Parity — From Perversion to Political Progress: Changing Discourses of ‘French Exception’

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By 2004, the so-called ‘parity’ law had been applied to a full cycle of French elections. The Presidential elections of 2007, which fielded a woman candidate for the first time in French history, at least partially an effect of the parity campaign, and the subsequent 2007 legislative elections have brought further insights into the workings of parity law. This paper considers the origins and outcomes to date of ‘parity’ in France, quantitatively, but also, in relation to a changing discourse. It argues that an ongoing redefinition of ‘parity’, seen initially as perverse ‘French exception’, reflects an increasing sense of the legitimacy of women’s presence at the highest levels of politics and some opening up of the conceptions of French political representation.

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Introduction

In 2001, the ‘exceptional’ principle of ‘equal access’ for women to political mandates was written into French electoral law. In March 1999, despite setbacks and compromise, the Senate had accepted the modification of Article 3 of the French Constitution, the fortress used to keep out quotas or affirmative action by those on both sides of the political spectrum who defended traditional principles of the indivisible French Republic, universalism, and integration.

In this principled, fierce and still ongoing debate, universalism, which was equated with lack of distinction of race, class, or gender or with protection of traditional French harmony between the sexes constituting a bulwark against the threat of take-over by a perceived American or Anglo-Saxon style *communautarisme* (multiculturalism) and war of the sexes, was often presented as a ‘French exception’ (Badinter, 1992, 1996). A second sense of the term ‘French exception’ was invented for the debate by pro-parity women’s associations and intellectuals, used in Françoise Gaspard *et al.*’s seminal

(1992) *Au pouvoir, citoyennes! Liberté, Egalité, Parité*, for example, to characterize women's continuing absence from elected office and political life. In 1996, a bare 6% of the National Assembly was female, rising in 1999, with Jospin's new Socialist government, to 11%, a deficit presented as all the more 'exceptional' in that this was happening in a land seen as the 'cradle of the Rights of Man'. Battle-lines were thus drawn discursively between two French 'exceptionalisms'.

The modified Article 3 of the so-called 'parity' law passed on 6 June 2000 stated in a compromise that 'the law is to facilitate equal access for all women and men to elected office and political life' (*la loi favorise l'égal accès des femmes et des hommes aux mandats électoraux et fonctions électives*). Article 4 of the Constitution was henceforth to include the principle that political parties should contribute to the goal of parity. (*Les partis. contribuent à la mise en oeuvre de ce principe*). In elections observing a system of proportional representation (municipal, regional, European, and senatorial), 50% of the candidates on the lists presented by political parties were to be women. Parity was mandated in groupings of six candidates in municipal and regional elections with stricter alternation of a woman and a man in European and some senatorial elections. In legislative elections (as for other first past the post elections), parties were required to present as many women as men with no more than a 2% gap permitted. Financial sanctions would be imposed on parties who did not respect parity in legislative elections. While quotas or parity lists did not pose significant logistical problems for proportional representation, the question of what to do with single-member constituencies (divide them into two-member constituencies fielding a man and a woman?) has not yet been resolved.

In the 1970s in France, where for *MLF* feminists the personal was the political, agitation for new laws pertaining to the body and to work — contraception, abortion, harassment, equal pay — had been preferred to involvement with political representation. In the 1980s, women's associations worked with the 'exceptional' women appointed to government by a 'Prince', first by a modernizing Giscard d'Estaing (Simone Veil and Francoise Giroud) and later by Francois Mitterrand in his feminized 1981 Socialist government (Yvette Roudy, Elisabeth Guigou, Martine Aubry, Edith Cresson, Ségolène Royal...). Women inside and outside politics recognized, however, that the legitimacy of elected representation was of a different order again from this paternal protection (Ramsay, 2003).

What the acceptance of parity meant most immediately was that legislation for affirmative action was now possible. The *Conseil Constitutionnel* had ruled invalid the bill introducing a quota of 25% women on the lists of candidates for municipal elections and successfully steered through parliament by the feminist lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, in 1982, as it had divided the sovereign French people

into categories. The parity advocates would counter-claim in an accelerating media battle that members of classes or categories could choose to change their category whereas women, like men, cannot. As half of the world's population, encompassing all categories, and with major differences among them, women do not constitute a category. This form of anthropological legitimization of parity by sexual difference (primary to all other differences) was nonetheless seen with some unease by many intellectuals and militants as troublesomely 'strategic' (perverse) rather than strongly philosophically grounded (Bereni and Lépinard, 2004).

Speaking of the proposed new law in terms of the metaphor of 'Trojan horse' the feminist Geneviève Fraisse, one of the relatively few academic women to support parity, reveals the pervasive sense of 'masquerade' that it represented. For her, what was at stake behind the word was a strategic feminist victory for gender equality and perhaps even a step on a path beyond binary gender distinctions altogether.

