The Political Disempowerment of Women as a Standard of Civilization

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To the readers: This is a book chapter that I am presently reworking into a journal manuscript for submission to the European Journal of International Relations. Any comments on how to strengthen the manuscript in this regard are particularly welcome.
Introduction

There are pervasive presumptions among scholars and practitioners of international relations that the political empowerment of women is a phenomenon of European origin, rooted in Western Enlightenment and liberal traditions. The standard account is generally a more sophisticated variation on the following: for millennia, as a matter of tradition, women around the world were either oblivious to or helpless before their subjugation to men. With the rise of secularism and science, Europeans were not only relieved from previous religious dogma that undergirded such subjugation but they also came to develop law within the constitutional state. The constitutional state became the blessing of women, as law placed bounds on the legitimacy of physical coercion and provided the tools for women to argue for equality of opportunity, including access to various state organs. The spread of European conceptualizations of women and the state then helped non-European women become aware of their traditional misperceptions about sexual difference and pressured non-European states to take on institutions and adopt laws to halt male oppression.

International relations scholarship certainly does not dispel this account. A small but notable number of constructivist scholars interested in international norms have focused on the emergence and international spread of women’s rights policies. They point to the Western origins of norms regulating state behaviors that empower women, such as the now widespread existence of women's suffrage and national policy agencies for the advancement of women. The political empowerment of women is accredited the modern and liberal values of the West, and especially the progressive effects of individualism as it developed along with the constitutional state. Since they leave pre-nineteenth century Europe beyond the scope of analysis, these studies implicitly tell the story about a universal history of gender-based political exclusion from which European women were first to break free.

The aim of this article is to challenge the standard historical account of the political empowerment of women. It does so in two ways. First, it borrows from feminist history and political theory to show not only that the full-scale exclusion of women from state affairs is a relatively recent phenomenon, but also how prevalent ideas within liberalism and the secular sciences were liable for this exclusion. A number of absolutist states in pre-nineteenth century Europe made some room for both female sovereigns and female state officials. I then rethink this work and connect the scholarship on sex/gender with that on state-making. During the period of unitary state rule

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1 Ramirez and Weis (1979); Ramirez, Shanahan and Soysal (1997); Keck and Sikkink (1998); Berkovitch (1999); and Finnemore and Sikkink (1999). On the spread of reproductive rights, see Ramirez and McEneaney (1997).
under absolutism, I claim, Europe also saw a unitary notion of sexual being – a one-sex model – which made it difficult to bar women as such, as a distinctive sex, from state office. Between the late seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, in the transformations of absolutism, the notion of what a ‘person’ and a ‘state’ are, how these beings are unified, also altered dramatically. The secular sciences and liberalism helped give rise to the creation of what was understood as an ontologically separate category of women and the exclusion of that category from the emergent political realm.\(^2\) Before women could be politically empowered in Europe, in short, they had been differentiated as ontologically separate beings from men and politically disempowered as such.

Second, this article demonstrates that the ban on women’s participation in state affairs came to be a policy expressly for so-called ‘civilized’ states. I show that a norm came into being for the society of civilized states by the second half of the nineteenth century: civilized states were expected to keep women out of politics. Those non-European societies that had made available a political role for women were chastised as ‘primitive’ and ‘traditional’ for doing so. This norm has not been addressed by IR scholars interested in the standards of civilization of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^3\) And it should come as something of a surprise to those who connect the empowerment of women with the West in the present, such as Inglehart and Norris (2003) who call gender equality the site of “the true clash of civilizations.”

The article starts with the premise that the international should be approached as a society in the sense of being social – constituted by intersubjective knowledge and meaningful practices (discourses, in short). It deploys an analysis of knowledge that came to be shared and central for the full-scale removal of women from formal politics in the society of civilized states. I point to the centrality of the simultaneous formation of three entities – the state, woman and civilization – and how the regulation of their relations changed between the era of the absolutism to that of the constitutional state. The relations between the three came to understood in a particular way by the mid-nineteenth century, leading to the norm that civilized states bar women from the political sphere.

The rest of the article is organized into three sections, reflecting three analytical steps necessary to understand the relation between the state, woman and civilization. It begins with a cursory discussion of the development of the European state from the age of absolutism to the nineteenth century constitutional state. The section is brief, since the discussion is likely familiar to IR scholars. The second section is more


\(^3\) E.g. Gong (1984) and Bowden (2005).
extensive and examines the co-determination of ‘woman’ and the ‘state’ and the changes in their relation between absolutism and the nineteenth century. Here, I bring the work of political theorists and historians into conversation with the conventional IR treatments of the state. The final section is given most elaboration, as it brings in ‘civilization’ as a third crucial element for understanding the relation between women and the nineteenth century state. That analysis is based on primary sources [develop].

From Absolutism to the Constitutional State

Between the late sixteenth to eighteenth centuries – often referred to as the age of absolutism – the territorial state consolidated at the expense of other polities and was under the increasingly unitary rule of a monarch or council of state. The essential sociality of this development has been widely noted, as ideologies and social practice moved across Europe and as each state came to exists in the recognized presence of and competition with other states. Concurrently, internal political institutions and forms of rule developed that enabled absolutist rule. The period of absolutism initiated what we could cautiously refer to as the simultaneous outward and inward developments of the state, of separating state from state territorially in the international sphere and state from society in what came to be the domestic sphere.

