UP FROM THE PEDESTAL

SELECTED WRITINGS IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN FEMINISM

Edited with an Introduction by

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standard reference works from which I obtained most of the data preceding the various documents; Doris W. Dashew, for reading the introductory essay, which is much the better for her criticisms and suggestions; Carl N. Degler, for his many helpful comments regarding my selection of documents; and Mr. Dennis Costa, who helped me sharpen some of the ideas that are to be found in the last section of the introductory essay.

EDITOR'S NOTE

A number of the documents in this volume are taken from the first five volumes of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, a six-volume collection of speeches, writings, and other documents that is of first-rate importance in the literature of American feminism. For the sake of brevity these volumes will be referred to as *HWS* I, *HWS* II, and so on. The full bibliographic information on each is as follows:

Vol. I: Edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. New York, 1881.

Vols. II and III: Edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. Rochester, N.Y., 1887.

Vol. IV: Edited by Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper. Rochester, N.Y., 1902.

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UP FROM THE PEDESTAL

INTRODUCTION

Women in History and Historiography

UNTIL TOWARD the end of the nineteenth century, most history was written in terms of kings' reigns and presidents' administrations, of wars and revolutions; in these, women took little or no part. And, since women wrote as little history as they made, it is not surprising that historiography faithfully reflected their exclusion from those events historians considered important enough to record. That their exclusion was itself a datum of history never entered the historians' minds, for was not the domestic sphere—ahistorical by definition—"naturally" ordained to be woman's? "Natural" phenomena—geographical, meteorological, astronomical, ecological, and so on—are noticed by the historian only when they intrude in a positive—i.e., *un*natural—way in the human drama; ordinarily they are simply "there," negative, the stage on which the drama takes place. Hence the older histories sometimes opened with a chapter setting the geographical stage and often included narrative-breaking chapters on social life, family patterns, dress styles, and other such entertaining topics that changed either too slowly or too fast to be part of the main stream of "real" history. It is hardly coincidental that such chapters, which of course mentioned women, performed a function in these tomes parallel to that of comic interludes in Shakespeare's tragedies. Until a few

years ago this situation had continued with little noticeable change.

In 1946 Mary Beard noted that twenty-two years earlier Arthur M. Schlesinger had called for a rewriting of American history to give proper credit to the role women had played in it. She complained that his suggestion had gone unheeded, and observed that Ralph Gabriel, in his *Course of American Democratic Thought*, published in 1940, had completely ignored even the woman's-rights movement.[1] The seventy-year struggle for woman suffrage had evidently contributed nothing to the course of American democratic thought. In 1968 Schlesinger's complaint of 1922 and Mrs. Beard's of 1946 are still timely: the index of a widely used college text in United States history lists only forty-nine women, and their segregation into special sections is made more invidious by the fact that these individuals or women in general are mentioned on only 4.1 per cent of the work's 1,600 pages.[2] But there are signs that no historian in 1990 will have occasion to quote three such complaints, each a generation later than the one before, and add a fourth. Two major facts provide grounds for optimism: first, the entrance of women into those areas of American life that traditionally furnished the data of history, and, second, the rise to popularity of social history and the growing tendency of even the political, constitutional, diplomatic, and economic historians to incorporate data of social history in their studies. The history of women's role and women's status may follow the pattern of Negro history: before World War II it was largely ignored except by Negro scholars; since then it has become an important area of specialization and will continue to be until the enormous gaps in our knowledge begin to narrow. A third stage, heralded by a recent article,[3] will begin when Negro history is incorporated into all

[1] Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York, 1946), pp. 58–59; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York, 1922); Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought: An Intellectual History since 1815* (New York, 1940).

[2] Harry J. Carman, Harold C. Syrett, and Bernard W. Wishy, *A History of the American People*, 2 vols., paperback (3rd ed., New York, 1967). The title is ironic.

[3] Robert Starobin, "The Negro: A Central Theme in American History," *Journal of Contemporary History*, III (April 1968), 37–53.

other aspects of American history, as scholars both recognize the integral role of Negroes in American life from the beginning and possess sufficient specialized studies to perform the synthesis. The history of women is at the beginning of the second stage of this process.

Until a few years ago, scholarly works on the role and status of women in American history fell into two categories. The first consisted of only two books—Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959) and Andrew Sinclair's *The Better Half* (New York, 1965)—both broad surveys and both about as good as the paucity of the specialized knowledge at their disposal allowed. By far the majority of works in this field fell into the second category: biographies of important women and minute accounts of activities of suffragists in various states.

