Forty years ago when I began research for my dissertation in French women’s and socialist history, I came across the names of Kaethe Schirmacher, Marcelle Capy and Maria Vérone. Who were these women and where did they fit? I had no idea. There was no secondary literature, nothing to help me find my way through the plethora of materials, including hundreds of publications, from isolated brochures to daily newspapers, through which I searched for clues to my subject.

Now, as we all know, we can turn to a very large literature that traces the history of French women of the Third Republic, and we can find references to these three women in several recent books. They all wrote for periodicals and all have earned some recognition for their journalism. But beyond that, who they were, and what they contributed to the burgeoning of what sociologist Evelyne Sullerot half a century ago called “the secondary press” – the one that elicited variously anger or ridicule – and to the shaping of French journalism writ large, we still don’t know much about.\(^1\) Despite four decades of resurgence in French women’s history, the contribution of the feminist press in creating support for women’s rights remains underappreciated.

In an earlier era when women might hesitate to venture out to public meetings but could afford to purchase journals they could read at home, this press became surrogate “mother” to the feminist movement, as a Chinese student

in Paris, Li Dzeh Djen, recognized in her 1934 thesis. The plethora of women’s publications she found both reflected and encouraged demands for change in favor of women’s rights. In 1966 when Sullerot examined women’s periodicals, she identified both a “feminine” and a “feminist” press, and focused on the feminine. In 1979 the first issue of Pénélope: Pour l’histoire des femmes, a joint publication of the Groupe des études féministes at the University of Paris 7 and the Centre des Recherches Historiques at the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, selected as its theme “Les femmes et la presse.” We still await, however, a comprehensive study of the French women’s press and its important feminist component.

The three papers presented here open new doors through which we can revisit this neglected area of feminist history. They lead to the recovery of important little known feminists, toward better understanding of the relationship between the feminist press and the feminist movement, and of the impact of feminist journalism on the French press. All are excellent papers, and all create new knowledge important to the political history of women, that is, to feminism. Each introduces a feminist who breached the walls of previously impenetrable male professional bastions of journalism and, in one case, also law. Although their work spanned several decades chronologically, all belonged to the generation that followed the Third Republic’s liberalization of the press law in 1881, which led to a virtual revolution in print. It introduced an era when, as Sullerot puts it, “Feminism was so combative, its organs of the press so numerous, and its journalists so prolific that none could ignore it.”

Yet, apart from the considerable attention given to La Fronde and its founder, Marguerite Durand, by Mary Lou Roberts and others, and more recently to Fémina in Lenard Berlanstein’s study, not much work about the women’s press has appeared, especially on the large output of the small, often short-lived or irregularly published and feminist journals that proliferated in this period – or even on the exception, Le Droit des femmes, which lasted a hundred years. The early studies found no echo in the three-volume history of the French press, edited by Claude Bellanger and others, which appeared in the 1970s. Some

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4 Sullerot, La Presse féminine, 37.
help is available in Steven Hause’s 1984 study of woman suffrage in the Third Republic, where he lists 19 feminist journals published circa 1920, and in Karen Offen’s comprehensive history, *European Feminisms*, published in 2000, where she devotes several pages to this phenomenon.

The first of the investigative journalists we meet here, Kaethe Schirmacher, reminds us first of all of its geographical breadth. Claiming for her subject the title “femme de lettres,” Karen Offen introduces us to a truly transnational feminist journalist. In this era of a virtual women’s republic of letters, many of its members participated in international meetings such as the one in London in 1899, at which Avril de Sainte-Croix gave the report with which Offen opens her paper. Comfortable enough financially to travel widely, and, thanks to their typically female education in multiple languages, able to converse across linguistic lines, they readily collaborated across national borders on many political endeavors—and even across class lines on some. Schirmacher, long resident in France, exemplifies this multinational feminist group.