A new form of rule emerged – law as an instrument of expressed sovereign will – displacing the previous negotiated understandings between the Estates and the Monarch. Law as sovereign will rested explicitly on coercive rule. Domestically, penal codes relying on the physical body as target of punishment and on torture as public spectacle were in force all over Europe.

Succession battles over the throne and struggles with the Estates over state rule regularly involved assassinations of monarchs (or monarchs-to-be) and of portions of the nobility. In the emerging international sphere, since each state’s commitment to self-aggrandizement was legitimated, there was ‘the continuous and inescapable presence of other states bounding that ‘will to sovereignty.’ Over and over again, each state came up against limits to its sovereignty in the form of competing states striving to satisfy their own self-defined interests. Hence in this system... every claim was

[5] Poggi (1978):72-77. It needs to be added that the sovereign, monarchical rule was always an ongoing struggle, not only between contending aspirants for the throne but also between the estates and the monarchy (e.g. the assassination of large sections of the nobility to lessen their influence). Sovereign authority thus shifted between the monarch and estate councils.
ultimately enforceable only through coercion – if necessary on the field of battle.’ The pervasiveness and frequency of warfare only underscored this.

Unitary arrangements for the creation and execution of state-wide policies developed, operating in the name of the sovereign ruler. Courts and other institutions that created and executed law became not only more pervasive but also public, that is physically and visibly distinctive as official organizations of the state. Around Europe, uniforms for functionaries of the state were assumed akin to those of the military, denoting the public nature of the inhabitants of state office. The state thus became distinct from (and derived its meaning in relation to) the new sphere of ‘society,’ creating a realm where specifically ‘political’ or ‘public’ functionaries and personnel were located. At the same time, the absolutist state was empowered to rule over ‘society.’

That society, from the height of the state’s level, appeared to be peopled exclusively by a multitude of particuleurs, of private (though sometimes privileged) individuals. The state addressed them in their capacity as subjects, taxpayers, potential military draftees, etc.; but it considered them unqualified to take an active part in its own business. It contemplated the civil society exclusively as a suitable object of rule. ’ (Poggi 1978:78)

The whole of the state – the public functionaries, offices and organs – were permeated by and understood as an expression of the will of the sovereign in the rule over society. There was thus an ideal of an essential, hierarchical unity of the state.

Early nineteenth century Europe had roughly speaking arrived at being composed of territorially bounded states which each maintained a single currency, unified fiscal and legal systems, increasingly making claims to a national language and people. During this century, the structures of state power were to be profoundly reshaped. Another form of state rule emerged which was increasingly depersonalized, no longer understood to have been bestowed upon their populations primarily by the will of God by means of the actions of the sovereign Monarch. Law, no longer primarily granted from above, became understood as founded on popular sovereignty and was deliberated in elected national assemblies. The state to a larger or lesser degree became conceptualized as a deliberate construction, a conscious, willful human creation which was often both represented and bounded by a written constitution. Constitutional parliaments had emerged well before

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9 The unity of these states should not be overstated, however. Poggi (1978:94) points to countertendencies, such as different ministries developing distinctive administrative styles, policy traditions and clienteles and rivalries developing between administrative bodies of the state.
10 Most European states of the nineteenth century were to take the form of constitutional monarchies, combining the non-elective rule of the Monarch with legislatures that were elected by restricted suffrage. (E.g. Therborn 1977:9 and Haupt and Langewiesche 2001:17).
1848 in Belgium, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway (in its union with Sweden), Sweden and Switzerland, and they formed in Austria in the 1860s, France in the 1870s and Italy in the 1880s.\footnote{Haupt and Langewiesche (2001):17.}

There are a number of characteristic aspects of this transformation. First, although the state-society distinction was still central, the relation between the entities changed: the sovereign state no longer ruled over society, but increasingly a national community was thought to rule ‘itself’ through the state. The relation between the state and national citizenry was of great concern not only to many nineteenth century thinkers – including legal positivists, natural rights scholars, socialists and liberals – but also to the emerging mass political movements that demanded popular forms of government on a national scale.\footnote{E.g. Hinsley (1966):226-7; Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992), Haupt and Langewiesche (2001).} ‘Except for Tsarist Russia, the prerogatives of the rulers were greatly restricted by constitutions in the decades after 1848 and opportunities for parliaments to participate in the legislative process were codified.’\footnote{Haupt and Langewiesche (2001):18.}

Although the state became understood as man-made and thus lost some of its previous religious purpose, it continued operating ‘with reference to some idea of an end or function to which it is instrumental.’\footnote{Poggi (1978):96.} The second key aspect of the transformation in state rule is well expressed by Poggi’s (1978:101) suggestion that ‘the moral ideal that ultimately legitimizes the modern state is the taming of power through the depersonalization of its exercise.’ As the state expressly becomes an artifact of human reason, the law itself becomes both a source of legitimacy and the state’s ‘standard mode of expression, its very language, the essential medium of its activity.’\footnote{Poggi (1978):102.} Law thus became self-referential: having been reasoned into being in accordance with set rules (themselves man-made), the state came to rest partially on procedural legitimacy rather than the will of the sovereign. Law, as an expression of reason, was importantly conceptualized as a limit on (rather than expression of) power, assuring that brute force and unbound passions could not reign. Representative institutions such as parliaments/legislatures and executives took over the centrality previously

