Abstract: Yohanna ALIMI

Weaving a Transatlantic Feminist Network:
the impact of the French revolution of 1848 on the American contest for women's rights

In July 1848, the Seneca Falls convention was held to discuss the role of women in the American society and to claim equal rights and citizenship for women in the United States. Remembered as one of the initiating events of the first wave of American feminism by most historians, this convention included several women’s rights famous speakers such as Lucretia Mott and offered lengthy debates on the Declaration of Sentiments, a document prepared by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the main organizer of the event, and modeled after the American Declaration of Independence. In this document, Stanton denounced the exclusion of women from the political sphere and claimed the right to fully participate in the civil and political life of the nation.

Whereas most historians have studied the American feminist movement as a national phenomenon, this paper aims at decentering this traditional approach by demonstrating that this movement needs to be understood in a much broader framework that transcends national borders. In my presentation, I will attempt to assess to what extent the principles of social reform and political equality defended by the French revolutionaries in February 1848 have inspired and given momentum to the American contest for women’s rights, and played the role of a catalyst in the emergence of the American feminist movement. I will also try to show how French feminism, which was born out of the liberalizing spirit of the 1848 Revolution, and the publications of its activists like Jeanne Deroin for instance, influenced the course of action and the rhetoric of the feminists on the other side of the Atlantic. Indeed, some leading figures of the American women’s rights movement like Mott or Stanton not only read about the 1848 Revolution and the feminist movement in France in the numerous news reports published in the American press, but they also corresponded with French feminists, discussed their accomplishments during American women’s rights conventions and even publicly read letters which their French counterparts had sent them. This paper will examine the connections and the processes of exchange and transfer of ideas between the French and the American feminists in the context of the French Revolution of 1848 and during the few years that followed. By exploring the workings of a feminist transatlantic network connecting American and French women’s rights activists, this paper will show to what extent the feminist ideas developed in the context of the 1848 Revolution provided useful arguments to the American feminists to advance their cause at the national level and claim inclusion in American democracy.

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