Of course parity seeks to promote women's access to the summit of political, economic and social hierarchies. But parity has renewed the whole debate on gender equality. Parity is the new word for the feminist struggle. It must be admitted that the words 'feminism', and 'gender-equality' are terrifying. The word parity is like the Trojan horse which brings with it the utopia of egalitarian gender mixedness (Fraisse, 1999, 22).

Despite his active support of the campaign, Jospin had estimated 10 years for parity to happen. In an interview with me in December 1996, the then Minister of the Environment, Socialist activist and former 'symbolic' woman candidate for the Presidency, Huguette Bouchardeau, gave a prognosis of 20 years. Changing the Constitution takes a two-thirds majority of both houses (or approval by referendum). The extensive work published by Mariette Sineau throughout the 1990s suggests how suspect the principle of parity and the fear of its (mis)appropriation was to women of the Left; even to those who supported the campaign. Yet, events had suddenly accelerated after the election of Jospin's new Socialist government and the unpredictable, and for some, less than desirable, happened.

Debate has been extensive on what moved the old 'French exception', defined most generally as the premium placed on femininity or on gender 'difference' that had worked against women's entry into politics, towards an institutionalized parity as the new 'French exception' in the domain of political representation. If parity was indeed a Trojan horse, who took it or let it into the walls of the old masculinist political city? The spectacular and unexpected return of the Socialists to power that had doubled the number of women in the *Assemblée* (to 62 out of 577) appeared to be a factor. In the government announced on 4 June 1997 by Jospin, eight out of his 26 *ministres*, *ministres*

délégués, and *secrétaires d'Etat*, that is, more than 30% of the government were women. Moreover, pressure had been exerted on poorly performing France by the example of measures put in place by the United Nations, the European Council and Commission to eliminate discrimination. From the 1980s, women's groups of very different political origins had united around the new cause of political power including Gisèle Halimi's *Club Parité 2000*, Yvette Roudy's *L'Assemblée des Femmes*, *L'Alliance des Femmes pour la Démocratie* organized as early as 1989 by Antoinette Fouque as the successor to the *MLF* (Women's Liberation Movement) and *Demain la Parité* (Parity Tomorrow) which organized a number of forums to prepare women to run for office as municipal councillors.

According to Fraisse (1998a), however, it was the word 'parity' that had relaunched the feminist debate in 1993, 'crystallizing awareness and a revolt'. The term had come to carry a sense of the general recognition that women's political exclusion was less an effect of individual 'machismo' than of political networks that are 'virile' in character and do not attract women, self-protective networks unlikely to be changed from within by the political parties. The 'Manifesto of the 577 for a Popular Democracy', published in *L'Express* on 10 November 1993 and the later witness by 10 women in high positions in the 'Manifeste des dix pour la parité', (*L'Express*, 6 Juin 1996, 32–33) to having personally faced condescending indifference, scorn, or open hostility from within the world of politics, rehearsed the arguments developed by women historians, the loneliness and exclusion deriving from the outdated Jacobin tradition at the heart of republicanism. Real human relationships, sensitivity, and concrete, everyday preoccupations, are cast out from the field of politics and the republican imagery and do not contribute to law making. Bereni and Lépinard analyse this as a 'euphemistic' rhetoric that conceals the affirmative action implications of parity by instead writing the principle of a primary and sexual difference' into political representation (2004, 73). The accent placed on the 'resonance' of the pervasive current rhetoric of 'Republican universalism' and on the need to create a renewed and more representative 'mirror' political representation (Phillips, 1995), by means of feminine difference, in a democracy in crisis, the two writers argue, led to a relative marginalization of the more controversial discourse of gender equality (Bereni and Lépinard, 2004, 79). The '*coup de force*' in the arguments of parity supporters, then, was to anchor their claim to a new 'mirror' representation within the very frame of the discourse of universalism 'by representing parity as the logical outcome of the singular universality that resides in sexual difference' (*ibid.*, 83). Recourse to the notion of a specific women's contribution in a partnership with men, conclude these authors, removed the threat of antagonistic feminist claims or battle of the sexes.

