is difficult not to listen.

Why should a person who was politically sound, and apparently unthreatened by strong and talented women, turn out to hold such demeaning, negative views of women? In most cases, we have no way of knowing. But Brissot, in the *Memoirs* he wrote in the prison de l'Abbaye (in the cell Manon Roland had just vacated, and where she'd begun her own *Memoirs*), gives us an insightful account of his own prejudice. He describes his attitude to politically engaged women in 1782, when he was visiting Geneva. Because it is such a rare moment of clarity, I reproduce it entirely:

[...] politics seemed a heavy and boring science, unsuitable for a pretty woman. To please and to entertain was the great art that women were to learn their entire life. And if the philosophy I professed forced them to take up other studies, it was of the virtues that could render a wife or a mother's company useful and pleasant for her spouse and children. In a word, a woman given to politics seemed to me a monster, or at least, a new kind of "precieuse ridicule". There is no doubt that, had I thought through my

opinions, I would soon have discovered their absurdity, and would have turned the ridicule against myself instead of against political women. But in most of my life's external circumstances, carried by a whirlwind, I was more the slave to public prejudices than the apostate of truth. [...] (Brissot 1910, 273–4, my translation).

Rousseau's influence becomes clear in the next few sentences: Brissot goes on to praise Genevan women, saying of his own wife that she ought to have born in the country of the adorable Julie, because she exhibited so much of the same womanly qualities as Rousseau's heroine. At the time of writing his *Memoirs*, that is, at the age of 39, while he was in prison awaiting his appointment with the Guillotine, Brissot recognized the absurdity of his position. In an attempt to understand it, he attributed it to intellectual complaisance, and to his fashionable love for Rousseau. It may have been difficult, when carried by the whirlwind of prejudice, to think twice about one's attitude to women, especially if this attitude was born out by the arguments of one's favorite philosopher.

Rousseau-inspired gender prejudice was particularly insidious because it praised women while putting them down, and because it appealed to women themselves who saw in Rousseau's writings, a glorification of their roles as mothers. This glorification meant that women had a different role to play in society from men, a role that did not require them to go out into the public forum, or indeed to be capable of thinking about politics. Rousseau in any case did not believe women capable of the sort of abstract thought such as is needed for politics, but should only make use of their intellectual faculties, such as they are, in the pursuit of their domestic duties, or the study of men and what pleases them (Rousseau 1966, 507). Brissot also admits to agreeing with Rousseau's opinion of women's intellect in his youth, when he thought that political thinking was too "heavy and boring and unsuited to occupying the mind of a pretty woman" (Brissot, 1901, 272–3, my translation).

One reason why women may have looked past Rousseau's denigration of their intellectual capacities is that they understood that their roles as mothers, which Rousseau thought crucial to a republic, included the education of future citizens. This was Wollstonecraft's argument and plea to Talleyrand, in the preface of her *Vindication to the Rights of Women*. Women needed to be educated, she said, so they could in turns educate their children. But this was a dangerous argumentative move, one that could be turned against women, sometimes by women. Women's roles as educators could only go so far—from the perspective of Rousseau readers—before it had to be taken up by men. In a letter to Brissot, Louise Kéralio-Robert explained how she saw her role as the new mother of a future citizen. Her role, she said, was to

prepare her *citoyenne* to receive her civic education from her father as soon as she is old enough.¹⁵

Women, on Rousseau's model, although they may have derived their political and civic value from their work as educators did not yet think that they could be responsible for more than the first years of education. This seems a far cry from the idea that women are crucial to the development of the republic, and one is tempted to conclude that there is but a small distance between women's roles as mothers, thus conceived and hence their value as citizens, and the use of baby bottles. In any case it should not be surprising that a defense of women's political participation based on such a slippery model should ultimately have failed. Rousseau's model of the domestic republican woman was not intended to empower women politically.

Germaine de Staël: The Home and the Birth of Liberalism

Historian Helena Rosenblatt has recently argued the first philosophical defenders of liberalism were not, as is often claimed, Locke or Smith, but Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant, and that liberalism for them was the position needed in order to draw the revolution to an end and maintain the republic (Rosenblatt 2018, 50). Constant's role in the birth of French liberalism is well-known, in so far as Isaiah Berlin cites it as the principal inspiration of his own view of negative liberty or freedom from interference (Berlin 2002, 209). But although Constant was a strong defender of liberalism, and published several influential pamphlets, it is Staël's own (including some unpublished during her lifetime) philosophical writings that shed more light on why the domestic republicanism of Roland and Kéralio had to fail.

