

The Need For Memory

Ruth Rosen

In recent years, feminism has been blamed for the destruction of the family, women working outside the home, the high divorce rate, the neglect of children, the feminization of poverty, the lack of child care, women's failure to find marriage partners, women's infertility, men's sexual impotency, the superwoman syndrome, the nation's moral flabbiness, rising unemployment, and the debasement of intellectual standards. And this is only the short list. Just last year, a perfectly intelligent young woman at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote a paper in which she stated as fact that the women's movement played a very large role in creating eating disorders. Feminist-bashing has become so common that I thought the Tower Commission might somehow implicate feminism in the Iran-contra affair.

What creates such sensational claims? One obvious answer is the media, which, while making feminism a household word, also created fraudulent celebrities, ridiculed participants, distorted ideas, equated feminism with individual advancement and self-improvement, and then, in 1980, with a particular kind of vengeance, repeatedly pronounced it dead. But the media's biased translation of feminism is too partial and easy an answer. The real problem is that the media, like the rest of American society, lack historical perspective on the origins and development of contemporary feminism.

Americans are notoriously ignorant of their history. The Hearst Corporation recently reported that 45 percent of Americans believe that the phrase "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" appears in the United States Constitution. A few months ago, a woman on the Phil Donahue show warmly reminisced about the good old days in the sixties when we women marched for the ERA. Nobody bothered correcting her; it wasn't even clear anyone noticed.

It's naptime in Reagan's America, and the truth is that both conservatives and feminists alike exercise an extremely selective memory in recalling the history of the

women's movement. The forgetfulness has its motives, and in this case the motives differ. To support their current agenda of demolishing the welfare state and restoring patriarchal authority to a much-mythologized nuclear family, conservatives blame feminism for most of today's ills. For many feminists the past is simply too embarrassing or too painful to admit into our collective consciousness.

Let us restore some historical perspective. Yes, the early movement included both reformist and liberationist tendencies. And yes, the civil rights wing of the women's movement played a key role in securing important rights for women. But at the height of the late sixties' intoxication with liberation, it was the youthful radical groups that provided the transformative vision and gave this wave of feminism its distinctive political culture and some of its greatest strengths and weaknesses. Feminists want to forget the rage, stridency, and anti-male, antimotherhood, and antimarriage attitudes that fired the young radical members of the early movement and influenced some of the older members as well. A few embarrassed souls repent; some deny their youthful excesses; many concede them but respond, "Yes, but *I* was never like that."

Feminists also want to forget the devastating battles that divided members and subjected too many individuals to ostracism and exclusion. The twin notions that "the Personal is Political" and that "Sisterhood is Powerful" fired the imagination of many feminists and provoked extraordinary intellectual insights. But they also had the unanticipated effect of subjecting members' personal lives to excruciating scrutiny and demanding, in the name of unity, unquestioning loyalty to a political line. The members of the *Tikkun* roundtable, all highly respected and admired feminists, exhibit a refreshing tolerance and generous pluralism. But we should not read history books backwards from the present. Their willed acceptance of diversity is a mature and dignified response to the pain many of us witnessed or experienced when difference meant disloyalty. In scores of interviews with feminists, I have been struck by the deep pain feminist activists suffered from the very women they expected to provide a refuge from men.

Rather than deny the embarrassing or painful parts of the recent feminist past, I would rather ask: Why did

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the women's movement develop as it did? And what I want to argue is that we can best understand the women's movement of the sixties if we grasp two points: that feminists' fury against men, marriage, motherhood, and children was actually a war against the *zeitgeist* of the fifties; and that feminists fought their battles with the only language and symbols they had at the time, those of the New Left and liberal men whose political limitations they rejected but whose political culture profoundly shaped the early years of the women's movement. A fully developed feminist language, grounded in women's experience, would only begin to emerge later.

As the feminist revolution revved into high gear in the late sixties, critics sniffed out a certain hostility toward men, motherhood and marriage, nuclear families and traditional sexual mores. They weren't entirely wrong. There are reasons why movements target certain enemies, flash particular symbols, choose specific metaphors, and set the goals that they do. The past shapes how people view the present and how they imagine the future. The feminists of the sixties, largely white middle-class women, were recent refugees of the fifties, a decade that vilified female independence and insisted that women's anatomy become their destiny. For these mothers and daughters of the fifties, the immediate past conjured up images of claustrophobic marriages, coercive motherhood, and constrained chastity. Terror of being trapped—again, or for the very first time—drove activists to try to dismantle what Betty Friedan, in her pioneering and best-selling 1963 exposé, termed the feminine mystique, the belief that women should devote themselves exclusively to marriage and motherhood.

The rage that characterized the American women's movement is only comprehensible if the tyranny of the feminine mystique—and women's collaboration in it—is fully understood. Although the feminine mystique accurately described the lives of only the white middle class, its power to induce conformity was breathtaking. In a 1955 survey, forty-six out of fifty sophomore college women chose identical futures: marriage to a successful professional or junior executive, three or more children chauffeured from suburban home to various activities, and leisure time spent volunteering in civic affairs. They were not alone. Middle-class America had a dream and the affluence to achieve it. More than 70 percent of American families in the fifties consisted of a breadwinner father and a mother who stayed at home caring for the children. Sheer numbers alone permitted the feminine mystique to achieve a hegemonic tyranny in American culture.