Laure Bereni and Anne Revillard (2007) write of the development of a new ‘state feminism’ they present as closely interwoven with the parity cause — evidenced in the creation of the *Observatoire de la Parité* in 1995, a consultative government body of 18 eminent advisors under the leadership of the Centre-Right Roselyn Bachelot, working in a surprisingly productive alliance with the Left-wing militant lawyer, Gisèle Halimi. The pressure the pair exerted through the media and their 1996 report established a much more militant conception of parity than that of the Women’s Rights Department and the Prime Minister and brought the parity question to a parliamentary debate in 1997. The second *Observatoire de la Parité* of 1999 greatly increased the *Observatoire*’s means (now 33 unpaid members with a paid secretariat of two) under the leadership of the militant Geneviève Fraisse. To help prepare and support a parity law, it included intellectual representatives such as Janine Mossuz-Lavau and Michelle Perrot, known for their positions in favour of women, as well as a number of *députés* able to speak for the parity cause in Parliament. From 1999, the government also created parliamentary delegations for women’s rights. The presence of representatives from women’s groups set up within government and of substantial feminist expertise ensured that the provisions of the new law were not too watered down (Bereni and Lépinard, 2004; Lépinard, 2007). After the passing of the first parity law in 2000, the *Observatoire pour la parité* and the parliamentary delegations strengthened their links, while the *Observatoire* became the primary reference for statistics on the place of women in politics and a major pressure group for strengthening parity law.

A further significant facilitator of the entry of the Trojan horse, was the media, doing its core business, claims Jane Jenson in ‘visualizing deviance’ (the deviance of women in power) but in the process, also popularizing the intellectual battle of the ‘French exceptions’ taking place around the new parity discourse. Like diversity and multiculturalism, parity was presented as a potential agent of fragmentation, redolent of suspect American culture and sex-war. Like feminism, it threatened the break up of single shared (universal) commonality. Ethical universalists, like Badinter, arguing for the need for virility in government in both men and women (1992), were joined by women for whom class and ideology or equality were more important than parity — the radical Left had difficulty working with or supporting Right-wing women (anti-abortionists or Le Pen supporters, for example). Researching the origins of women in political office, Mariette Sineau (1998, 2003), for example, found the latter to be largely middle-class and professional, and not therefore, a mirror of society. Alain-Gérard Slama, journalist for the Right wing *Le Figaro*, reviewing the raft of recently released books on parity by well-known figures — *La cité républicaine* (The Republican City) by the philosopher Blandine Kriegel; *Politique des sexes* (Gender Politics) by Sylviane Agacinski, the then wife of the Prime Minister, Jospin; *Femmes-Hommes. Pour la parité*

(Women-Men. Towards Parity) by Janine Mossuz-Lavau (Presses de Sciences Po), claimed stridently that the parity arguments (on both sides of the debate) announce the ‘totalitarianism’ of the next century (*Le Point*, 2 May 1998). In *Le Monde* on 11 February 1999, Evelyne Pisier and Elisabeth Roudinesco, along with 14 other prominent women, ‘said no to parity’, and its ‘betrayal’ of 150 years of struggle based on the universalism of rights.

Polarized in the media, canvassing public personalities, parity was variously imaged as Trojan horse, cat-fight, sex-war, or totalitarian feminism, often reduced to the comic notion of ‘tic-tac’ or ‘zipper’ electoral lists and had many of the elements of popular comedy. The press took advantage of the debate’s polemical aspects and unexpected twists and orchestrated ‘fights’ between well-known women to sell the story. For example, the introduction of the bill on 17 June 1998 led the newspaper *Libération* to ironically pit the Centre-Right Roselyne Bachelot, regretting that, in the constitutional amendment, the verb ‘facilitate’ had been allowed to attenuate the original verb ‘guarantees’ under pressure by the Senate and the President (‘the law is to facilitate equal access to political mandates’) against the Left-wing feminist universalist, Elisabeth Badinter. Gisèle Halimi regretted the absence of a referendum but echoed Martine Aubry, Marie-Georges Buffet, and Elisabeth Guigou in their sense of being in the presence of a historic moment. Edith Cresson, Elisabeth Sledziewski, Yvette Roudy, Françoise Gaspard, Janine Mossuz-Lavau, and other well-known women then picked up and responded to questions of parity as ‘humiliation’, or of ‘difference’, arguing that women’s under-representation is more humiliating than special measures for women. Accused of reverting to feminine nature or difference, a dangerous essentialism that had been the pretext for women’s exclusion from public life, they exercised the counter-argument of the different difference inscribed in that ‘half of humanity’ that cannot be assimilated to a social, ethnic, or cultural category. A SOFRES poll in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in late 1998 showed male–female parity as third on the list of changes desired to modernize political life, after the reduction of the Presidential term and a limitation on holding multiple political offices. In February 1999, further polls attested to an astonishing 80% public support for political parity.

Post Parity and the New ‘French Exception’

Before 2000, Geneviève Fraisse had wondered whether the parity debate of 1997, initially something of a flop, and given new life only by the political action and successes of the *Parti socialiste* and Jospin in the spring of 1997, was not still a *fait du prince* or top-down operation of the kind that had systematically characterized French politics (1999). However, changes in public

attitudes were apparent in the 1997–2000 opinion polls that showed the female ministers of Jospin’s Socialist government consistently at or near the top of the popularity ratings. At the end of the 1990s, women even rated highly in polls for the presidency. In a 1999 poll cited by Sineau, 47% of French people declared they were in favour of Martine Aubry and 45% in favour of Simone Veil as the next President of the Republic, a major shift in polling approval for women candidates for presidency. By 2007, approval had reached rates of more than 90% for the candidacy of Ségolène Royal.