By focusing this study on Schirmacher’s writings during her years in France, Karen highlights the international impact of French feminism in this formative period, including, of course, the early adoption by Schirmacher of the French terms, *féminisme* and *féministe*, which would soon spread across the seas. She also shows, in Schirmacher’s work, the international convergence of issues central to feminisms in many countries. Schirmacher’s first book, her 1898 comparative study of feminism in five countries (France, Great Britain, Russia, Sweden and the US) is impressive in its scope. But, Offen notes, it was her interest in women’s paid employment that drew Schirmacher into investigative journalism. She was one of many derided as “bourgeois feminists” who devoted themselves to exposing and improving the wages and working conditions of poor women. Unlike those who, like the influential republican minister, Jules Simon, looked backward to some idealized society where all women found sustenance in a family wage, and for whom “salvation by the family” was the solution to the poverty of women and the dangers of a “promiscuous” workplace, Schirmacher reported on the realities of women’s labor, but also praised its benefits. She differs from most in the international scope of her investigations and in her insistence, cited by Offen, that “il faut du féminisme dans la vie de l’ouvrière” (women workers need some feminism in their lives). She seems to have been more

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outspoken than most, and willing to talk back even to the most eminent of men and to challenge the reports of important public agencies. Her audacity, her extensive knowledge, her usage of many kinds of information or data—a supposedly masculine style—all show her capacity for investigative journalism. In Mary Lynn Stewart's term, may we call her a "grand reporter"?

What little seems to have been published on Schirmacher in recent years, as Offen's notes reveal, has appeared in German. Now that Offen has brought her—a transnationalist before the word—to our Anglophone and Francophone attention, I can answer my long ago question: we know something of who she was and what she had to say about many important issues of the day. Beyond following her back to Germany, what remains would seem to include tracing her multiple international connections and influence. What became of the "Union internationale des femmes progressistes" (International Union of Progressive Women) she cofounded? And what effect did the Paris years have on her own development? Did she belong to any feminist groups in Paris? Were these, for her, as for her compatriot though putative class enemy Clara Zetkin, "decisive years"? Did she read Zetkin's Die Gleichheit (Equality)? Did she continue her international career after her return to Germany? But all this belongs to another study. Offen's paper brings Schirmacher back into the light of history and reminds us of how many important feminists of this period remain to be recognized.

Turning to the second of our papers, Mary Lynn Stewart introduces her subject, Marcelle Capy, by explaining the gendered division of labor within the rapidly expanding press of the period. Any woman breaking into the profession of journalism beyond the women’s press, she tells us, faced the sex-linked distinction between “grand” and “petit” reporting. Like her predecessor, mentor and model, Séverine (Caroline Rémy), Capy set out to work for the major Parisian dailies. But since so few women could earn a living from journalism, she combined reporting with writing fiction, an important clue, Stewart tells us, to appreciating the quality of her prose, with its “vignettes and pathos.” A “feminine style” and “social reporting” defined women’s journalism then, and as many will recall, for decades to come. Most of what women wrote appeared only in the “women’s pages.”

Given the requirement to experience international reporting that precluded a career as a “grand reporter,” Capy perhaps did the next best thing and became a social investigator. Noting how little attention has been paid to the kind of social investigating that Capy undertook during the war years and interwar period, Stewart shows how Capy followed the path that had been bushwhacked by

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Séverine. She sought not only to report on what she witnessed, but to be a participant observer, even on occasion disguising herself to hide her own comfortable financial circumstances in order to gain access to and describe for her readers the realities of working-class women’s lives. It was this kind of reportage, or, on-the-scene observation, a practice then still somewhat unusual, which led Marie-Hélène Zylberberg-Hocquard and Evelyne Diebolt to label Capy an “ethnologue” (in their 1984 republication of some of her, and of Aline Valette’s, columns on women’s work). Capy stressed human interest and compassion, while Valette provided lots of data.

In her wartime journalism, Capy also sought to report from the front, so to speak, looking close up at the impact of war on working women, including some in the relatively new and growing tertiary sector occupations. As her socialist sympathies might predict, she had little empathy for the “charitable ladies” who sought to aid in the war effort. Partnering with a socialist deputy who belonged to the minority faction opposed to the war, as against the party majority who supported and even joined the “bourgeois” coalition government, Capy appears to have begun her transition toward the pacifism that would occupy her during the interwar period. One wonders if her wartime journalism reveals any response to Clara Zetkin’s call to socialist women of all belligerent countries to meet in Berne in March 1915, to stimulate opposition to the war. Did Capy report on the Louise Saumoneau case, in which this antiwar militant defied her group of Parisian socialist women who voted not to send a delegate to Berne and traveled without passport across the border? Did Capy report about Frenchwomen such as Saumoneau and Hélène Brion, who went to jail for their public pacifism? What in her wartime journalism caused the police to keep her under surveillance?

