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Gender equality under the law is and has been a polemic theme of politics for centuries, albeit one that has often taken a backseat to other topics of social justice in the public sphere. On the whole, it is men who possess the prestigious power of society, while the relative state of women varies greatly from country to country, taking a multitude of forms. Upon examination of the so-called "history" of Western civilization, one finds that truly feminist movements, sociopolitical stances and organized action aimed at equality of the sexes, are fairly recent developments, and it is well worth the effort to study the successes and failures of these movements. Two movements that are strikingly similar, though rarely compared, are those of France and Chile, a pairing that at first glance seems rather strange. However, given Europe's long-time status as a model for Latin America combined with France's domination of Europe at the time of Chile's independence, the correspondence between the two is slightly more understandable. At present, after two histories more or less similar, the two feminist movements find themselves in quite different situations. In France, feminist movements remain present in the public eye thanks to concerns of parity in government, whereas in Chile, the movement is disappearing from the public discourse even as its agenda has begun to take hold. By examining these two countries, one begins to be able to evaluate whether or not feminism is actually a movement that must always be present to ensure progress towards gender equality, or if it can actually be an ephemeral, effective movement whose purpose is to change the conscience of the society in question.

Chile, like the majority of Latin American nations, was part of the Spanish colony before its eventual independence. Its capital, Santiago, was founded in 1541, on the *Cerro Huelén*—now known as *Cerro Santa Lucía*—by Pedro de Valdivia and his band, which counted in its ranks just one woman, Sister Inés de Suárez. This ratio was typical of the Spanish conquests, which were aimed at finding gold to bring back to Spain. The Chileans constitute a *criolla* race, for the only women on the voyages were nuns, representative of the Catholic influence on that society and by logical consequence on the Chilean woman. Spanish women, considered to be hindrances, thus rarely figured in the trips, while Spanish men murdered the Araucanian (native Chileans) during their conquests. These two factors in concert led to systematic rape of Araucanian women and the *machismo* that still dominates Chilean society¹.

Chile celebrates its independence on September 18, to commemorate the assembly called to Santiago in 1810 in response to the kidnapping of the king of Spain by Napoleon I. Despite the best efforts of the royalists, the Chileans declared their independence and crafted a constitution two years later. Chile remained one of the oldest and most stable democracies in the Americas, until the coup d'état on September 11, 1973. Three years earlier, the country had become the first democracy in the world to freely elect a Socialist president, Salvador Allende, who immediately began to nationalize the copper mines (the source of Chile's most profitable export since the beginning of the twentieth century), and had put into action an agrarian reform plan to redistribute farms to the poor. The coup, masterminded and led by General Augusto Pinochet, preceded a violent dictatorship, the arrival of neoliberalism, and a new constitution, which remains in place to this very day, though amended. In 1989, the people were given the chance to vote for an end to the dictatorship, which they did with some trepidation, and

¹ “Donne in Cile: La ‘sucursal del machismo’” in *Effe*. Oct.-Nov. 1974, p. 25.

democracy returned to Chile under the presidency of Patricio Aylwin. Women were among the most vocal supporters of democracy during this time, though their efforts were not rewarded.

Today, Chile is quite stable and fairly advanced for a Latin American nation. Its economy is the strongest in South America, although poverty remains nearly 20 percent, including an indigent population of five percent², still a great drop from just ten years ago. The country has a population of 15 million, including 7.6 million women. The outgoing president is again a Socialist, Ricardo Lagos, just like his successor, Michelle Bachelet, who, despite the fact that she is a self-professed agnostic who has had a divorce and a child out of wedlock, managed to win the presidency over a male conservative billionaire in a very Catholic nation. The facts that a woman is president and that women comprise half the cabinet positions are all the more remarkable since women's suffrage dates only back to 1949.