\footnote{‘Characteristic liberal preference for having collective decisions emerge from the public confrontion of opinion in open-ended debate, that as far as possible law should be the product of ratio (reason) rather than of voluntas (will)... the validity of law is made to rest ’no longer upon force, nor primarily upon habits and mores, but upon insights and arguments.’ (citing Hegel)’ (Poggi 1978:107).}
accorded the sovereign Monarch, providing the fora for more ‘civil’ and bounded controversy, debate, and law-formation.\textsuperscript{16}

The law placed tenuous bounds on brute force, however, and was never thought to remove power as the essence politics. Instead, the organizations and form of state rule bifurcated, so that the ‘political’ nature of the state became separated from though internally related to its ‘civil’ functions. A mutually constitutive political/civil division thus emerged within the state. Politics continued being understood largely as a matter of potentially power-laden conflict, connected with coercive rule. Regardless of the rules and procedures, politics were still an arena of conflicting interests and competitive struggle, where combative passions ran high and cool reason did not always prevail. Moreover, it was the executive and legislative political organs that made the decisions about the financing and organization of the military and police (and, in extension, those in control of the representative institutions formally controlled the state’s coercive organs). Equally important, the political institutions of the state formally directed international politics, where war was still considered the extension of politics.

Public functionaries and civil servants, on the other hand, became seen as the antithesis of the political – impersonal, non-political bureaucrats, the very embodiment and executioners of legal-rational authority. These were the technically specialized administrators who were to ensure the rational, functionally efficient pursuit of whatever goals were set up in the ‘political’ sphere.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{From One-Sex to Two-Sex Models of Human Being}

The total exclusion of women from state institutions across Europe in the nineteenth century was not preceded by any standard behavior towards women. Landed women of the estates had access to the state apparatus in many cases. More importantly, as will be developed below, a number of states had queen rulers, no small thing at a time when the state was governed by a sovereign. This access was importantly enabled by the

\textsuperscript{16} To be sure, procedural legitimacy may have been particularly predominant in more liberal states such as Great Britain and the U.S. The other form of depersonalization of state rule took its expression in the state becoming a being of and onto itself, operating based on rational, scientific principles of raison d’état. In states such as Germany or Sweden, the role of government was not solely to represent interests of societal groups but rather to, in the words of Uppsala political science professor Reuterskiöld (1911:19), ‘secure the undisturbed development of state life.’ Under this logic, the state was not a humanly manufactured article but a being that operated according to its own logic.

unitary ideal of being and rule characterizing not only the state but also sex/gender conceptualizations during the era of absolutism. ‘One-sex models’ of sexual being were pervasive throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reviving and reinterpreting ancient Greek teachings which conceived of all humans as of essentially a single sex.\(^{18}\) One version understood woman as simply lesser man, an inferior variant of a single male anatomy.\(^{19}\) More prevalent were notions that as one-sex bodies, all human beings contained both ‘male’ and ‘female’ elements, providing no clear biological boundaries productive of sexual difference. The male elements were generative (e.g. semen which infused new individuals with a soul), and involved vigor, physical strength, courage and thus a predisposition for creation and domination. The female elements, unsurprisingly, were inert and involved gentility, physical weakness, cowardice and thus a tendency for submission. However, and this is crucial, it was the ‘predominance, rather than the exclusion, of one or the other…[that] helped to determine sexual identity,’ as Stephen Greenblatt argues.\(^{20}\) Men and women were thus not conceived as mutually exclusive categories defined by their essential difference. Even though ‘male’ attributes were valued over ‘female’ and the male elements lead to rule, this did not necessarily translate into those labeled men dominating women. Someone identified as a woman could also rule, generally in the absence of a man alternative and if she exhibited appropriate male characteristics.

Although the one-sex models were pervasive around Europe, they offered a range of routes for conceiving the relationship between ruler and polity. Women’s position in the relationship between the ruler and state-society complexes, while hotly debated, thus remained quite divergent even as the more unitary absolutist state developed. There were several attempts to deal with what appeared as a fundamental paradox: monarchs died, but the state survived. In fifteen century France, scholars came to espouse a polity, or body politic, of the king’s one body (that did not die) which was regenerated over time through formative male seed.\(^{21}\) A system of rule which centered on monarchical replication through male reproductive capacity, connecting male virility with French kingship and state, could not accommodate direct female succession. Female rule was thus prohibited.\(^{22}\) There was voluminous French commentary on the rule of Russia by Catherine the

\(^{19}\) Aristotle had notoriously stated that ‘The woman is as it were an impotent male, for it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female, being incapable of concocting the nutriment in the last stage into semen’ (as cited in Lange 1983:9).
\(^{21}\) Hanley (1997):133.
\(^{22}\) Cosandey (1997). However, as guardians of young regent sons, queen mothers did direct the council of state and France experienced three such regencies from 1560 to 1651 alone. See Lightman (1981).
Great, centering on alleged general problems of female rule and deriding her female characteristics to a degree unheard of in Russia.23

Eighteenth century Sweden was profoundly influenced by the French Enlightenment and French cultural practices, including ideas about the state as a male body politic.24 It is not surprising that the constitution of 1720 prohibited female succession to the Swedish throne.25 Until then, there had not only been female monarchs but women had also served as state officials. As an example, two of the royal postmasters were women in the seventeenth century, presiding over the entire postal service.26

