

From Eve to Dawn: A History of Women in the World

**The Feminist Press at the City University of New York
Marilyn French**

"HERSTORY" REVISADA

Marilyn French's fervently feminist novel *The Woman's Room* has sold 20 million copies since it was published in 1977, and its author, now nearing 80, remains as ardent as ever in her defense of women's rights. In four ambitious volumes under the title *From Eve to Dawn*, she surveys world history from a staunchly feminist perspective. Written during the 1980s and early 1990s and published in Toronto in 2002, this epic work now makes its debut in the United States.

Early on, French expresses her major concern: the rising fundamentalist backlash against women's rights. "If you pay attention to history, and know what has happened in the past," she writes in the introduction, "you will realize that the rights we have so arduously won in the United States slowly but surely can be rescinded by a right-wing Supreme Court combined with a right-wing government. And are." In *Origins*, the first volume, French reexamines the earliest human records and addresses the history of major world religions and cultures that have shaped gender relations in the West. The next two volumes tell the story of patriarchy and female subordination: *The Masculine Mystique* traces the rise of feudalism in Europe and Japan, the rise of European nation-states and imperial expansion and, finally, the French Revolution. *Infernos and Paradises, the Triumph of Capitalism in the 19th Century* takes the measure of industrialization and of Western imperialism in Africa, then narrows the focus to England and the United States. Her final volume, *Revolutions and the Struggles for Justice in the 20th Century*, addresses socialism, revolution, fascism and anti-imperial revolution in various parts of the world. The final chapters treat the recent history of feminism and its future potential. "The feminist movement," French asserts, "is the most important revolution that has ever occurred on earth."

Shadowed by pessimism and outrage, French's work is grounded in the first generation of scholarship about women's history in the English language, which focused on what men

did to women. But since the 1970s, that early emphasis has been supplemented by discoveries of what women accomplished despite restrictive conditions, with the goal of exposing and eliminating those conditions. Scholars worldwide now confront the male-centric politics of earlier histories with penetrating gender analyses of religion, the state, social and political systems and war and peace. Readers curious about these findings can consult another recent four-volume work, edited by Bonnie G. Smith, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* (2008); the Smith-edited pamphlet series published by the American Historical Association, *Women's and Gender History in Global Perspective*; and ViVa, an online multilingual bibliography of women's and gender history articles (www.iisg.nl/~womhist/vivahome.php).

Marilyn French is a literary critic, acclaimed essayist and best-selling novelist, but not a trained historian, and it shows. Readers can profit greatly from her brisk and passionate prose, but anyone seriously interested in women's history and the history of feminisms shouldn't stop there.

Karen Offen

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