Chilean feminism is a movement that began at the dawn of the twentieth century, but it did not appear *ex nihilo*. Previously, in lieu of a feminist movement, public discourse about women was of a rather philosophic character concerning feminine nature, so to speak, a serious debate between the liberals, secularists opposed to the Church's influence, and the conservatives, who supported it. The woman was but a pawn on the chessboard of Chilean politics, a strategic argument in a larger debate about secularism, rather than as real entities deserving of the protections and privileges of all citizens. Women were of particular importance, for they raised the children and future citizens of the nation and therefore inculcated the values of the society in them; since women were perceived to be under a stronger influence from the Church, it was the liberals who opposed women's suffrage. The results of these discussions are not to be ignored: women had their own parochial schools (whose teachers were often French nuns) from 1838 on;

² Fundación para la Superación de la Pobreza. "El Balance de una década".
<www.fundacionpobreza.cl/fnp_secciones.asp?Id_Seccion=23> (15 mai 2005)

the University of Chile, the public, lay university, became the first in Latin America to admit women³; and the government created high schools for girls in 1891. Yet women remained a topos of public debate without actively and massively participating in it until the twentieth century.

Indeed, Chilean feminism was born at the same time as the movements in the other Southern Cone nations, namely Argentina and Uruguay. There are some who attribute its origins to an intellectual movement that began in 1907, which demanded the end of institutionalized inequality inscribed in the constitution based on the Napoleonic Code⁴. These aristocratic feminists held meetings to educate the public and organize the movement. However, one must not overlook the role of the blue-collar feminist movement that had begun three years earlier. According to Elizabeth Hutchison, between 1902 and 1907, “Feminine activism bloomed in unisex or mixed unions;” in fact, women conducted 16 strikes, and were participants in 151 of the 371 strikes of that era⁵. Moreover, it was the worker’s movement that first created a feminist press, including *La Alborada (The Dawn)*, a newspaper for and by blue-collar female workers that addressed themes such as suffrage and mistreatment by men, and *La Palanca (The Lever)*; educated women waited until 1915 to found their own press⁶. Yet all of a sudden in 1908, the blue-collar feminist movement lost its steam and dissipated into the crowd, a foreshadowing of future feminist movements.

In France, the feminist movement was born out of similar origins, though far earlier. During the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, there was no feminist movement to speak of,

³ Aguayo de Sota, Carmen Gloria. *Des Chiliennes: des femmes en lutte et Carmen Gloria Aguayo de Sota*. Paris: des Femmes, 1982. p. 112

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hutchison, Elizabeth. “La Defensa de nuestras hijas” in *Disciplina y desacato: construcción de identidad en los siglos XIX y XX*, Lorena Godoy et al. Santiago: SUR, CEDEM, 1995. pp. 260-261

⁶ Lavrín, Asunción. “The Ideology of Feminism in the Southern Cone, 1900-1940”. Washington: Working Papers, The Wilson Center. 1986. pp. 24-5

but the woman and her nature were a frequent theme of intellectual discourse among the elite from the time of the *Querelle du Roman de la Rose* (the Feud of the Story of the Rose), a series of letters exchanged between Christine de Pisan and Jean de Meun over the misogyny of the *Roman de la Rose*, in which de Pisan makes a strong case for equal respect for the role of women in a society, without proposing any actual change in the social order. This debate over the respect for women gave way to the feminist movement of the French Revolution. At that time, women played a crucial part in the success of the Revolution, and at times even battled among the men or in their own battalions. It seemed as though their efforts had been for naught when the victorious Revolutionary men, with whom they were supposed to be in solidarity, conferred upon them a paucity of rights, including the right to divorce. After years of chaos in France, Napoleon I restored political and social order at the expense of women (as well as other French minorities of which women were obviously a major part) who were, according to his famous Code, lifelong minors, and feminism was effectively neutralized until 1830.

The wave of feminism of 1830 was blue-collar, which probably had a strong influence on the Southern Cone, given that in Argentina and Uruguay many feminist leaders were émigrées from Europe. In France, women were in solidarity with men while the latter clamored to gain so-called “universal” suffrage. When the men finally got the right to vote, their support for women’s right to vote was conspicuous by its absence and women had to wait even longer for the right to vote. A women’s press appeared around this time, the first newspaper being *La femme libre* (*The Free Woman*) in 1832 and the more famous *La Fronde* (*The Revolt*), created in 1872 by the feminist Marguerite Durand, for whom the city of Paris named its small library devoted to women’s studies. From 1875 on, French feminism witnessed the genesis of two mutually exclusive strategies: the quest for social equality with the goal of eventually procuring political

equality, and the pursuit of political equality as a means to social equality. The latter gave rise to the reincarnation of the battle for universal suffrage while questioning the Napoleonic Code.

