



Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927 (Women in Culture and Society)

By Mary Louise Roberts

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In the raucous decade following World War I, newly blurred boundaries between male and female created fears among the French that theirs was becoming a civilization without sexes. This new gender confusion became a central metaphor for the War's impact on French culture and led to a marked increase in public debate concerning female identity and woman's proper role. Mary Louise Roberts examines how in these debates French society came to grips with the catastrophic horrors of the Great War.

In sources as diverse as parliamentary records, newspaper articles, novels, medical texts, writings on sexology, and vocational literature, Roberts discovers a central question: how to come to terms with rapid economic, social, and cultural change and articulate a new order of social relationships. She examines the role of French trauma concerning the War in legislative efforts to ban propaganda for abortion and contraception, and explains anxieties about the decline of maternity by a crisis in gender relations that linked soldiery, virility, and paternity.

Through these debates, Roberts locates the seeds of actual change. She shows how the willingness to entertain, or simply the need to condemn, nontraditional gender roles created an indecisiveness over female identity that ultimately subverted even the most conservative efforts to return to traditional gender roles and irrevocably altered the social organization of gender in postwar France.

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About the Author

Mary Louise Roberts is associate professor of history at Stanford University.

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