Mercer on Fishman, 'From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France'

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Sarah Fishman’s From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution “examines how and why ideas about women’s and men’s lives, gender roles for men and women, courtship, love and marriage, spousal relations, parenting, childhood, and adolescence changed in the twenty years from France’s liberation in 1944 to the mid-1960s” (p. xi). Fishman argues that, despite retrospective characterizations of the 1950s as an ultraconservative decade, contemporaries understood the fifties as a time of modernization. Viewed from the Vichy era rather than the post-1968 present, the fifties look much more progressive. Much of what is commonly associated with the 1960s was already evident in the prior decade in an evolution that nevertheless did not call into question fundamentals.

The research is based on two archival corpuses: advice columns in women’s magazines and juvenile court case files. This is thus a study first and foremost of the ideas held by advice columnists and the social workers who wrote reports for the juvenile court system. Fishman excels at teasing out the subtle and gradual shifts in the writings of advice columnists and social workers from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. As she notes, these representations are not to be confused with reality. Indeed, in some cases, for example, the anxiety over the “suffocating mother” figure, there is no evidence for its existence.

In chapter 1, “Men, Women and Family Life, 1945-1949,” Fishman contrasts Vichy’s model of gender and family to that of the postwar era. Where Vichy had blamed feminism and excessive liberation of women for a perceived crisis of the family, political equality of women was uncontroversial after 1945. While gender roles appeared unchanged on the surface and female roles in particular were still very much anchored in the family, attacks on feminism ended, women were accorded a role of authority in the family, and the premise that not all women were destined for a domestic life achieved a broad acceptance. The hypermasculinist rhetoric of Vichy was displaced by a new conception of fatherhood that emphasized not just the father’s authority in the family but his relationship to his spouse and children: “During the war, fatherhood was a status. After the war, fatherhood was becoming a relationship” (p. 15).

What sparked this transformation? The discrediting of the archconservative model of Vichy helped, but Fishman identifies two forces of change in particular. First, the postwar economic recovery, affluence, and consumerism, buttressed by the state and the system of family allowances,
transformed the material reality of people’s lives. Second, the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Simone de Beauvoir, and Alfred Kinsey “eroded previously unquestioned ideas about male/female relationships and sexuality” (p. 32). The most interesting inclusion here is Kinsey, and worthy of further consideration. It is not always clear just how far such ideas diffused to the broader population or how they were received. Nevertheless, Fishman demonstrates that they began to appear in advice columns and the reports of social workers. Family life was increasingly viewed from a psychological rather than moral perspective, and voices of advice were “notably more practical and less moralizing, dismissive, and judgmental” (pp. 96-97). Freudian psychology, existential ideas, and discussion of sexuality fostered a gradual transformation of the traditional models of women, men, and children into autonomous individuals endowed with their own psychologies, sex drive, and desires.

Fishman traces changes to the conception of marriage, parenting, and childhood in chapters 3 to 5 under the twin factors of affluence and the autonomous sexual self. Marriage was reconceived, fathers expected to be more emotionally engaged, and a more egalitarian conception of spousal relations emerged. Marriage remained, however, the presumed goal for almost all women, and, despite some challenges, the double standard on adultery remained. A good indication of the gradual nature of these shifts is the advertising of products linked to the rhythm method, promoted as an aid to conception in 1953 but as a tool to avoid pregnancy by 1959. The 1950s also heralded “a democratization of adolescence” (p. 86), the individualization of the child. The use of harsh discipline fell out of favor and, consequently, gave rise to the caricature of the spoiled child who dominated the family (another anxiety for which evidence is scant). Chapters 6 to 8 trace the gradual transformation of youth roles, dating, courtship, and marriage in the 1960s. While marriage remained the primary goal for women, this was complemented by the idea that a woman might legitimately pursue her interests via paid employment and, even in the early 1960s, the suggestion that husbands and children might share the tasks of household labor. The expectation that a woman be a virgin at marriage weakened, as did the disapprobation of divorce and single parents.

The book ends on the eve of 1968. How does the radical challenge of those events relate to the gradual, evolutionary change depicted here? On the one hand, Fishman argues that “much of what we associate with the 1960s was already evident, well beyond embryonic, in the 1950s” (p. 115). On the other hand, Fishman notes that expectations evolved “without calling into question the fundamental vision” (p. 179). This raises the question of when and how gradual evolution provokes or generates a radical, fundamental challenge. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this book (understandably given the scale of literature on 1968 and after). Fishman suggests that “the questioning of the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s made the eventual challenge starting in 1968 possible” (p. 198). Yet the gradual, gentle questioning appears closely connected to the persistent limits, nor is there much sense of a significant push from below against the fundamental limits on gender roles, which would characterize the 1970s. It would be interesting to know how women’s magazines, advice columnists, and social workers reacted to the assault on family, gender roles, and sexual relations of the post-1968 era. From one perspective it makes sense to argue that the 68ers and feminists adopted or adapted the model elaborated in the 1950s of an autonomous individual with sexual desires no longer confined by tradition or morality. Yet the step from gradual evolution to full-frontal challenge is not necessarily obvious. The transformations of the 1950s in this account are characterized by confusion as to new norms and anxieties about their impact, but rarely by social conflict or by demands welling up from below that will mark the era after 1968. Nevertheless, From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution makes an important contribution to our understanding of the 1950s
and sweeps away the caricatures of that decade all too easily invoked after 1968.


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