Chilean and French feminist movements followed more or less the same course after the blue-collar feminist movements, save the absence of the division of goals in Chile. The two focused their attention on the right to vote while the government managed to delay this concession. French feminism made great strides during this time and just before the First World War, France was ready to accept women in the public sphere as electors. During the interwar years, the House of Delegates resolved no fewer than three times to give women suffrage, but the conservative Senate refused. In April of 1944, after a misogynistic occupation and government of Vichy, women finally received to right to vote thanks to an executive order by President Charles de Gaulle followed by a constitutional amendment the following year. After that, the feminist movement did little until the second wave of feminism, to be discussed below. Following a similar progression, in Chile it was a time of national articulation of feminist goals that achieved great success⁷, overcoming the distrust of both the left and the right and obtaining suffrage in municipal elections in 1933 and in national elections in 1949 (though their first presidential election would not occur until 1952). This great success preceded the *silencio feminista* (silence of feminism), a time in which feminism positively vanished from the public discourse and feminist organizations (with the exception of the *Movimiento de la Emancipación de la Mujer Chilena*, MEMCH, the most important group in the movement), nearly dissolve until 1978, “the reappearance of a feminist conscience” under the military dictatorship⁸.

At this stage of their developments, the two histories diverge. French feminism witnessed the birth of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (Women’s Liberation Movement), a

⁷ Kirkwood, Julieta. “La Política del Feminismo en Chile.” FLACSO, Santiago de Chile. N° 183, June 1983. p. 18

⁸ Ibid. p. 19

group of radical (and a couple moderate) feminists founded in 1968. The group worked to obtain rights such as the right to free abortion and the recognition of the right to live as a lesbian. Currently the movement Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores Nor Submissive) remains active, launching publicity complains and holding protests. In Chile the dictatorship that began during the *silencio feminista* had many unintended consequences, antithetical to the desires of Pinochet. Women were exploited by the neo-capitalist system and the country's machismo, often working as fruitpickers for up to 16 hours a day for pittance and unable to survive the seasonal unemployment without resorting to prostitution. However, women qua workers actually benefited in a way that chagrined the dictatorship, for they managed to earn their own wage (thereby reducing their dependence on men), had a forum to discuss their domestic problems with other women at the workplace, and developed the capacity to fight back against the murderous dictatorship⁹, thus giving women the real option of independence. It is also worth mentioning that Pinochet, by taking away all the power from poor men, emasculated the men of proletariat, which enabled women to assert a more "masculine" presence. Following these modest advances, the feminist conscience reawoke in 1978, and women's groups became active once again, fighting against the dictatorship and then inclusion in the new democracy. Now, having been well integrated in the public life that has accompanied socioeconomic development, both feminists and their critics agree that the public presence of women's movements is diminishing in proportion as their ideas, such as the right to divorce and to abortion, are being incorporated into the Chilean conscience¹⁰.

⁹ Tinsman, Heidi. "Reviving Feminist Materialism: Gender and Neoliberalism in Pinochet's Chile" in *Signs*. aut. 2000, v. 26, n° 1. p. 146-7

¹⁰ Ríos Tobar, Marcela. "Chilean Feminism(s) in the 1990s: Paradoxes of an Unfinished Tradition" in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 5, n° 2, juillet 2003, p. 257

Chile's case would seem to indicate that feminism in that country has once again begun to enter a *silencio feminista*, where women and feminists have not necessarily stopped working, but their message appears less important to society. Thus the question appears, is it truly necessary to have a feminist movement with a public presence. The case of France seems to pose a counterargument that the feminist movement is of utmost importance. Until the blue-collar feminist movement, the condition of women had progressed at a snail's pace. Sexism in France was not recognized as such; rather, it went without saying that women were subjugated owing to their supposedly natural inferiority. Any advances had not been won by women, but rather granted to them by men, whatever their motivations might have been. During the post-Revolutionary years, women who had shed blood to liberate their country from the tyranny of the monarch did not even get the right to vote. The great victory of the era was the ability for either spouse to file for a divorce, but it is questionable that this was truly a feminist victory rather than an attempt by the male Revolutionaries to cast off the yoke of the Church, which forbade divorce. Conversely, when feminists got organized and made their presence and intentions known, their actions precipitated one change after another, social as well as political. This tendency has not yet ceased: the only time in which women did not gain many rights under the French Republic was a period of reduced (but still extant) activity on the part of feminists, just before the second wave of feminism mentioned earlier.