The biographical approach is not by accident the most popular; nor is it accidental that almost all these works are by women. Most men, even today, when women are legally almost their equal, think of the woman's-rights movement as the demand by neurotic females to be like men, and they assume that a significant proportion of its members were hawk-faced spinsters who wore blue stockings and marched in parades for lack of more feminine employments to occupy them. (It may be more than a coincidence that most male historians, when they do mention the suffragists, call them "suffragettes," the epithet that during the life of the movement was used only by their enemies.) With a few exceptions, only women have seen fit to write about the lives of women leaders, and these biographies, while they give the lie to the stereotype, are rarely accorded by male historians a respectable place in historical literature and are hardly ever mentioned in bibliographies appended to books that deal with the times in which these women affected history. Hence women scholars who can be expected to harbor a better opinion of their sex have had the field to themselves. But even they have not been fully immune to the dominant ideological assumptions. This accounts in part for their biographical approach, which manifests a concentration of attention on and interest in the personal motivations of leading participants in the movement and a corresponding slight-

ing of the objective historical significance of the movement in the main stream of American history. Moreover, the biographical approach results partly from their desire to demonstrate the normality of their subjects; this laudable aim unfortunately has resulted in some portrayals that are larger than lifesize and hence smaller than reality.

The articles on suffragist activity hardly deserve the name of history. They are, rather, the raw material for history, meticulously gathered from private papers, newspapers, state legislative documents, and the like. They list names and dates in bewildering profusion. They tell which lady gave a tea party for suffragists on which afternoon in which town, how much money was raised, and which local paper recorded the event. They tell little about why these women wanted the vote or why the movement arose where and when it did.

This genre recalls a penetrating observation by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss:

> Biographical and anecdotal history . . . is low-powered history, which is not intelligible in itself and only becomes so when it is transferred *en bloc* to a form of history of a higher power than itself; and the latter stands in the same relation to a class above it. It would, however, be a mistake to think that we progressively reconstitute a total history by dint of these dove-tailings. For any gain on one side is offset by a loss on the other. Biographical and anecdotal history is the least explanatory; but it is the richest in point of information, for it considers individuals in their particularity and details for each of them the shades of character, the twists and turns of their motives, the phases of their deliberations. . . . [T]he historian loses in information what he gains in comprehension or vice versa. . . . The historian's relative choice, with respect to each domain of history he gives up, is always confined to the choice between history which teaches us more and explains less, and history which explains more and teaches less.[4]

The informative studies of women continue to be needed, but they do not themselves suggest how they will be integrated into larger explanatory patterns. This depends on a new attitude, on

[4] *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), pp. 261–62.

the part of historians, toward women and toward the relation of social history to other aspects of history. Already young male scholars are devoting serious attention to this field, and a few scholars, such as William R. Taylor,[5] are considering women's roles and status as part of the necessary data for intellectual history. The requisite shift in attitude can be described by means of a phrase that American feminists repeatedly used in their propaganda: a change from regarding women as females who happen to be human, to regarding them as humans who happen to be female. For, as long as the first attitude prevailed, it was logical to omit women from accounts of the lives and activities of human beings—that is, from history—and to mention them for the same reason that other nonhistorical phenomena were mentioned, as part of the "natural" setting against which the human drama was enacted. In view of the primitive state of historiography in this field, the larger explanatory patterns suggested in the following pages can be no more than tentative.

Feminism and Antifeminism: The Real Issues

Feminism is customarily thought of as the theory that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men. As a definition of a theory, this is satisfactory, but a theory has a way of changing when it is translated into practice over a long period of time. At times some of the feminists whose writings are sampled in this book demanded social rights superior to those of men; at other times, political, economic, and social rights inferior to those of men but superior to those that women had; and at still other times, rights different from but "equal" to those of men. In one period the most commonly demanded right was higher education; in another, access to professions; in a third, the vote. Clearly, the history of American feminism implies far more than the practical application of the theory stated above—

[5] *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and the National Character* (London, 1963).

that women should have rights equal to men's. What the feminists have wanted has added up to something more fundamental than any specific set of rights or the sum total of all the rights that men have had.