In her postwar career, founding an international pacifist league and editing a socialist feminist pacifist journal, Capy was, Stewart states, “closer to men in the ‘new’ pacifism” than to feminist pacifists.” Like an earlier reference to “integral pacifism,” this comment could bear further elaboration. What does this mean? A clue to its meaning and to Capy’s ostensible rightward turn—how interesting that both she and Schirmacher moved toward the political right—can be found by following Stewart’s lead to Simon Epstein’s recent study of the political trajectories of pacifists who were initially outspoken supporters of Jews (“philosemites”) but later supported the Nazis and Vichy, among whom Capy is

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the lone woman included. 15 “Integral pacifism” appears to have been a kind of pacifism without limits to which all else was subordinated, including the fate of the Jews. Capy had many compatriots on this trip, from left and right, who like her moved to support the Germans after their victory over France. Anything but war.

Does this then also explain how Capy’s early and continuing emphasis on women’s work and on pacifism can be reconciled, or somehow integrated? Drawing on her longer writings, including the fiction, Stewart suggests one possibility: the devastating effects on home and family of both women’s work in exploitative and deleterious circumstances and of war, which made it all so much worse. Empathetic toward women who had to work for a living, Capy seems to have idealized women’s traditional roles, while creating for herself an unusual and non-traditional career. Her rightward tilt, however, calls for further investigation of her role during Vichy.

In conclusion, Stewart credits Capy with innovative and important investigative reporting about a broad spectrum of women workers. She was not eligible for designation by her contemporaries as a “grand reporter,” for her lack of experience in war and/or foreign reporting and in writing for “daily, mass circulation, informational newspapers.” This brings us back to where Stewart begins, with her analysis of the gendering of the journalism profession in Third Republic France. But, what of writing for La Fronde, which met those criteria, if only for about six years? Perhaps in Sullerot’s “secondary press,” Marcelle Capy may be viewed as a “grand reporter.”

Our third pioneering journalist, Maria Vérone, not only ventured through the press to call attention to gender injustice, but unlike her predecessors who breached the borders of that male preserve, she also took on the male-dominated legal profession. Vérone was, Sara Kimble states, “the most influential female lawyer of her generation,” and she enjoyed a career of forty years. Kimble shows how through the engagement of a few women in the law, the position of court recorder, as a mere chronicler of legal proceedings, evolved into a commentator on social and political aspects of the law. They helped to educate the public, to shape conceptions of the law, and even to change the law and the courts, as did Vérone in her work on juvenile justice, as Kimble has demonstrated elsewhere) 16 Vérone’s unique contribution was to purvey to her contemporaries legal and legislative information that illustrated the gendered impact of the law. In the process, she helped to create what Kimble here terms “feminist legal journalism.” Popular legal journalism,” she states, “was part legal criticism, part advice

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column, and part social commentary,” with consequences for redefinition of the law as a helping profession, on establishment of new courts for juvenile justice, on family law, on promulgating feminist propaganda, and on enhancing the role and reputation of women lawyers.

Nurtured early on by *La Fronde*, Vérone produced weekly columns that offered legal advice along with her commentary. As what Kimble calls an “avocate engagée,” her legal journalism combined legal and sociopolitical opinion with reportage, a practice that Kimble traces back to the revolutionary era. She focused on laws affecting women’s rights, juvenile justice, and the long but ultimately successful campaign to gain access for women lawyers to the judiciary. She pioneered tactics that would later prove effective in expanding the rights of other disenfranchised and oppressed groups through the courts. One of few—Charles Sowerwine terms her the “only really active woman lawyer” of her era in France,¹⁷ she was a true militant, in the stronger English rather than weaker French sense of the word. Through the range of her action and longevity of her career, and her downright persistence, she put her mark on French legal as well as women’s and feminist history. From *plumassière* and chorus girl to leading lawyer, she led a remarkable life. Where then is the biography? There seems so much more to know.

Many questions arise. To what extent did the entrance of women such as Schirmacher, Capy and Vérone change the practice of their professions? Can we trace the impact of their work on public opinion? Did other journalists refer to it in their columns? Is there any way to track reader response? Did feminist journalism move the public toward new understanding of women’s rights (and wrongs), of gender relations, and relationships between individuals of both sexes and society? Feminist journalism was not just a mother to the feminist movement but an important means for women to enter into and affect the uses of public space. Thanks to these three historians, who have brought new recognition to its pioneers, we can now, like journalists, answer many of the old questions of who, what, where, when, and why, and invent new ones for future research.