In much of the rest of Europe, generally in the absence of suitable male alternatives, women rulers were acceptable.27 Political axioms of the monarch’s two bodies developed in England, distinguishing mortal individual monarchs from the immortal public office and accommodating queen rule.28 English common lawyers were formulating an idea of the state as a perpetual corporation, yet they were unable or unwilling to separate state and monarch. Their concept of the king’s two bodies was an attempt to deal with a paradox: men died and the land endured; kings died, the crown survived; individual subjects died but subjects always remained to be governed. Perhaps the lawyers were unwilling to envisage England itself as a perpetual corporation because the law had always vested land in a person. Anyway, for the purposes of law it was found necessary to endow the Queen with two bodies: a body natural and a body politic. (This body politic should not be confused with the old metaphor of the realm as a great body composed of many men with the kind as head. The ideas are related but distinct.) The body politic was supposed to be contained within the natural body of the Queen. (Axton 1977:12)

English highborn women could inherit state office with their property, and in 1711, Queen Ann decreed that unmarried women could vote for the English parliament.29 English abbesses were called to the first parliaments and women landowners could influence voting to the parliament on par with men.30 The Russian and Habsburg empires similarly embraced female succession, seeing monarchs such as Catherine the Great and Maria Teresia of the 1740s.

Between the late seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, in the transformations of absolutism, the notion of what a person is, how a being is unified, also altered dramatically. Woman as a collective became

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23 Meehan-Waters (1975). Voltaire, one of Catherine's most distinguished public relations agents abroad, 'took a delight in the fact that the Moslem Turks were being humiliated by a woman,' according to Meehan-Waters (1975):294.

conceptualized and voiced in new ways by the developing secular sciences that became such an important source of knowledge.\textsuperscript{31} As will be further discussed in the next section, the broad field of evolutionary theory became central for thinking about all sorts of phenomena and processes of change, including women and the state. In the characteristic taxonomy frenzy and escalation in efforts to create mutually exclusive and clearly bounded scientific categories, new understandings of woman as essentially \textit{different} from and complementary or inferior to man emerged. Two-sex models of separate spheres and being for men and women thus came to compete with and in many cases predominate over the previous one-sex models.\textsuperscript{32}

Woman consolidated as a distinctive being by undergoing a significant degree of sexualization. It was not merely that ideas about women had changed, as will be discussed more extensively in the next section. The whole meaning of ‘woman’ had been transformed once the concept of the female person as thoroughly sexed through all her regions of being had become entrenched. Not even the previously neutral domains of the soul remained - it had become possible to \textit{be} a sex.\textsuperscript{33}

Woman’s becoming a distinct sex gave rise to at least two possibilities for that and those which were \textit{not} woman. First, ‘man’ became voiced as woman’s carnal, biological opposite, so that each of the now two \textit{distinct} sexes became the embodiment of the \textit{either} male or female elements. Still espousing a form of rule that ultimately legitimized physical strength and coercion as vested in the military and police, the nature of the ‘political’ sphere of the state and ‘man’ came to overlap more tightly than before. To some, the state was therefore explicitly understood as being, in nineteenth century German historian von Treitschke’s words, of ‘male gender,’ of ‘purely male essence.’\textsuperscript{34} Second, generic ‘humans’ or ‘persons in possession of \textit{reason}, so central for the reflection and purposive action that willed the state into being, could emerge.\textsuperscript{35} Such unsexed ‘individuals’ (by definition not ‘woman’) could deliberate and reason law into existence in the political sphere, speaking on behalf of the ‘common’ good and ‘general’ interests of the nation-state and placing bounds on brute force.\textsuperscript{36} As

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\item\textsuperscript{31} Riley (1988):14. In this respect, Hubbard (1983) identifies some of the key biologists and historical geologists as Linnaeus (1707-78), Lyell (1797-1875), Lamarck (1744-1829), Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) and key social scientists as Malthus (who published \textit{Essay on the Principles of Population} in 1798) and Herbert Spencer.
\item\textsuperscript{32} Bock (2002):84.
\item\textsuperscript{33} Riley (1988):43.
\item\textsuperscript{34} Bock (2002):133.
\item\textsuperscript{35} On reason and passions, see e.g. Elshtain (1981):117-119.
\item\textsuperscript{36} Liberal thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke and James Mill had all belabored the exclusion of ‘woman’ from the category of ‘individuals’ with political interests and rights. See Okin (1979), Pateman (1989), and Jónasdóttir (1994).
\end{itemize}
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unsexed individuals, they could also occupy the new, impersonal bureaucracies of the ‘civil’ domain of the state.

As will be further considered below, nineteenth century ‘woman’ consolidated as a being with characteristics and capacities for action that were in direct opposition to those of the state itself: as the state became one of reason and force, woman became entrenched with emotion and weakness; as the state became one of science, woman became infused with faith and religion; as the state became modern, woman became understood as traditional; as the state turned self-interested, woman was cast as selfless. In the bifurcation of rule of the nineteenth century – depersonalized rational-legal authority and coercive power – woman became the object of both form of rule. And with the new species-differentiation, it was possible for women as such to become excluded from all formal organizations of the state. Although formal participation in state affairs were still restricted for most men as well, their exclusion was not premised on a presumed sexual unity of being men but rather on a combination of wealth requirements, estate belonging and what we can loosely refer to as religious and ‘ethnic’ preconditions.

While shut out of deliberation and decision-making, women became an important object of the targets of the state. In the profuse scholarly deliberations on the state and the role of representative government leading up to the nineteenth century, arguments abounded on the need for woman to subordinate herself to man and abandon dominion over her body for the sake of public utility.\(^{37}\) By the nineteenth century, such conceptualizations of politically inactive women as a resource for the public good had taken hold as predominant, though never unchallenged, in the emergent European national states. [Transition into civilization.]