This fundamental something can perhaps be designated by the term "autonomy." Whether a feminist's demand has been for all the rights men have had, or for some but not all of the rights men have had, or for certain rights that men have not had, the grievance behind the demand has always seemed to be that women have been regarded not as people but as female relatives of people. And the feminists' desire has, consequently, been for women to be recognized, in the economic, political, and/or social realms, as individuals in their own right. Such a recognition could be consistent with a distinction between men's and women's "spheres," even with a continued subordination of the feminine "sphere," as well as with a merging of men's and women's "spheres." The essential change demanded has always been that women's "sphere" must be defined by women. The questions have always been: What is women's proper sphere? and, even more, Who should decide what that sphere is?

Two documents illustrate both the fundamental nature of the insistence on self-determination and its persistence in time. The first was written in 1838 and the second in 1891, but the theme of autonomy may also be discerned in documents written long before the first and long after the second. The first is a letter from a feminist to her fiancé describing a lyceum debate on the proposition: "Would the condition of woman and of society be improved by placing the two sexes on an equality in respect to civil rights and duties?" The feminist's comment, significantly, was not on what was said at the debate but on the fact that all the participants were men:

> There our lords & masters undertook to discuss *our* rights & settle what was most for *our* benefit, but we were not permitted to plead our own cause, nor were *we* called upon to give our votes[.] As well might the Slaveholders of the So[uth] hold a meeting to discuss whether the condition of Society & the slaves would be improved by emancipation, whilst they sat gagged before them & the question decided by acclamation by the masters without the voice of the slaves.[6]

Fifty-three years later a woman minister voiced essentially the same complaint:

> It has always seemed to me remarkable how clear the definitions of men are in regard to women, their duties, their privileges, their responsibilities, their relations to each other, to men, to government, and . . . to God. . . .
>
> The great divine who suggested . . . [the subject of this speech] to me was lecturing before an Institute of Sacred Theology in the city of New York. Before him was a class of students, male and female, and he was defining to the male students what they, the males, might permit the females to do. He says, "There are some things which the women may be permitted to do." Now we like that, don't we? Some things that we may be permitted to do! "They may be permitted to dispense certain charities; they may be permitted to speak in prayer and class-meetings; they may be permitted to do certain lines of church work. There are other things which women may not be permitted to do. Among the things which they may not be permitted to do, is to hold high official relation to the church, to become its ministers, and to dispense its sacraments. These things women may not be permitted to do." [7]

The suggestion that autonomy, rather than the redefinition of women's proper sphere, should be considered the objective toward which the feminists, consciously or unconsciously, worked is not meant to deny the importance of the question of "spheres." Rather, it is meant to show that that question has broader implications than commonly thought. The feminists seemed to sense that the distance between the spheres of men and women encouraged people to lose sight of the differences among individual women. Strictly speaking, men have never had a "proper sphere," since their sphere has been the world and all its activities. They have always been, accordingly, human beings who happened to be male. Women, on the contrary, have occupied sharply circum-

[6] Angelina E. Grimké to [Theodore D. Weld], [January 7, 1838], Weld Papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

[7] Anna Howard Shaw, "God's Women," speech at Woman's National Council meeting, reported in *Woman's Journal*, March 7, 1891.

scribed spheres—the home, the church, the philanthropic society or sewing circle—regardless of differences among individuals in talents and tastes, and have, accordingly, been thought of as females who happened to be human. It has been taken for granted that men's activities should vary according to their potentialities, but it has been assumed that women's activities should be defined by their sex. Thus, it was proper for men to live for themselves—to achieve self-fulfillment by developing their individual talents—whereas women should live for others—to achieve self-fulfillment by caring for their husbands and children. Church and charity work was a logical extension of that role outside the home and hence was socially acceptable.

Women have been the only subordinated group that has belonged to the same families as its rulers. The ambiguous status of well-to-do women, as both ruler and ruled, generated contradictions and ambiguities in both feminists' and antifeminists' attitudes toward women. On the one hand, the middle-class women who in the nineteenth century comprised the feminist movement shared the economic and social status of their men, but, on the other, they were excluded from the economic functions that maintained that status. While they shared the middle-class ideology, on all issues besides feminism, that rationalized their status, their desire for individual autonomy seemed to conflict with that ideology's understanding of the nature of the family and its relation to society. The feminist movement began in the middle of the nineteenth century, when both individualism and the cult of domesticity occupied extremely important places in American popular thought. Two such contrary doctrines could coexist only if individualism was marked "For Men Only." The glorification of the Jacksonian go-getter businessman, the intrepid pioneer, the log-cabin-born President, coincided with the decline in women's status and the increasing restriction of middle-class women to domestic and ornamental functions.