But the very power of the feminine mystique to limit women's aspirations and choices also created a vast

underground of seething discontent. Many women secretly experienced the fifties as a private nightmare. As women strained to comply with the demands of the feminine mystique, they discovered they could not win. Critics blamed housewives and mothers for creating "suburban matriarchies" that emasculated men. McCarthyites denounced working women as traitors, and psychiatrists labeled career women neurotics. Whatever women did, they were deemed failures. Such a double bind silenced a generation of mothers and sowed the seeds of revolt in their daughters.

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The fifties was also an age of cognitive dissonance: Millions of people believed in ideals that poorly described their experience. While the media painted a roseate portrait of suburban motherhood and the happy nuclear family, women began moving into the labor force, the sexual revolution heated up, growing numbers of couples ended up in divorce court, and the young crossed over an unbridgeable generational divide. During the fifties, McCarthyism silenced dissent. Still, every once in a while, someone noticed the growing discrepancy between myth and fact. And, on occasion, some brave and daring soul opened the closet door, allowing some of the dirty little secrets of the fifties to tumble into public view.

By the late fifties, the feminine mystique had begun to collide with the reality of women's growing sexual and economic independence. The contradictions and frustrations faced by large constituencies of women—housewives, working women, and rebellious daughters—in effect set the agenda for a new women's movement. Housewives, as Betty Friedan discovered, quietly endured profound despair, interminable boredom, and unbearable isolation. Working women, whose numbers doubled during the fifties, quietly suffered sex discrimination and sexual harassment at their jobs. Daughters of the fifties, sensing the bitterness and disappointment of their mothers and other women, entered a new

decade eagerly mapping escapes from the constraints of the fifties.

But it wasn't until the sixties that the details of the nightmare trickled out and the mothers and daughters of the fifties became the feminists of the sixties, launching a revolution whose secret agenda was to exorcise the fifties from themselves and the nation. For these refugees, the women's movement seemed like an exhilarating revolt against the coercive authority of the feminine mystique. The movement publicized and politicized the private agonies that the fifties had effectively silenced; it addressed the massive problems that accompanied women's infusion into the labor force and legitimized women's resentment and ambivalence toward an accelerating sexual revolution.

Clearly, not all American women in the late sixties remembered the fifties in this way. At least half the female population didn't, and the feminist attack against the nuclear family—the only refuge left against a hostile and impersonal consumer society—sent many women rushing into the waiting arms of the New Right in the seventies. But, in fact, many women felt stifled by the feminine mystique.

Not everyone articulated that discontent, of course. Movements are always led by activists, who, by their particular social locations and temperaments, are best situated to name problems that have remained invisible. As two generations of women grew dissatisfied with the limits of liberalism and the New Left, they founded, respectively, NOW and the autonomous women's liberation movement. But they also drew heavily upon the men they had left. Older women who founded NOW—many of whom had been mothers or working women in the fifties—took up the liberal program to secure women's equal rights. Their assertion of the individual rights of each woman gained important victories, even as it limited a broader political agenda. The more radical women's liberation movement—made up of rebellious daughters of the fifties, many of whom were also disgruntled veterans of other movements—questioned everything. From the civil rights movements they inherited the certainty that “separate but equal” would never guarantee equality; from the counterculture they acquired the moral imperative to live as though the future had already replaced the present; from the late New Left—in the midst of its

own self-destruction—they inherited an apocalyptic utopianism that shunned structure and leadership, spoke a garbled revolutionary rhetoric, glamorized vanguardism, romanticized irrationality, and demanded moral absolutism and ideological purity. In this language, and with cultural styles and political symbols drawn from the late sixties' revolutionary fantasies, radical feminists battled with the ghosts of the fifties. The result: a discourse about men, marriage, and motherhood in which rage against and fear of the feminine mystique were expressed in the inflammatory language of revolutionary warfare.

As was the case for other movements of the sixties, many opportunities to move further were squandered in the push toward revolution. Extreme moralism, unwillingness to tolerate difference, inability to appreciate the sexual and economic fear of dependent women, failure to comprehend the importance of racial and class divisions, and ambivalence toward authority all helped undermine the women's movement's ability to speak compellingly to the majority of American women on all but a few issues. Until, that is, the larger culture assimilated a transformative feminism and turned it into an agenda for individual self-improvement and self-advancement.

Feminism is an easy scapegoat for today's ills. It is easy to forget that many of the economic and social changes that have transformed the family and men's and women's lives antedated and speeded the rise of the women's movement. In turn, the women's movement played an essential and pivotal role in accelerating that change, interpreting the significance of gender to a bewildered society, and pushing reluctant Americans into the next historical stage of gender relations. By addressing invisible changes that had already occurred in the fifties, by demanding that men and the government assume their fair share of responsibility, the women's movement punctured sacred myths and forced American society to acknowledge the painful reality of a changing world.

These were extraordinary accomplishments. For all the movement's errors and excesses, a generation of feminists have every reason to honor our recent history. We honor it best when we continue the good fight, persevere in the face of backlash, and transmit the whole truth to the next generation. □