The Exit of Woman from the State in Civilized Society

An important shift in the relations among European states took place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: these states came to view themselves as belonging to a ‘civilized society’ regulated by international law. During this period, deliberated law increasingly became seen as a means to tame brute power not just domestically but also among states. The rise of highly professionalized and fairly secret diplomacy, third-party arbitration and mediation provided a sense of rule-following order that

\(^{37}\) Locke appealed to ‘nature’ to legitimize women’s exclusion from the state polity and their subordination to men (Okin 1979:200). Other early liberal thinkers such as Hobbes, Hume and James Mill rejected the nature argument and used expressly utilitarian lines of reasoning that invoked the ‘common good’ and ‘its’ rights and needs (Okin 1979:197-99 and Jónasdóttir 1994:141).
allegedly assured that outcomes were not simply guided by military might.\(^{38}\) The nineteenth century also saw one hundred years without a general European war, the "hundred years peace" (1815-1914), which suggested that law could in fact move Europe away from the ‘barbarism’ of war toward the civility of peace. This law-bound group of states, which had earlier shared some sense of unity in Christendom in interactions with non-Christians, came slowly but surely to characterize both its domestic legislation and international relations as ‘civilized.’\(^{39}\) The society of civilized states emerged.

The civilizing process was understood roughly as the course of transcending the presumed givens of natural existence. ‘Civilization is the composite result of progress from the purely natural life of the animal to the purely artificial life of the most enlightened individuals and peoples,’ as one observer noted in 1895.\(^{40}\) Civilization was conceptualized as the most elevated of several progressive levels of being and was articulated together with ‘less advanced’ groups of humans or polities on a single scale of development and success. From the vantage point of European capitals, the world hence became separated into three rough classes of peoples and societies: the savage, the barbarous and the civilized. And the standards of international behavior varied accordingly, guided by the classification of the other. It was reasonable and expected to engage in diplomatic bargaining and deliberation of international law, showing restraint and respect, in the interactions with ‘civilized’ countries. Conquest for subjugation and humiliation was out of the question. In drastic contrast, patronizing, paternalistic and brutally violent behavior was considered suitable toward the ‘less civilized.’\(^{41}\)

There were a number of requirements and expected behaviors that determined whether a polity was to be included in the society of civilized states and receive the privileged treatment that came with this classification. Having established a domestic system of state institutions governed by law and demonstrating the capacity for self-rule were some of the more explicit requirements. However, since civilization was defined in relative terms in contrast with barbarity and savagery, the criteria were ever-changing and illusive, providing slim chances for ‘advancement’ into the civilized fold of official statehood.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) Mason (1895):272.
\(^{41}\) Puchala and Hopkins (1983) and Gong (1984)
\(^{42}\) Gong (1984).
The standards of civilization have been addressed by a small but distinguished group of international relations scholars.\textsuperscript{43} What is not noted in this scholarship is that by the mid- to late eighteenth century, the status of women had become intimately implicated in the ordering of societies along the stages of civilization. The situation and treatment of women became indicative of the advancement of a society, a factor that helped define and rank a nation. In 1845, Marx and Engels expressed this very clearly in \textit{The Holy Family}. While critical of colonialism and disagreeing with the predominant understandings of the stages of civilization, they nevertheless claimed that

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the transformation of a historical era can always be determined by the condition of progress of women toward liberty, because it is here, in the relation of women to men, of the weak to the strong, that the victory of human nature over brutality appears most evident. The degree of female emancipation is the natural measure of general emancipation. (Marx and Engels, 1956 [1845]:259).
\end{quote}

A society in which women prospered clearly had developed rules and institutions that protected them from the sheer force of the stronger sex. To many, the status of women thus became symbolic of the advancement away from the state of nature, the lawless and primitive condition that enabled rule by the strong.

The status of women was not merely important in a symbolic manner. The situation of women was believed to have effects of the advancement of society in very real and material ways. As pioneer sociologist Herbert Spencer contended, we have ‘to bear in mind these traits of intellect and feeling which distinguish women, and to take note of them as factors in social phenomena.’ Any ‘increase of female influence,’ he insisted, would affect the advancement of society ‘in a marked manner.’\textsuperscript{44} The key questions were how and why. In other words, what role should women occupy to stimulate movement towards higher levels of civilization? We will now turn to some of the attempts to make out precisely how and why the standing of women may affect progress.

A shared presumption among those grappling with the question of women and progress was that adaptation to surrounding conditions was central for the ability of a society to move forward. Charles Fourier could thus claim of the French that ‘the French are the foremost civilized nation owing to this single fact of adaptability, the trait most alien to the barbarian character.’\textsuperscript{45} Adaptation was in turn widely understood as a product of a competitive struggle for existence, whether among individuals or nations. Competition and struggle brought about movement along the social stages, either upward.

\textsuperscript{44} Spencer (1873) 142 and 140.
\textsuperscript{45} Fourier (1848[1808]):145.
towards a higher level of civilization or downward, towards barbarity or savagery. A society needed to be adaptive and capable of change in order not to regress or even perish.

The idea that women were inert and unadaptive thrived in the nineteenth century, in the natural as well as social sciences. Evolutionary biology drew on examples from the natural world to develop a science of sexual selection, a form of progress that depended, in the words of Darwin, 'not on a struggle for existence in relation to other organic beings or to external conditions, but on a struggle of individuals of one sex, generally males, for the possession of the other sex.'