Electoral outcomes and post-parity narratives

By examining electoral outcomes and post-parity narratives, this second section of our essay considers whether parity has indeed had perverse effects or split the universalist Republic. Beyond the numerical outcomes, it is again the slippages in meaning attributed to the term ‘parity’ and to the notion of ‘French exception’ that is our particular focus.

In a first and generally suspicious inspection of outcomes, the editors of a special volume of the journal *Politix* (‘La parité en pratiques’, 2002) claimed that parity in its initial practice could be best evaluated in relation to the party ‘strategies’ that had simply appropriated the new law. Political analysis of the electoral data from the municipal elections showed, for example, that the order of candidates on the list did not translate necessarily into the position given. Many fewer women than men who were second on lists were given assistant mayoral status. Nonetheless, it was undeniable that the first application of the law in the municipal elections of March 2001 had seen new mechanisms for recruiting candidates set in place by all parties and ultimately a massive increase (from 22 to 47.5%) in the numbers of women entering politics at the local level, in *communes* of more than 3,500 inhabitants. Claude de Granrut, assistant mayor of Senlis, and author of a book on her personal electoral experience, *Allez les femmes! La parité en politique* considers that even in the 34,150 communes of fewer than 3,500 inhabitants, where the parity principle does not apply, the results also ‘appear satisfactory’ (Granrut, 2004, 10). Here, an additional 10% of women became town councillors by what de Granrut sees as the ‘contagion effect’ of the new law. Insidious influence, then, but also gaps. The percentage of female mayors of small communes falls. Around 13% (a change from 30 to 44) of elected mayors were women with only four women mayors in towns larger than 100,000 inhabitants. As Sineau writes, ‘[no] egalitarian dynamic came to redistribute public offices in cities’ (2003, 122). Any feminization of large towns occurred at the bottom end of the hierarchy. Granrut identifies the general problem that the gaps in parity law meant that it had not made major changes at higher echelons of power and concludes that

the letter of parity can often be respected without substantially changing the power balance.

The studies published in *Politix*, for their part, all tend to the conclusion that gender had simply been used as a strategic identity, both a 'political resource' and a 'stigmata', appropriated according to the particular locality in distinctively 'political' (i.e., perverse or devious) fashions. Few women headed lists. The suspicion that reappears in different forms throughout the story of parity, and is well supported by the figures, is that in the new political arena where the entry of women limited the number of places available for men, increased male competition and strained traditional loyalties (fewer places), the men who headed the list, often local political heavyweights, could use the construction of parity lists to strengthen their own position by recruiting non-partisan and non-politically experienced women who might subsequently be relegated to the wings. Aurélia Troupel (2002) provides detailed examples of '*détournement*', misuse or 'perversion' from the *Alpes-Maritimes* region.

Changes at municipal level apparently had little effect on elections at the level of the *cantons* (where parity law did not apply), although these elections took place at the same time as the municipal elections. Female representation hardly moved from its 1998 level of 20.5%. Many women stood in un-winnable constituencies and only 10.9% of women were elected. (In 1998 elected women had constituted 8.6%.) After the Senatorial elections of 2001, the number of women moved from five to 20 in *départements* subject to proportional representation although not in those with a first-past-the-post system, where the number remained at two. This left the Senate with a bare 10.6% of women Senators. At the head of the government-sponsored *Observatoire de la Parité* in the early years of the law, Nicole Ameline, who also occupied the new office of Associate Minister for Parity and Professional Equality, stressed the positive progress for women's representation in all elections by list as she reported the figures, contrasting both types of elections.

The legislative elections of 2002 produced narratives of failure and disillusion (Bird and Dubesset, 2003; Murray, 2004; Sineau, 2004). Despite the fact that 38% of candidates were women, the outcome in female representation, at 12.3% (71 out of 577 and 13th for female representation in Europe) was barely more than the 10.9% of women in the National Assembly of 1997. The *Observatoire de la Parité* figures show the Right and Centre-Right largely backgrounding parity obligations with the UMP party fielding only 19.7% of female candidates and simply paying the mandated penalty of 4,264,000 euros; the UDF presenting 19.9% paying 667,075, the PS-PRG with 34.6% of women candidates foregoing 1,651,000 of their electoral subsidy for their less than complete compliance and the PCF with 43.8% losing 124,139. In part because they could not afford the financial penalties, small parties such as the Greens and the Trotskyists with limited

means did indeed field 50% of women candidates. But so too did the extreme Right-wing *Front National*, playing the woman card with daughters and even mothers of party heavyweights to win respectability. (In 2007, Marine Le Pen was designated by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, as his preferred candidate to replace him at the head of an increasingly failing party.) Even on the Right, the long-serving Parisian politician, Françoise de Panafieu protested that male-dominated committees had continued to allocate winnable electoral districts to incumbents, rarely to women. There were major problems in making former incumbents (seen as the most likely to hold the seat) give up winnable seats to a woman.