One of the commonly expressed grievances of feminists was that a man was considered a member of both his family and society, while a woman was thought of as a member only of her family. Feminists tirelessly quoted the Declaration of Independence, arguing that "men" in "all men are created equal, and have certain unalienable rights" was a generic term that included women, and that exclusion of women was as inconsistent as exclusion of Negroes. "The consent of the governed," the Protestant glorification of the individual soul, the proud boast that Americans had discarded European distinctions of status in favor of open opportunities for talent—if we are people, they asked their men, how can you without contradiction accept these ideas for yourselves alone? They were right, of course, but they too were guilty of inconsistencies. Most of the time they accepted the cult of domesticity and the doctrine of inherent sexual differences in temperament and talents, while they demanded freedom to work outside the domestic sphere and to be recognized as individuals with temperaments and talents as varied as men's.

They developed several ingenious theories to reconcile the acceptance of inherent sexual differences in temperament with the demand to be treated as individuals. Some feminists took the cult of chivalry, scorned by others as a mask for oppression, at face value. Chivalry claimed that woman, superior to man in the spiritual realm, was too good, too pure to be permitted contact with the sordid world of politics and business. Yes, they cheerfully agreed, they *were* superior. In fact (finding implications in female superiority that chivalry never intended), *they* were the originators of civilization, having developed, through their love for and care of offspring, the values of altruism and peace that made social evolution possible, and having taught them to the warlike, predatory, selfish men, who unfortunately had not learned the lessons thoroughly. The first women who argued along these lines—Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for one—insisted that the superior sex should have the vote in order to impose on society at large the values they had imposed on the individual family; but they accepted fully the cult of domesticity and never dreamed of altering the conventional division of functions within the family.

Other women tried to reconcile the cult of domesticity with sex *equality*—by redefining the economic relation of husband and wife to show that woman was not dependent upon man. It is not true, they said, that a husband supports his wife. They

cannot eat the money he earns; she must transform it into food, clothing, and shelter. Hence she supports him just as he supports her. This argument never died out during the life of the feminist movement—or, at least, as long as housekeeping required long hours of labor. Significantly, those feminists who rejected the cult of domesticity rejected the theory invented to justify it. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in particular, repeatedly declared that a husband did support his wife, and that it was precisely her economic dependence that underlay her inferiority.

When women who wanted equal rights and opportunities accepted the traditional conception of the family, and its concomitant premise that woman's place was in the home, some of them thus adopted a sort of "separate but equal" doctrine surprisingly parallel to that of antifeminists who reiterated that women were not inferior, only "different." There is no doubt that most of the feminists who used such arguments believed them, but probably some were hoping to allay the fears of certain conservatives that votes, education, and careers for women would rend the social fabric. The question then arises: What did these demands represent to the antifeminist majority of American men and women?

Just as the specific content of the feminists' demands expressed a deeper and broader urge for self-determination in general, the specific content of their opponents' conservatism on the woman question reflected their attitude toward American society in general. Certain recurrent themes in antifeminist literature portray the business and political world as one of strife, and the home as a peaceful refuge, where the higher values are nourished. The ugly features of the outside world are accepted as necessary for progress, but progress would be futile unless balanced and ennobled by the conservative influence of the home. Destruction of the home means destruction of the delicate balance between progress and stability, between warfare and peace, between a certain necessary brutality and an equally necessary refinement. How might the home be destroyed? By eradicating the distinction between the spheres of men and women. If women enter the political and business world, they will become like men—or rather, owing to their inherently emotional nature, become even more brutal and

coarse than men. Thus, not all antifeminists contended that women were inferior to men; in fact, a few conceded that women could vote as intelligently, conduct businesses as shrewdly, or engage in scholarly pursuits as creatively as men. But what price would society pay for these additional voters, merchants, and scholars? Social disorder. The home was the bulwark against social disorder, and woman was the creator of the home. Not all nineteenth-century antifeminists were insincere when they sang poetic praises to the Queen of the Household, who was superior to the man even though she was excluded from the polls and professions. In their curiously ambiguous conception of American society—a conception that glorified its quick change and yet feared the consequences of that change—she occupied a desperately necessary place as symbol and center of the one institution that prevented society from flying apart. Hence the apparent contradiction of a society increasingly seen as a conglomerate of separate individuals which nevertheless insisted on assigning a "sphere" to half its population according not to their individual but to their common characteristics, and insisting that the unit of representation in the state was not the individual but the family. And hence the apparent anomaly of antifeminist tracts antedating the rise of the feminist movement. If antifeminism is understood as largely representing fear of social disorder, the contradiction and the anomaly disappear. It was not that social order required the subordination of women; rather, to the conservatives it required *a family structure* that involved the subordination of women.