In *Origin of the Species and the Descent of Man*, Darwin argued that

the chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can women – whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music (inclusive both of composition and performance), history, science and philosophy, with half-a-dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison. We may also infer… that if men are capable of a decided pre-eminence over women in many subjects, the average of mental power in man must be above that of woman…

[Men have had] to defend their females, as well as their young, from enemies of all kinds, and to hunt for their joint subsistence. But to avoid enemies or to attack them with success, to capture wild animals, and to fashion weapons, requires the aid of the higher mental faculties, namely observation, reason, invention, or imagination. These various faculties will thus have been continually put to the test and selected during manhood.

(Darwin, 1873, pp 873-4)

The physical strength and intelligence of men was constantly improved and developed by means of sexual competition for women, in short, while women’s capacities remained quiescent.

The academic disciplines of anthropology and geography helped connect the notion of sexual selection with the stages of civilization by adding comparative studies from the then-contemporary human world. Women, it became clear through plain observation, did not generate progress. In the words of one anthropologist:

One has only to look around him in traveling through countries lately touched by civilization to notice that men have to drop their old occupations for new ones. In fact, not five men in a hundred in the most favored lands are at this moment pursuing the calling for which they were educated. But in transitions from savagery to civilization, and in the vicissitudes of life, women go on housekeeping, spinning, demanding if no longer making pottery, using the same vocabulary, conning the same propositions, reproducing the same forms of ornaments, believing as of old, only making use of modified and better appliances. In this they are conservative, indeed, and the blood

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46 Darwin (1873):69.
coursing through the brain tissue carries on the same commerce that has been familiar to women during many thousands of years.

The savage man in his normal life is every changing… On the other hand, the women of a savage tribe, and the ordinary run of women in any civilized land, who change slightly the duties they have to perform, or their manner of doing them, need to modify their conception and their opinions very little. The constant doing the same things and thinking the same thoughts from generation to generation pass the bodily activity and the mental processes on to a semiautomatic habit. Very few men are doing what their fathers did, so their opinions have to be made up by study and precedents. Nearly all women, whether in savagery or in civilization, are doing what their mothers and grandmothers did, and their opinions are therefore born in them or into them (Mason 1895:274-5).

In their explorations and comparative analyses of the world outside Europe, scholars and travelers made connections among women across geographical and cultural divides as a singular stagnant rather than progressive force. Women in all parts of the world were essentially the same: inert and uncreative. As such, women were not generative of advancement.

Although women were closer to the state of nature, it was evident that women benefited most from living in a civilized society. If law truly placed bounds on and civilized brute force, then women, as the weak sex, could only stand to gain – in an environment of ‘might is right,’ women were thought to surely succumb. It became a matter of established fact that ‘the condition of woman has always been the most degraded the nearer we approach to a state of nature, or, rather, the less we are raised above the level and mere animal characteristics of the brute creation.’ The brute subjugation of women was by the early to mid-nineteenth century widely represented as an effect of savage society, an ‘oriental, and semi-barbarous delusions,’ a sign of ‘Turkish contempt of females, as subordinate and inferior beings.’

Women were thus simultaneously most in need of civilization, in order to be raised out of degradation and protected from sheer force, and yet they posed a challenge to civilization’s creation and maintenance. As vestigial beings lacking in reason, many claimed that it was critical that women not be entrusted with deliberating law or with bureaucratic public functions. If they did, the state of civilization and their own well-being would be jeopardized. Evidence from less advanced societies and from a less developed past was presented to support the claims. Noted US historian Francis Parkman contended that:

the social power of women has grown with the growth of civilization, but their political power has diminished. In former times and under low social conditions, women have occasionally had a degree of power in public affairs unknown in the foremost nations of the modern world. The most savage tribes on [the North American] continent, the Six

47 Fullom (1855):149.
48 Young (1837):17.
Nations of New York, listened, in solemn assembly, to the counsels of its matrons, with a deference that has no parallel among its civilized successors. The people of ancient Lycia, at a time when they were semi-barbarians, gave such power to their women that they were reported to live under a gynecocracy, or female government. The word gynecocracy, by the way, belongs to antiquity. It has no application in modern life; and, in the past, its applications were found, not in the higher developments of ancient society, but in the lower. Four hundred years before Christ, the question of giving political power to women was agitated among the most civilized of the ancient peoples, the Athenians, and they would not follow the example of their barbarian neighbors. (Parkman 1884:10-11)

Far from everyone agreed that women had no essential role to play in the generation of civilization, however. The nineteenth century also saw prevalent identifications of woman as a crucial civilizing agent. Because of their essential difference, it was argued, women had a distinctive mission in the conversion of nature into culture, especially with reference to the socialization of children. ‘No universal agent of civilization exists but our mothers,’ argued Louis-Aimé Martin in his enormously influential The Education of Mothers; or, The Civilization of Mankind by Women (1834:228) which had won French Academy acclaim and reached an impressive eleven editions in French by 1883, three in English and translations into Swedish, German and Italian. 49

Many of those speaking as and on behalf of women objected not to the characterization of woman as a selfless, conservative and emotional being but rather to the devaluation of such qualities. ‘The one quality on which woman’s value and influence depends is the renunciation of self,’ Sarah Lewis claimed in 1839, in the best-selling Woman’s Mission that was to reach seventeen British and five American editions by 1854. She extended Martin’s discussion and argued that ‘the fundamental principle is right – ‘that women were to live for others’ – and therefore all that we have to do is to carry out this fundamentally right principle into wider application.’ 50