In July 2002, Nicole Ameline suggested a re-evaluation of parity. The new Prime-Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, while arguing in favour of economic and social parity, remained sceptical in respect to political parity. In July 2003, Raffarin's proposed reform of electoral modes for regional and European elections and for the composition of the Senate provoked fears of a major weakening of parity law. Asked by a reporter for *Le Monde* (9 March 2003) whether the law needed to be amended because the major parties had not been sufficiently constrained by law to play the parity game, Mariette Sineau could only respond that the 'French exception' of women's exclusion from politics continued to exist ('L'exception française existe'). The French political parties would need to consider mandating representation, that is, the numbers of women elected rather than the number of women candidates. The report that Marie-Jo Zimmermann (2003), now at the head of the *Observatoire de la Parité*, presented to a journalist for *Libération* made recommendations for a new voting paper that would pair male-female candidates.

However, the texts of this period, including Zimmermann's reports, show that 'parity' was not only keeping the issue of women's representation in the foreground, but raising wider issues. Among these was the need to change the job definition. Zimmermann asked for a status that would enable elected women to reconcile work and family life. Meeting in Paris with Mariette Sineau, Françoise Gaspard and Isabelle Germain, President of the Association of Women Journalists, elected women had chosen to speak particularly of the discouragement and exhaustion brought about by the hours of work, the lack of childcare facilities, and their relative lack of power in a world where the *directeurs de cabinets*, that is, those holding the real reins of power, were still almost all men (*Le Monde*, 7 March 2003). For these women of the Left, the old dilemmas of women in office were yet to be resolved: they pondered how to not simply imitate the behaviour of their male colleagues yet how to avoid giving value to some vague feminine specificity that then imprisons women in certain roles. In the same edition of *Le Monde*, Sineau argues that where marriage and children are an advantage for a man, they are a difficulty for a woman. As her 1998 surveys show, 84% of male politicians are married

compared to 64% of women in politics; 29% of women are on their own as opposed to 8% of men; 20% of women are divorced as opposed to 4% of men and 19% of women have no children as opposed to 10% of men. Ségolène Royal's (2007) book, the account of her run for the Presidency, also observes that where Jacques Chirac can state that his wife Bernadette remained at the steadying centre of a demanding political life, she had experienced the lack of any such shoulder to cry on. Sineau also notes that 20% of women in politics are still daughters of political fathers, suggesting the continuing importance of paternal legitimization to women's ability to 'represent'.

Moving to the final set of elections where parity applied for the first time, the Regional and European elections of 2004, the outcomes again gave rise to mixed conclusions. As Sineau's figures from the French polling agencies show (Sineau, 2004), in the regional elections, the Socialist Party elected 49.2% of women to the *conseils régionaux* (regions and departmental sections) with the UDF and the Greens close behind. The proportion of women elected to these regional councils thus increased from 27.5% in 1998 to 47.6%. Traditional geographical differences were also eroded with a 51.2% female representation in Martinique and 43.6% in the most masculine of all the *Assemblées* in Poitou-Charentes. But although positions of Vice-President opened up to women (34.6% as against 15% in 1998), the same was not generally true for the executive positions at the top. Eighty-one percent of the names at the head of the list were still those of well-known political men and the office of president remained a male bastion. Only Ségolène Royal, herself a well-known political figure, succeeded in obtaining the politically prestigious and coveted position of the Head of a Regional Executive Assembly. Royal then incorporated 8 women out of 15 into a very unusually feminized executive office. Although Sineau's figures indicate that women are less in evidence at the top in the regional assemblies, they also show that women now constitute the new and younger blood.

Sineau's work had consistently argued, moreover, that ever since de Gaulle had instituted a two-round electoral system in 1958 to eliminate the Communists (who also elected the largest number of women), this more personalized system that encouraged the election of local or political dignitaries has been unfavourable to women. And again, in the elections at the level of the *cantons*, female representation hardly moved from its 1998 level of 20.5% with many women standing in un-winnable constituencies and only 10.9% were elected (from 8.6% in 1998 and 9.8% in 2001). Without the legal constraint of parity law, parties simply continued to invest prominent known senior political personalities or former ministers as *conseillers généraux*. Unsurprisingly, concludes Sineau, the executives in the *départements* (first-past-the-post), with two women Presidents and only 10.9% of women Vice-Presidents, also remained in the hands of men. Because of the high political

capital invested in the office of *conseiller général*, seen, like the position of mayor, as providing access to parliament, the voting system, in 2004 as in 2001 for the parliamentary elections, concludes Sineau is still 'paradoxical' in character. The 'perverse' effects of the law (2004) derive now from the gaps between the masculine executive offices and the more mixed lower-level offices as between assemblies elected by a list system, where parity applies, and those by a first-past-the-post system without parity obligations, which remain masculine enclaves.