Aspects of the History of American Feminism

Why did the feminist movement appear in the United States when it did, in the second third of the nineteenth century? The immediate cause was the experience of a few women in the abolitionist movement in the 1830's, who found their religiously inspired work for the slave impeded by prejudices against public

activity by women. They and many others began to ponder the parallels between women's status and the Negro's status, and to notice that white men usually applied the principles of natural rights and the ideology of individualism only to themselves. The feminist movement was founded by abolitionists and grew directly out of their experiences within the abolitionist movement.

A deeper look at the antebellum generation, however, suggests that the Industrial Revolution was the soil in which feminism grew. The influence was indirect, for the women exploited in the new factories were not those who became feminists; in fact, feminist propaganda rarely mentioned women's wages and conditions in industrial enterprises until about the turn of the century, when the woman's-rights movement was half a century old. And it is difficult to attribute a direct influence to the congestion of population in cities and the tendency of families to become smaller, both consequences of industrialism; many of the early feminists were small-town residents with large broods. In any case, these processes might make a feminist movement possible; they would not cause its development. On the other hand, the growth of industry made the United States a magnet for Irish immigration in the forties, providing middle-class women with abundant domestic help, which in turn gave them leisure for self-education and reform activities. (The reform movements themselves can be seen as reactions to the social problems created by rapid economic development.) Women whose horizons had been thus broadened and who wished to enlarge their sphere of activity then encountered the prejudice against such activity that lit the first spark of feminism. The growth of industry also broadened the distinctions between men's and women's occupations and certainly provoked new thinking about the significance and permanence of their respective "spheres."[8] The rise in the urban population resulted in the enfranchisement of all white men and

[8] For a full discussion of the impact of the Industrial Revolution on women's status and the rise of feminism, see Keith E. Melder, "The Beginnings of the Women's Rights Movement in the United States, 1800–1840," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale, 1964. Some of the points mentioned above are in Melder, Preface and chap. 1.

consequently in the belief that a man earned the vote by his membership in the human race rather than by his ownership of property; a woman who considered herself a member of the human race might question the justice of her disfranchisement. Most important of all, perhaps, was the rapid social change caused ultimately by the rise of industry. The feminist movement may, then, be best characterized as an effect of various effects of the Industrial Revolution.

Throughout its history American feminism has been overwhelmingly a white, middle-class movement. This does not mean that Negro and working-class women have not wanted equality of the sexes. They have formed their own organizations (demanding, among other things, woman suffrage), and have in small numbers belonged to various feminist organizations. One reason for the minor part they have played in them has been the obvious prejudice against them within the woman's-rights movement. Far more important has been their own sense of priorities. Whereas middle-class women wanted the same freedom to develop individual talents as their men apparently had, black and working-class women knew that these things were denied *them* not primarily because they were women but because they belonged to groups whose male members were denied them as well. The demand for woman suffrage necessarily seemed less important than the demand for security of person or for a living wage, and the request for admission to colleges had to appear irrelevant to a mother whose children left school to work in factory or field. Hence Negro and working-class women have always put their needs and grievances as Negroes and workers first and as women second. Primary emphasis on feminism seems to have been a luxury that only white, middle-class women have been able to afford.

In the face of the nineteenth-century assumption that men and women differed innately in mental, moral, and personality traits, the feminists undertook a formidable task when they challenged the notion of separate "spheres" and demanded autonomy for women as individuals. Even those who agreed that woman's place was in the home had to demonstrate that homemakers could

also be professionals, voters, and businesswomen. But until the late nineteenth century there were few such women they could point to as living proofs of their contention, and they had to admit that a much larger proportion of women than of men were politically naïve, emotional, uncreative mechanically and artistically, slavish followers of fashion, and interested in little beyond their homes and families. Since the feminists' demand for autonomy could not be justified by much empirical evidence and indeed seemed to contradict the evidence, they at first adopted two main tactics that permitted them to ignore or even admit unpleasant facts: they appealed to abstract justice and they insisted that these "feminine" traits were not innate but the results of training.