One might say that the case is the same for Chilean feminism, but there the story is slightly more complicated. On the one hand, it is indisputable that feminism catalyzed the acquisition of rights for women in Chile. On the other hand, the state of affairs for women had steadily increased throughout the nineteenth century, when a women's movement was inconceivable, and the improvement in women's condition was not so much feminist as anti-

ecclesiastical. In addition, although it would be absurd to say that women benefited overall from the Pinochet dictatorship, one must admit that some parts of their lives actually got better through unforeseen consequences of economic policies and even in the absence, early on at least, of a feminist movement that put pressure on the dictator. This tendency remains evident to this day, when the feminist movement is disappearing as feminist ideals play a more prominent role in Chilean life. Before analyzing these ideas, it will be helpful to examine the example of the nineteenth century and the role of the east in decision-making.

Up to this point, French and Chilean feminism have appeared to be in vacuums, effectively isolated from one another. But this is not Martian and Plutonian feminism under discussion; these are two movements that took place in a world where countries regularly received news from one another. The public discourse on women in Chile consisted of rhetoric that came from the country itself as well as from Europe, where France's philosophical tradition was widely recognized as one of the best. One of the effects of any colonization is that the way of thinking of the conquering country leaves an indelible mark on its colonies, even when they gain their independence. Chile, which was newly independent during this century, had a multitude of citizens who in all likelihood, given the strong allegiance shown to the king of Spain, considered themselves to be Spanish and looked to Europe as a model for American nations. The philosophical ideas about women of the Spanish (more so than the rest of Europe) as well as news of the progress achieved by women in France surely arrived in Chile, because *El Mercurio*, the most respected newspaper in Chile even today, was sympathetic to feminism, and also because the feminist leaders in nearby Argentina and Uruguay were mainly from Europe¹¹. One thus concludes that Chilean feminism may not have been necessary for the advancements made in women's rights, but without any feminism anywhere, it is doubtful that the condition of

¹¹ Lavrín, Asunción. *op. cit.* ch. 1.

women would have gotten better, at least not as well as it is now. Though one might say that Chile could have had the same effect on France, this is doubtful for two main reasons. The first is that Chile has tended to lag behind France for most of its women's rights, and the second is that rarely will a country that perceives itself to be a global leader look to an upstart country for direction.

Thus, it has been established that in France the feminist movement was capital to advance women's rights, while in Chile it was less important, if only due to the influence of foreign feminist movements. Next, it is instructive to look at the periods of *silencios feministas* in each country and to draw conclusions from each. The feminist silence in France followed the blue-collar movement. From 1849 to 1875, the feminist movement was virtually nonexistent, and what there was did not match the achievements of its predecessor. The result was a period of little to no progress for women. However, after 1875, there is the rebirth of feminism, divided into the two camps earlier mentioned, which suggests that the feminist movement never actually stopped, but rather that the actors involved left the stage to discuss the future of women and feminism in the wings.

The *silencio feminista* in Chile first arrived after universal suffrage in national elections. Though there had been a sort of feminist silence in the blue-collar movement soon into the twentieth century, at that time the bourgeois feminist movement began to speak out. Yet, after having won suffrage rights, the feminist organizations dissipated into the political parties, which curiously refrained from co-opting feminist goals¹². At the same time, poor women in the countryside and in *poblaciones* (vast neighborhoods of slums on the outskirts of Santiago) organized themselves in *centros de madres* (mothers' centers), where they discussed the conditions of the attendees. They spoke about familial and social structures, the role of women,

¹² Kirkwood, Julieta. *op. cit.* p. 19

and books such as *The Second Sex*, by the French author Simone de Beauvoir¹³. During this time, in absence of a feminist movement, the sociopolitical status of women barely budged. This evidence in concert with that of France seems to confirm that the presence of a feminist movement is indispensable for women's progress.