This is a paradoxical result for a law of affirmative action, whose primary objective is to bring about a catch-up effect in areas where discrimination against women is greatest. French legislation is confronted with the 'return of the real' leaving the inequality of the sexes in relation to political power intact (Sineau, 'Parité 2004: les effets pervers de la loi', 2004, 159).

In the proportional European elections (where the enlargement of Europe had led to a reduction from 87 to 78 of places for the French), women candidates did better, moving from 40.2 to 43.6% and the number of French female Euro-deputies moved to 30.3% putting France in fourth place for Europe, behind Sweden, the Netherlands and Lithuania. In 2005, however, the World Report on Human Development (Sineau, 2007b) France with 14% of women in both Parliament and Senate was in 21st place (out of 25) for the percentage of women sitting in the internal parliaments of the countries of the European Union.

Sineau's work on the gender-gap in the vote (2007a) shows that gender did not seem to be a decisive factor in the Left/Right voting orientation in the first ballot of the Presidential election, although it did again remain predictive of a lesser vote for the extreme Right. There was, however, a major generational gender gap with younger women preferring the Socialist candidate, Ségolène Royal and older women the traditional values represented by Sarkozy's UMP party. (In the second round of the Presidential elections, Royal obtained 47% of the vote.) Figures from the *Observatoire pour la Parité* for the 2007 legislative elections (<http://www.observatoireparite.gouv.fr>) show that the UMP presented 26.6% of women and the PS 45.5%, in part by reserving seats for women. The PS elected 26% of women and the UMP 14%. Of the 41.6% of women candidates, 18.5 were elected. The victory of the Right thus saw a modest but perhaps still relatively surprising increase in elected women from 12.3% in 2002 to 18.5%.

Following the press report of M-Jo Zimmermann, Head of the *Observatoire* in 2005, Jacques Chirac had committed to new measures. Under pressure, he allowed the presentation of a bill on 28 November 2006 to the Council of Ministers for the application of parity law to local executive councils, the strict alternation of man/woman on the lists for municipal elections and the increase

of financial penalties to 75%. A slightly modified law was adopted on January 2007 (Zimmermann, 2007). The measures of the second phase of parity law effected some minor progress in the homogenization of the application of parity but in the face of a continuing unwillingness by the parties to restore proportional representation, this represented an ‘incomplete’ and modest reform rather than any redress for the still major disparities or any ‘substantial second stage of parity law’ (Troupel, 2007a). Moreover, the increase in the financial penalty did not apply until the 2012 elections. Troupel notes the Socialist *député*, Bruno le Roux’s comment, on a ‘simulacrum’ of a law (second session 18/01/07) perpetuating the existing ‘fracture’ between the Assemblies.

For many writers the ‘perversity’ of parity has come to derive less from a suspect law than from the pragmatically limited scope of the initial project and the ability of party leaders in power to get round the law and protect their own positions. The countries of Europe that have autonomous women’s organizations within their political parties are those most favourable to voluntary measures in favour of women, Sineau argues, whereas, in France, women’s movements have not been integrated. Troupel (2007b) speaks in of the ‘flagrant gap’ between the Palais Bourbon legislature and the executive in a ‘land of contrasts’, as she had earlier (2005) concluded on the ‘mini-revolution’ that parity constituted.

The perversity of parity as Fraisse defined this more theoretically in 1999, in her metaphor of ‘Trojan Horse’, lay particularly in the fact that it conceals within it a ‘masquerade’ of the kind the feminist theorist, Judith Butler, speaks of in her call for ‘gender trouble’ (2002), a subversive political discursive strategy for the conquest of gender-equality and an attack on the old ‘French exception’, the premium placed on femininity and masculine–feminine opposition and consequent disfigurement of the feminine by the authority of the political forum. (Butler argued that women are very different, and that gender, which is discursively constructed, ‘performance’ not biology, should be ‘troubled’, that is shown to be non-natural, by subversion as in ‘masquerade’.) Such a strategy would proceed by means of a discursive reversal, the term, ‘exception’ being redefined by its proximity (metonymical and metaphorical) with ‘parity’. By 2004, revisiting the central terms of the debate, Laure Bereni argues that, rather than representing any real French singularity or ‘exception’, parity simply results from the ‘disguising’ of the French will to nationalize an international policy of affirmative action practiced extensively throughout the European Union countries. For Eléonore Lépinard and Laure Bereni (2007), the parity law fits into this frame of a general evolution of international law and democratic practices in most of the European democracies, and, in particular, a politics of quotas to enable women to enter politics. In a paper entitled ‘Parity or the myth of a French exception’, Bereni and Lépinard

conclude that although the French experience has qualities that are particular [...] it ‘does not derive from any French exception’ (2004, 74).