In the appeal to abstract justice, the Declaration of Independence was so perfectly tailored to their needs that in 1848 the first woman's-rights convention in history adopted a manifesto that *was* the Declaration, with a few appropriate changes in wording. The New Testament was also useful in the antebellum generation, when religion played a far larger role in American life than at any later time, especially among participants in the reform crusades out of which the first feminist movement emerged. But antifeminists could reply that the Declaration was never intended to apply to women any more than to Negroes: it had, after all, been written by a slaveholder. And the Bible was a dubious support for feminism, for antifeminists also could find in it what they wanted.

The thesis that typically feminine traits were the results of training led to the first effort to translate the abstract demand for autonomy into concrete demands for rights. This first effort was the campaign for better education for girls. Those women, like Mary Lyon, Emma Willard, and Catherine Beecher, who worked primarily in the education field used rather conservative arguments; they sincerely disclaimed any intention of training their pupils to be dissatisfied with their assigned sphere, and argued that broader education would make them better wives and mothers. But other women who were interested in education, having no connection with school-founding and thus no need to solicit subsidies from legislatures or reassure parents of prospective pupils, argued that women's proper sphere had yet to be revealed, since they had been denied the opportunity and education to discover all their potentialities, and that whatever that sphere turned out to be, women themselves must find it. Clearly, then, it was not enough simply to train girls to be homemakers and teachers or even doctors and journalists; education must also be an instrument for self-discovery and self-development, to turn females who happened to be human into humans who happened to be female.

The contention that only when women had the opportunity to discover all their aptitudes could their proper sphere be defined appeared regularly in feminist propaganda from its first appearance to our own day. Feminists have at the same time been eager to show that this or that particular career was appropriate for women, and so the demand for education was only the first of many demands for specific rights. They included the right to become physicians, to go to college, to practice law, to be the legal guardians of their children, and so on. Propaganda along these lines had a double function: first, it was a plea for a wider range of opportunities; second, it exploited every bit of evidence it could uncover to prove that women had already demonstrated the qualifications for fulfilling these roles, perhaps as much to instill self-confidence in women as to show that women's talents were as varied as men's. Thus, feminist newspapers, tracts, and speeches often mention Mistress Margaret Brent, the seventeenth-century Maryland lady who was executrix of Lord Baltimore's estate; widows who successfully ran their late husbands' businesses; and women who in other ways distinguished themselves in "masculine" occupations.

From 1848 until 1920 the specific right most often demanded was the right to vote. The other campaigns did not die out, but many of them were incorporated into the suffrage campaign. For one thing, several of the other specific rights seemed to be contingent on political equality—for example, the right of women to practice law, to make wills and contracts without their husbands' consent, and to serve on juries. Second, one of

the major grievances was the existence of laws that discriminated against women—for example, the husband's legal ownership of all the property a couple acquired after their marriage, his sole right to choose their domicile and to bequeath to others than the mother the guardianship of their children upon his death, and bias in favor of the husband in legal grounds for divorce. The chance to change these laws was a powerful incentive for suffragism. A third reason for concentration on the vote was that the "consent of the governed" and "no taxation without representation" slogans, so popular in feminist literature, made the right to vote an obvious and indispensable symbol of equality. And fourth, as time went on, most feminists began to demand the ballot as a means to effect certain reforms in American society—such as prohibition of liquor and, from about the turn of the century on, other legislation desired by Progressive men (it was then that the suffrage movement increasingly attracted the support of working-class women).

When the link between the vote and reform began to dominate suffragist propaganda, the "justice" argument took second place to what may be called the "expediency" argument. That is, the suffragists said less often: Give us the vote because we are taxed and therefore should be represented, because as human beings it is just that we should help rule ourselves; *share your political power with us*—and more often said: Give us the vote so that we can help you pass Progressive laws; *double your political power* by enfranchising us. This argument proved most effective in the Progressive period; outside the South there is a correlation between congressmen's Progressive leanings and their support for woman suffrage.