Notwithstanding this logical conclusion, the present situation in Chile seems to put that in question, for Chilean feminism is going through another silence, yet women continue to benefit from new rights. One example is the right to divorce, available since December 2004. Even in the face of the power of the Church, which managed to increase its political influence during the latest period of democracy¹⁴, women, in solidarity with men, managed to promulgate a law that authorized the process of divorce, although it remains quite cumbersome¹⁵. The *Servicio Nacional de la Mujer* (SERNAM, the Women's Ministry) has existed from the presidency of Aylwin in response to the help furnished by women in ousting the dictatorship. There are more young women who may choose to have a child out of wedlock or live with a man to whom she is not married, a step forward for social equality. Two of President Lagos' most highly regarded ministers were women, Bachelet, who was secretary of defense, and Soledad Alveolar, who briefly tried to launch her own presidential campaign. That Bachelet managed to win the presidency despite many Chileans saying the country was not ready for a female president is a sign of respect for women and for their abilities to carry out responsibility well in the public sphere. Absent from the discourse about Bachelet is the role of feminists, whose organizations are becoming increasingly specialized, attacking domestic violence and the feminization of poverty, for example¹⁶. Feminist ideas are now part of the political agenda, although the

¹³ Aguayo de Sota. *op. cit.* pp. 116-117

¹⁴ Ríos Tolbar, Marcela. *op. cit.* p. 260

¹⁵ Chile was the second-to-last country not to have divorce; the other was Malta.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p. 266

organizations themselves are now marginal. Feminism as a movement is no longer necessary in Chile, it would seem, while it remains crucial in France.

Indeed, in France, feminism often seems ignored, though it has come to the forefront in two recent debates, one on the right for a young Muslim woman to wear a veil in school, and one on the need for parity in elections. The former debate has split feminists, many of whom affirm that the veil is a symbol of sexism and the “need” for women to stay hidden from view, and also that by wearing the veil it infringes on the public school’s need to be seen as a secular institution; this is the prevailing viewpoint of the French government. Their feminist opponents state that it is the girls’ choice to wear the veil, especially since most of the girls who choose to wear it grew up in households where the mother was not veiled, and that by outlawing the veil and not the beard, the government is singling out girls for punishment. The other debate is more widespread, dealing with parity in elections. The French government had a dearth of female representation in its legislature, and after much debate, it passed a Parity Law, mandating that on each party’s election lists, men and women must alternate. So if a man is first on the list, a woman must be second, then a man, etcetera. Thus, when the seats are divided up on the basis of the percentage that the party receives, there should be more or less an equal number of men and women. There is also a Ministry for Women and Parity. Importantly, this measure has failed to effect the intended change. Parties regularly flout the rule, even the progressive parties that lobbied for it, and instead pay fines to compensate for their non-cooperation. Feminists thus continue to work to change the attitude toward women in government, an obstacle that Chile seems to have largely overcome.

It is exceedingly difficult to analyze the complexity of feminism in its totality, much less the dynamics of two countries’ feminist movements. By retracing their histories in this essay,

one can easily notice the differences and similarities between the two. By analyzing said similarities and differences, one comes to the conclusion, which will need to be borne out by further study and more empirical evidence, that the efficiency of feminist movements depends not on techniques per se, but on the sociopolitical situation of a given nation, and that it is the idea of feminism rather than the feminist movements themselves that truly realizes change. The two countries both have much inequality between men and women that has yet to be resolved. Both are facing similar obstacles, such as the conservative tendency of the countryside residents and a cultural heritage heavily influenced by the Church, whose interpretations of the Bible have never been favorable to women. Chile is a relatively poor democracy that is looking to lead the self-development of Latin America, socially and economically, whereas France is looking for a way to assure the equality of all its citizens without losing its spot in the world's top ten largest economies. These will be difficult obstacles to overcome, and it remains to be seen that they will manage to do it. But if they do, it will not be the work of their men only.

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