To Lewis, Martin and others, that wider application absolutely did not include state institutions and the political sphere. Instead, ‘the greatest benefit which [women] can confer upon society is to be what they ought to be in all their domestic relations.’ 51 There, women should demonstrate ‘devotion to an ideal good, self-sacrifice and subjugation of selfish feelings,’ so that they could be set aside from men, who had been ruined by the ‘selfish and groveling utilitarianism’ of the state. 52 Women would risk succumbing to selfishness if they were to enter the public sphere of the state. With their nature ruined, they would thus cease to be the ‘potent agent for the amelioration of mankind,’ leading to the degeneration of

50 Lewis (1840):54.
51 Lewis (1840):54-5.
52 Lewis (1840):44 and 23 respectively.
civilization. Unless properly nurtured in the domestic sphere, in New York Senator Samuel Young’s words, woman was ‘destined to be the mother of savages and barbarians, who in every age have been immersed in ignorance, blackened with crime and stained with blood.’

The answer to the question that set up Lewis’ book and which concerned so many statesmen of the time – ‘Would the greatest possible good be procured by bringing [woman] out of her present sphere into the arena of public life?’ – was thus a resounding NO! Women’s ‘empire is that of their affections,’ and the essential influence women exercise in the home is ‘the cultivation of the moral portion of [mankind’s] nature, which cultivation no government has yet attempted, over which, in fact, governments and public institutions have little or no control.’ She underscored that ‘the beneficial influence of woman is nullified if her motives, or her personal character, come to be the subject of attack; and this fact alone ought to induce her patiently to acquiesce in the plan of seclusion from public affairs.’

Many professed the inferiority of women in nineteenth century Europe, in short. As the stagnant and less rational of the sexes, woman could presumably contribute little to the civilizing process. Prevailing evidence clearly demonstrated that women simply could not advance on their own, in this view, and women were in need of male initiative and competitiveness to enjoy the benefits that civilization brought along. Others maintained that women did have an important role to play and placed equal value on the distinctive contribution of women as mothers in the domestic sphere. Importantly, both lines of thought supported the idea of separate spheres for women and men. The advancement of civilization was best assured with women in the domestic sphere and (some) men occupying public positions.

To equate separate spheres with the elevation of women was thus no contradiction. Lewis proclaimed that ‘this, then, is the law of eternal justice – man cannot degrade woman without himself falling into degradation: he cannot elevate her without at the same time elevating himself.’ New York Senator and gubernatorial candidate Samuel Young was also opposed to women holding public office and to extending voting rights to women. He nevertheless likewise declared ‘Let man, when he feels inclined to boast of his advancement, look at the condition of the other sex; and, whilst he finds woman deprived of any of the rights and privileges, which he enjoys, let him lay his hand on his mouth and cry, ‘uncivilized’.’

Keeping women out of the political sphere was often discussed as a way of elevating women by

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54 Young (1837):8.
55 Lewis (1840):23.
56 Lewis (1840):57.
57 Lewis (1840):41.
58 Young (1837):23.
protecting them from the brutality of politics. This, more importantly, was also done by setting states in the right direction in the civilizing process.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the following norm was evidently in place: civilized states exclude women from the state. There are several additional indicators of the effectiveness of this norm. First, the behavior of European and European settler states became standardized. There had previously been no European-wide formal barriers to women entering state office, and (some) women sometimes served as sovereign monarchs, state officials and had voting rights as we saw above. These diverse practices then gave way to more uniform behavior. Explicit exclusion was formalized into law in most of Europe starting in the late eighteenth and accelerating in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1778, the English House of Commons prohibited women from attending and listening to its debates from the floor or gallery of the house. In 1832, women were expressly prohibited from voting in the House of Commons through the introduction of the language of ‘male person’ instead of the previous ‘person’ in suffrage law. In France, women’s political organizations were dissolved and prohibited from reappearing in 1793 and new laws prohibited women from creating or belonging to political clubs and associations in 1848. In Colombia, citizenship was similarly defined as exclusively for ‘men of means’ in 1843. A 1851 Prussian law stripped women of all political rights and disallowed them from attending political meetings, the 1868 fourteenth amendment to the US constitution specified suffrage for the ‘male citizen’ for the first time and the reformed electoral law in New Jersey also disenfranchised all women. Similar legal changes explicitly barring women from participation in the state polity were made in the Netherlands (1887), Germany (1900), Austria (1907), Italy (1912) and Portugal (1913).

If developments within Europe bear testimony to this norm, another telling indicator are the legal shifts in states formally entering the society of civilized states. Concurrent with formal entry into civilized society at the end of the nineteenth century, Japan codified a total ban on women’s political activities for the first time. The Chinese Constitution of 1912 attempted to introduce Anglo-Saxon democratic practice into this first but short-lived Asian republic. This constitution also explicitly excluded women

60 Reuterskiöld (1911):70.
61 Zetkin (1906).
62 Reuterskiöld (1911):79.
65 Brock (2002):133.
from participating in electoral politics, using Europe and North America as the model.\textsuperscript{67}