It appears, however, that the expediency argument of itself was insufficient to convert an antisuffragist lawmaker, for there was another variety of that argument, which, although used at least as often, failed decisively. In the North this variation went: Give us the vote because there are more native-born women than "new immigrant" men and women combined; woman suffrage will therefore help maintain the political supremacy of the "fit" portion of the population. In the South the argument went: There are more white women in our section than blacks of both sexes; give us the vote and we will help you maintain white supremacy. Neither of these propositions impressed those legislators who feared that woman suffrage would double the voting strength of the "unfit" portions of the population. Southerners, especially, remained overwhelmingly antisuffragist to the end, probably owing to their general conservatism concerning woman's proper sphere. Just as feminists' demands for specific rights were expressions of their general discontent with restrictions on women's autonomy, the reception given their arguments for those rights appears to have been determined not by the logic of those appeals but by their audience's general attitude toward woman's "sphere."

Why did most feminists focus their campaign for equality so sharply on the vote between the Civil War and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920? An obvious reason, besides those suggested above, was that most of the other rights they had agitated for either had been won or were clearly on the way to being won. Part of the answer, however, probably lies in the thoroughly main-stream character of the feminist movement. As noted earlier, the feminists were for the most part middle-class women who on every other subject shared their men's opinions. In that period, politics was the great national pastime; especially during the Progressive period, the feminists shared the widespread conviction that many social evils could be cured and sweeping social reforms effected by legislation. To the suffragists, the ballot was an instrument of actual power. Significantly, the socialists, who believed that power resided in ownership of the means of production, were seldom active suffragists, although they naturally supported the demand for the vote. True, Jessie Ashley, a wealthy New York lawyer who was a socialist, was for a time an officer of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and other socialists participated in the movement. But they were exceptional. More typical of socialist thinking was the thesis that woman's place in a society depended ultimately on its economic arrangements, and that after private

property, and the family relations it produced and perpetuated, had been abolished, sex equality would come about as a natural consequence.[9]

One of the common antisuffragist arguments reveals an insight that many suffragists and socialists in that day seem to have lacked—recognition of the importance of ideology. Socialists, in foreseeing the automatic equalization of the sexes after the overthrow of capitalist property relations, underestimated the persistence of old attitudes; the suffragists overestimated the influence on American life that the vote would give to "feminine" traits. The "anti's" argued that an election registers public opinion and that anyone, including a disfranchised woman, who helps mold public opinion is exercising power. But the suffragists realized an important truth that the "anti's" failed to grasp: that in a society as fascinated by politics as American society was, a group's prestige is affected by its political status. While some suffragists overestimated what women would accomplish with the vote, others saw political equality merely as a symbol of a more inclusive equality. Here again the theme of autonomy appeared: the point was not only *how* a group exercised its right to vote but also *that* it possessed that right.

Very likely many of the suffragists who expected sweeping changes to result from women's enfranchisement were merely reflecting the tendency, common to reform groups, of exaggerating the significance of their crusade. The error has a certain practical value, for it encourages optimism and commitment. In the case of the feminists, it helped to focus the movement's work on a specific goal that was attainable and that could be agitated for in specific ways. The abolitionist movement of the 1830–60 generation is analogous; abolitionists too had a double objective: the wider goal of race equality, and the specific and more limited step toward that goal represented by abolition of chattel slavery. They too sometimes had unrealistic expectations of the degree to which Negroes would be accepted into American society after

[9] See, for example, Olive M. Johnson, *Woman and the Socialist Movement* (New York, 1918; written in 1907), a Socialist Labor Party tract: "In a Socialist society the question solves itself" (p. 36).

emancipation. Another possible parallel may be found in the modern black-freedom movement, which agitated for specific rights—to be served at lunch counters, to vote, to attend integrated schools, and so on—which really were aspects of the wider goal of full manhood. The abolitionist movement lived to see slavery abolished, the feminist movement saw almost all its specific demands met, and the civil-rights movement of the early 1960's won certain of its demands. All three then awoke to the fact that legal and formal reforms did not bring the wider goal in their train.

The Family vs. Autonomy

The years since the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment have seen the publication of countless essays explaining modern American woman's discontent with the results of suffrage and of the large measure of freedom she has won. Many of these bear a remarkable resemblance to very early antifeminist tracts in their contention that woman is after all destined to be fulltime wife, mother, and homemaker. Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* documents the fact that these ideas are winning increasing acceptance among young women themselves.

If the "autonomy" thesis is correct, perhaps the discontent is due not to disappointment with the results of the attainment of equality, but to the discovery that the array of specific, formal rights has not added up to substantive equality and autonomy. Although many discriminatory laws still exist in many states, they are minor and hardly touch the lives of most women. Yet the old grievance remains: women are still, in popular thought and custom, females first and human beings second. Is this merely an instance of "cultural lag"? Or is it that the persistence of the old attitude reflects the persistence of the institution of the family in essentially the same form it had when the feminist movement first arose?