Liberalism, for Staël and Constant, meant first and foremost the adoption of liberal values, the virtues which she saw essential to the survival of the republic, and in particular those virtues that are central to Christianity, generosity, self-sacrifice, and charity (Rosenblatt 2018, 53). These are also virtues that she attributes to women, to those citizens who are more focused on the domestic than the political—politics being the source of egoistic and violent traits, rather than gentle virtues. As Evelin Groot notes in a recent piece on Stael:

When De Staël refers to the mother's "heart" of her female readers, or the feeling of *pitié* of the political actors, she directs the attention of her audience to the basic human notion of fellow-feeling: feeling empathy and compassion towards other people who are suffering (Groot 2021, 147).

As well as a set of values and virtues, Staël's liberalism also introduced the focus on the individual that is

distinctive of the liberalism(s) we now know. The passions that can either make or break a state, for Staël, start with individuals, and it is the happiness of individuals that makes up that of the state (Groot 2021, 133). This focus was present also in her account of the relationship between family and state. The “Nation,” Staël thought, had taken too much precedence over individuals and families during the Revolution, requiring at times a father to sacrifice children and wife: “Family duties, only come second in a republic and the time, fortune, life of a man belong to the state in preference to his father, his wife, his children” (Stael 1906, 231, my translation). A father, she thought—reasonably enough—ought to be able to turn to his family and look for their welfare without this being a threat to the state. The Revolution, which demanded allegiance first to the Nation, meant that putting one’s family first was seen as an act of treason of sorts.

Staël did not see liberal value’s push toward individualism as nefarious or contrary to the common good in anyway. On the contrary, she thought that liberal values were a “lever against egoism” (Rosenblatt 2002, 53), an incentive for the well-off to think about the lives of those who worked for them, the poor, and help bring it about that mothers did not have to watch their children starve. Placing individual morality ahead of national allegiance, she thought, was a surer way of ensuring the common good. A kind, liberal minded individual would not let children die. The sovereign nation itself, when at its most powerful, that is, during the last years of the Revolution, had shown itself quite ruthless in its treatment of the poor as much as the rich, and women and children, as much as men. Stael argues that a government where liberal values prevail (even over democratic ones) will “protect” the most vulnerable, that is, the poor, women, and children.

It is this emphasis on protection and kindness toward the vulnerable that led to the unbalancing, and ultimately tipping over of the ideal of the Republican family. For Stael, it is the father who represents the family, and is responsible, in the first instance, for its protection. The state and other people need simply make sure that they do not come in the way of a man’s protecting his family, and at the same time exercise a certain amount of generosity if they see a family struggling. In the Republican family all were, to some extent, accountable. For a woman to be a good citizen, she had to ensure that her children were taught to be good Republicans, she had to set an example, by occasionally joining in street demonstrations, but not too often.¹⁶ A married woman, a mother were more than the passive recipients of protection in the republic. They were, as Kéralio argued, actively engaged in shaping the republic. When Kéralio complained that women did not officially

qualify as active citizens under the new constitution, she claimed that their activity within the family home contributed to the flourishing of the nation. But for Stael, it seems that only the tip of the family, the person who goes outside the home, contributes, and that it is this person’s individual freedoms, that is, the freedom to care for those inside the home, which ought to be protected. This focus on the individual as adult male is part of what feminists find hard to accept in liberalism.

One feminist thinker who famously took issue with the liberal conception of the family, *qua* liberal, was Iris Marion Young who argued that socio-political ideals of independence and non-interference, such as they are put forward by liberalism, are “male-biased and operative in relegating dependent people and their usually female caretakers to an inferior status” (Young 1995, 536). Yet, even Young did not think this was an indictment of the republican concept of liberty as non-domination, as she understood that what republicanism gets right is the idea that “[t]he social constitutions of agents and their acting in relations of interdependence means that the ability to separate and be independent of others is rare, if it appears at all” (Young 2000, 231). But the concept of independence of espoused by liberal thinkers, she claimed, lends itself to a “male-biased” interpretation, one that obscures the relationships that happen within the home.