Parity as Progress

Soon after the law’s first application, Françoise Gaspard’s research on women in politics after parity concluded that women had renewed the local elites, the Republic had not foundered, and the candidates had not all been the pawns of male politicians except in a few notorious cases (2002). A parity ‘strategy’, that for her had also been grounded in ‘principle’ (1998), has had positive effects and been anything but a Pyrrhic victory. Her surveys suggested that the self-exclusion of women from patriarchal political institutions that had long paralleled the obstacles to women in power and their exclusion by political institutions was also clearly weakening. Where they are no longer in competition with men, she claimed, women are willing to stand for office. Many of those who originally contested parity have since reconsidered, accepting that despite its failings, there has been evidence both of political will for change and of an opening up of political possibilities for women. In their 2004 study, Pionchon and Derville concluded that the electorate was no longer discriminating against women candidates.

Writing in 2007, Sineau, too, had also come to observe that the importance of a law must also be measured by its symbolic effects and that, despite the inadequacies of the application of parity law, it had contributed to establishing the legitimacy of women to exercise power, as evidenced by the election of Laurence Parisot to the head of the *Medef*, the employers union. The phenomenon Segolene Royal, too, might well also be ‘a delayed shockwave’ (2007b, 87) of parity law, allowing an outsider to compete for a major place in a traditionally closed system.

Laure Bereni and Anne Revillard write of the development of ‘state feminism’ as closely interwoven with parity. For Bereni and Revillard (2007, 19), the ‘category of parity’ had made itself the ‘grammar’ of state feminism, as the institutional inclusion of the term in the name of ministerial offices responsible for women’s rights from 2002 had demonstrated, creating a new frame of definition by adding political to professional equality. Although these authors add the still cautious caveat that the new name did not necessarily indicate a real change in priorities, the idea it carried of women’s ‘access to positions of responsibility’ in general (in the public service as in politics) constituted a blurring of the binary division between the State and the non-State.

Indeed with a woman, Ségolène Royal, opposing him and representing ‘participatory democracy’ and ‘renewal’, Nicolas Sarkozy had announced that he would form a ‘parity’ government if he were elected. Despite his somewhat neo-Gaullist and personalizing aspiration to increasing the Presidential role,

his promised ‘quiet revolution’ would begin to blur the Left/Right line with the syncretism of his 2007 government. Expanding his base rather than narrowing it to the party faithful, Sarkozy co-opted a significant numbers of representatives of young people and visible ‘minorities’ (Rachida Dati for Justice, Rama Yade and Fadela Amara as Junior Ministers). Both Fillon governments contained as many women ministers as men. Alongside the return of Michelle Alliot-Marie (Minister for the Armed Services under Raffarin) and Roslyne Bachelot, the raft of outsiders, representing the *banlieues*, immigration, humanitarian organizations even included the rugby coach of the French XV. Parity had also been accompanied early by another almost uncommented novelty, the opening up of local office to immigrants from European Union countries. The latter voted in 2001 and around 1,000 stood for office.

In a short text entitled ‘The Political Bastion has Fallen’ (the work of the Trojan Horse?), the historian Michelle Perrot (2007) sees the investiture of Ségolène Royal as the Presidential candidate of a major party (by more than 60% of party members) as a decisive event in a long historical dualism between the images of ‘women of influence’, lacking political capacity, deviant in the political sphere and men aggrandized by power, figured as rational and cool, able to act in the general interest. Parity law in her estimation was a ‘new and decisive reorientation’ and, although women’s access to power continues to arouse ‘distrust’, the effects of the law have been significant, particularly at the local level where the sheer numbers and visibility of women ‘normalize’ their presence. The desire to innovate, the decline of the figure of the father, the feeling that the masculinist model of culture has failed, and the appeal of the firm and gentle maternal figure (Ségolène Royal), along with parity, claims Perrot, created an opportunity for a new model. This, despite the fact that parties nonetheless remain backward-looking temples of machismo ready to do battle for their place and privilege against an intruder and despite the real dangers in playing the woman card — Ségolène’s feminine attributes —, smile, and white jackets, moralizing sincerity — would irritate noted Perrot. The candidate was predictably (if somewhat ironically?) labelled by one biography written by the political journalists from *Le Monde*, Raphaëlle Bacqué et Ariane Chemin as *La Femme fatale*. Nonetheless, the major support for Royal’s presidential campaign, as elsewhere for Hillary Clinton’s Presidential candidacy, the investiture of Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House, the respect for Angela Merkel in Germany and Michelle Bachelet in Chile indicated the desire for change in political representativity as in political language.