The practices of European colonial powers in Africa and Asia are also revealing. The elimination of matrilineal kinship systems and female political authority was carried out in the name of ‘progress’ all over the territories under colonial rule.\textsuperscript{68} For instance, the British regulated and codified politics as an exclusively non-female sphere upon conquering the Sudan in 1899. Reflecting the chauvinism of ‘European civilization,’ el-Bakri (1987:177) argues, the British ‘regarded those areas where relations between the sexes were relatively egalitarian as ‘uncivilized.’… In situations where women shared relatively equal status with men, they lost this status under the pretext of ‘civilization’. ’ The construction of colonial political institutions systematically enshrined their exclusion of woman, displacing prior forms of institutionalized female political authority which were in existence in many places.\textsuperscript{69}

Finally, the reaction to those whose arguments or behavior challenged this norm is illuminating. The movement for women’s suffrage began to gather force in many parts of the society of civilized states by the end of the nineteenth century. Those arguing in favor of the status quo often responded that ‘the propaganda of woman suffrage is part and parcel of the world-wide movement for the overthrow of the present order of civilized society.’\textsuperscript{70} By the 1910s, three states on the outskirts of civilized society had defied expected behavior and enfranchised women: New Zealand (1893), Australia (1902), and Finland (1906). Although the implications had to be pondered, this behavior was widely rejected as irrelevant for the old core of the civilized world.\textsuperscript{71} ‘When other civilized nations begin to grant the franchise to women, it might be time for the most civilized nation in the world to see whether it would be well to follow their example,’ Conservative member C. W. Radcliffe Cooke of the British House of Commons argued in 1897.\textsuperscript{72} A 1911 Swedish government report, \textit{On the development and application in foreign lands of the idea of women’s political suffrage}, likewise concluded that

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in these New countries, the ‘state’ is in reality not an independent being, since, on the one hand, a large portion of public office is filled by elected officials and the remaining
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\textsuperscript{67} Edwards (2000):622.
\textsuperscript{68} On the systematic colonial elimination of matrilineal kinship systems in Africa, see Sacks (1982).
\textsuperscript{69} E.g. Palau (Salvador 1995), the Andean region (Silverblatt 1985), the Sudan (el-Bakri 1987, Hale 1996), Ghana (Okonjo 1994). In writing the constitutions of Lebanon and Syria in the 1920s and 1930s, France similarly granted political agency to men but not women (Thompson 2000:126).
\textsuperscript{70} Illinois Association Opposed to the Extension of Suffrage to Women (1900):2.
\textsuperscript{71} On New Zealand as an international example, see Dalziel (1994).
\textsuperscript{72} Quote found in Dalziel (1994):42-43.
offices lack the independent and traditional power that is enjoyed by the public organs of Old civilized states, and, since on the other, the government itself is hardly anything other than an executive organ of the electing citizenry. It should be clear that what in these New countries is a necessity in order to avoid the oppression of women and which may lead to the development of a true state could be the very thing that undermines the independence of state authority in the Old states... There is a significant difference between the application of the principle in a state-in-the-making and a fully grown state (Reuterskiöld 1911:76, my translation).

The report spells it out quite clearly: suffrage was not a standard of behavior for the old civilized world. These new states’ experiments with women’s suffrage simply had ‘neither applicability nor importance for fully sovereign states of old European civilization with developed political institutions and traditions.’

**Conclusion**

*Sorry – didn’t get this done. Only random notes below.*

By the turn of the century, ‘European civilization’ had purged women from its political realm. Exacerbated, German Social Democrat Klara Zetkin exclaimed that ‘one dissolution of a proletarian women’s organization follows another, prohibition after prohibition of women’s assemblies takes place, the expulsion of women from public meetings are a daily occurrence and penalties for women for violating the Law for the Formation of Associations inundate the courts.’

Inglehart and Norris (2003) are some of the political scientists that have been most clear about tying gender equality to the West. They contend that gender equality is the source of ‘the true clash of civilizations’ and proclaim that it is around these values that the world’s civilizations differ. Although their studies center on the contemporary world, a historical account is implied that is consistent with the narrative above.

Now, however, bringing more women into public decision-making bodies is presented as intimately related to the move away from ‘traditional’ towards ‘modern’ and Western values and practices (Towns 2004).

In light of the contemporary admonishing of ‘tradition’ as the source of the subjugation of women and the adjacent celebration of Western values and history as the foundation of the political emancipation of women, this discovery is astounding. What is more, European history itself further places

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74 Zetkin (1895).
in question the notion that ‘tradition’ is the culprit for keeping women out of politics.

This is obviously a stunning reversal from the representations of the nineteenth century, when much of the non-European world was chastised as ‘primitive’ for not maintaining separate spheres and for not keeping women out of political power.

Global and regional organizations that work for bringing more women into government positions now explain the under-representation of women as a matter of traditional values and beliefs. And ‘traditional culture’ does not refer to ideas of nineteenth century Europe but rather as a set of beliefs, values and customs that have been passed down from pre-modern eras. The Inter-American Commission on Women likewise argues that it is ‘socio-cultural patterns’ that hold women back, and that ‘prejudices and customs limit [women’s] participation in public life’ (IACW, 1994:np).

In short, ‘traditional culture’ now appears as a common human past of sexual differentiation and separate spheres, a past which states can escape through successful Westernization. The recent European history of hailing the exclusion of women from politics as an advanced and civilized measure – and of implementing separate spheres in those colonized areas where women were not already excluded from political power – now seems to have become forgotten. Although the status of women remains linked with the progress of human societies, the more specific criterion for entering the ‘advanced’ fold has changed rather dramatically since the past century. Indeed, the standards of civilization hardly remain set.
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