We should not, of course, direct Young’s indictment of liberal independence back against Staël. Staël’s thought was still very close to republicanism, in particular because it embraced virtue as a political necessity. But the focus on Staël’s conception of the family during and after the Terror does give us an insight on what may have happened to women’s participation as France moved from a more republican to a liberal government. The home became the protected domain of the individual, and the only individuals who could participate politically were adult men. Had women’s political role within the republican family been more firmly defined, and less anchored in Rousseau’s dubious ideal of motherhood, the republican family as a platform for women’s political participation may have survived the advent of liberalism. But it was not and it did not.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Sandrine Bergès  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6904-3998>

Notes

1. The idea that there are two distinct spheres of human activity—private and public—is in fact quite recent. See Vickery 1993, for a criticism of the narrative which sees the public/private sphere emerging at the end of the 18th century after a “golden age” in which men and women shared activities and status. She suggests we review the evidence both before and after that date. Carol Pateman also argues that its weight as an objection against political theories that rely on participation in politics as necessarily excluding women is perhaps lesser than is sometimes claimed (Pateman, 1980).
2. Wollstonecraft’s own take on the public/private distinction and women’s political participation should be read in part separately from her argument for equality. She pushed for women to participate in politics, and she pushed for them to get out of the home more (and for men to spend more time in the home), but there is not an obvious link between the two. Women had to participate in politics because they were rational beings. They had to nurture children—with their husbands’ help—because it seemed they were the best placed to do so. On this see Bergès 2013, 2016b, and Hunt Botting 2014, 268.
3. The Girondins were a group of Jacobins who were opposed to the Montagnard faction, led by Robespierre, Danton, and Marat. The two groups clashed first about the war (the Girondins were pro-war, the Montagnards against), and later about the King’s execution (the Girondins did not, on the whole, want the King executed). Famous Girondins included Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Nicolas de Condorcet.
4. The clubs were “Fraternal Society of Patriots of Both Sexes,” and “The Social Circle,” or “Society of the Friends of Truth”. See also “On the emancipation of women” in Condorcet 2012, 6–12.
5. On Rousseau’s negative take on women, see Weiss 1987, Rosenblatt, 2002, and Pateman 1989.
6. The identity of Robespierre’s female triumvirate is unclear. Marisa Linton 2013 suggests that the three women are Manon Roland, Louise Keralio-Robert, and Sophie de Grouchy. Her source is a footnote in a 1939 edition of *Le Défenseur de la Constitution* by Gustave Laurent. Gita May 1964 also names those three women (using the same source) in her 1964 *De Jean-Jacques Rousseau a Manon Roland: Essai sur la Sensibilité Pre-romantique et Revolutionnaire*.
7. Danton to the Convention, 29 September 1792. Cited in Reynold 2012, 221.
8. Marisa Linton (2013, 156) notes that Manon Roland was the most politically acute of the Girondins.
9. Plutarch, in particular, discusses virtuous women in *On the Bravery of Women*, but also in several chapters of his *Parallel Lives*.

10. On this and the influence Rousseau’s republicanism had on Roland, see Bergès 2016a.
11. For a description of Keralio’s anthology, see Mistacco 2021.
12. Sieyes made sure to emphasize that this was a temporary measure only, and did not have principled objections to women’s political participation.
13. This has led some readers to qualify her branch of republicanism as “sexist” though it is not clear whether she could not also be called a difference feminist. See Geffroy, (2006), Green, 2014, 211.
14. See Hesse 1989, 479. Note that Kéralio did found a press, with the help of her father and later her husband.
15. “Adieu, Je raisonne à perte d’haleine quoique je sente que je ne suis pas forte de tête. Vous savez qu’au bonheur d’être femme d’un vrai citoyen, je joins actuellement celui d’être mère, et d’avoir ma citoyenne a préparer aux instructions qu’elle recevra de son père lorsqu’elle sera en âge d’en profiter.” 446AP/7 Dossier 2, G a Ma, 34. Date unclear.
16. “Women, do you want to be republicans? Love, follow and teach the laws that remind your children to exercise their rights. Take glory in the brilliant actions they may 1 day perform on behalf of the fatherland, because these speak well of you; be simple in your dress, laborious in your household work; never join popular assemblies with the aim of speaking there; but by your occasional presence there, encourage your children to participate; then your fatherland will bless you because you will truly have done for it what it expects of you.” From *Le Moniteur*, November 1793. In Dauban, 1864, ccxlix.

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