Outside Metropolitan France, in the French ‘overseas country’ of New Caledonia, for example, parity, applied to the provincial elections of 9 May 2004, saw an exceptional emergence of women in the public forum, including indigenous Kanak, emergence that has dramatically changed the face of the

political scene in that country. Perhaps because custom and politics are seen as belonging to different worlds, and parity has been packaged as a form of French universalism rather than as feminism, Kanak men have generally accepted this major change in women's status despite significant absence of rights (to divorce, inheritance, or protection from marital violence) for women under customary law. The election also brought a woman to head a government dominated for decades by the majority loyalist party (RPCR). With her came a new party, *Avenir Ensemble*, and the hope of a politics of greater pluralism and redress of the continuing power imbalance between indigenous Kanak and the descendants of French settlers (Maginos-Rey, 2004).

According to the sociologist Eric Fassin, the fierce theoretical debate of the earlier period, which took place, as he puts it, within the double register of universality (of sexual difference) and universalism (the indivisibility and equality of the French Republic), makes more sense in retrospect in terms of the 'rhetorical constraints on all dominated discourses', their need for a 'double' language universalist *and* differentialist (Fassin, 2003). Joan Scott's work (1996, 2005) has well demonstrated these paradoxes — in the light of a Revolution that excluded or subsumed difference within the masculine, women use their difference to liberate themselves from difference. It is as the group 'women' that they seek the same rights as men. They must therefore claim that difference *is* important and *is not* important. The issue, Fassin came to claim, had become less whether women do things differently in the public forum than how sexual difference is constructed in the play of local politics. What has also occurred, however, for Fassin (2005), is that the universalist *vs* the particularist battle has shifted and now rages around other questions of identity (class, religion, and globalization issues). The media has switched some of its attention from political parity to lack of parity in other less privileged areas, focussing, for example, on the marches for rights and freedom from violence of the association of young women, '*Ni Putes, Ni Soumise*' and from the immigrant *banlieues*. The parity debate, he claims, has heightened awareness of the questions raised by minorities in France, including the debates around both the PACS and gay marriage, paternity, or civil union, making the indifference to difference no longer possible. It incites the reworking of undermined binary oppositions — gender/sexuality and multiculturalism/universalism. From concepts of liberation and the tolerance of difference, France has moved toward the right to recognition of difference and the interrogation of norms. 'At the time of the parity debate, a number of people were concerned: might parity not be the "Pandora's box" of feminism and the "Trojan horse" of multiculturalism. We can reconsider the analysis, not as a source of concern of self-congratulation on the emergence of such questions' (Fassin, 2005). As Fassin's texts, like Perrot's tend to suggest, parity, as a more open and 'hybrid'

conception of French citizenship, able to be couched in non-binary terms, and beyond binary sexual divisions, would constitute a further revision of the 'French exception'

Parity or What's in a Name?

The rhetoric of 'French exception' is recognized as a form of subversion. What lay behind this situation for Lépinard and Bereni was 'France's need to see the French political system and its refusal of particular interests as exceptional and to transform imports from Europe, the new reform, into a product made in France' (2004, 81). But parity advocates, in their own 'masquerade', camouflaged and furthered their cause, by making it seem that parity politics was not a politics of quotas. Perversity, then, has shuttled back and forward, attaching to the different uses of the notion of 'French exception' in turn: and, in the final instance, to its relatively productive use in association with the term of parity democracy. In 2004, Lépinard and Bereni may agree with Sineau that the real 'French exception' still lies in the machismo of French political institutions and the resistance of parties to gender equality rather than in any French 'first' with parity. Bereni and Lépinard observe with perspicacity that in parliamentary debates in France, in contrast with its neighbours, the legitimization of parity focuses above all on the 'symbolic' dimension of the reform rather than practical results (2007, 90). Nonetheless, the 'perversity' of parity is increasingly represented as both symbolic and material progress.

Perhaps, like concepts from the social sciences such as 'Hybridity', 'Black', or again 'Kanak' (a term used without agreements and written with a K rather than the 'c' of the pejorative colonialist term 'canaque' to give its name to the FNLKS, the *Front National de Libération Kanak et Socialiste* or pro-independence party in New Caledonia), terms recuperated by political theory in a project of reversal then take on new and positive connotations while 'remembering' their racist past — Black signifying a rich Afro-American heritage, or hybridity, a 'third' cultural space of mixed new cultural creation (Bhabha, 1994) — the term parity is now evolving beyond its own somewhat negative history. There are indications that the discourse of parity is increasingly connoting a genuinely new, expanded and expansive political concept of equality within French political theory while still carrying its own somewhat ambivalent history.

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