Many tracts written between the Civil War and World War I

either called for or predicted the mechanization and professionalization of homemaking chores. They noted that all other varieties of necessary labor had become social, had been made efficient through division of labor, had become the work of paid experts. Yet housework remained the job of untrained isolated women. They assumed that once middle-class women had won the right to work beyond the domestic sphere they would automatically do so, if only they could be freed from household drudgery. Cooperative kitchens and other such improvements would give them the freedom and enable them to find remunerative careers suited to their individual tastes, while those women (and men) with talent and liking for housework would become skilled, well-paid professionals doing jobs hitherto done inefficiently by housewives who in many cases had neither talent nor liking for the work.

The frequency of such predictions cannot be a coincidence. Obviously the inferior position of women was somehow associated with the isolation of each family from every other family and with the sex-determined division of labor within the family. Yet the predictions have not been fulfilled. A century ago the sexual division of labor within the middle-class family could be justified by the fact that housekeeping (even with the help of a maid) was a time-consuming job. But in our day cause and effect seem to have been reversed: the conviction that the sexual division of labor within the home is "right" has now become an incentive to *make* housekeeping a fulltime job when technology has rendered it no longer necessary. And so we find women baking their own bread, making their children's clothes, and in other ways multiplying their household chores—enacting a sort of Parkinson's Law of housewifery.[10]

It is no longer possible for a middle-class feminist to argue that women are relegated to the domestic sphere by either law or the need of a wife to keep house while her husband works to support the family. In a period when there is no longer a rational basis for allocating either remunerative work or homemaking tasks according to sex, the institution of the family itself, as popularly conceived, stands revealed as the obstacle to full sex equality. As long as the man engages more in the work of the world and the woman spends a large proportion of her time and energies in the isolated family circle, men will continue to lead in government, the professions, and all the other fields that provide us with our criteria of human achievement. Some contend that women can use their education and talents (innately equal to men's) in training their children. But it may be argued that the training of children requires less than the highest level of specialization and provides no incentive and opportunity to push back the frontiers of knowledge. These must remain the province of men so long as women, regardless of their individual aptitudes, retain the principal responsibility of child care. And the current entrance of many men into the elementary-school teaching profession will help to discredit the assumption that child care is innately woman's work. It is also sometimes argued that women need not lament their lack of opportunity to specialize in given fields of knowledge; they can be the "generalists," reading in many more subjects than their specialist husbands have time to do. But such generalization ordinarily precludes that depth of mastery of one field that permits original and creative contributions to it; again, the pioneers and geniuses must be the men. A third common argument is that the difference in familial roles need not be synonymous with inequality: women will continue to be the nurturers and conservers, men the explorers and innovators, each's contribution to society equally necessary. It can be argued that this separate-but-equal doctrine disguises the fact that the roles of men and women, thus defined, perpetuate the ancient source of the feeling that women are inferior. Men's role as explorers and innovators places a premium on their individual talents, whereas women's role as nurturers and conservers actually places such talents at a discount.[11] This third argument, then, is a new way of stating an old myth:

[10] See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), chap. x, "Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available."

[11] For a perceptive discussion of this problem, see Alice S. Rossi, "Barriers to the Career Choice of Engineering, Medicine, or Science among American Women," in Jacquelyn A. Mattfeld and Carol G. Van Aken, eds., *Women and the Scientific Professions: The M.I.T. Symposium on American Women in Science and Engineering* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp. 51–127, esp. pp. 116–24. The article is of more generalized interest than its title suggests.

that men are male *humans* whereas women are human *females.*

Just as antifeminists in the past considered as innate female characteristics the traits that grew inevitably out of women's isolation and work patterns, the persistence of the sexual division of labor accounts for the continuance of the same assumptions, now abetted by advertising and the mass media. The old maid is regarded with contempt and pity for her obviously involuntary failure to play the role most appropriate for her as a woman; the old bachelor is envied for his exemption from the necessity of role-playing, his freedom to be an individual. A standard plot of TV dramas portrays the "suffragette" or career woman who finds love and a masterful man and promptly abandons her suffragism or career for demure domesticity.

In short, inequality of the sexes still exists because the family structure has remained basically unchanged. Unless a middle-class feminist is prepared to challenge that family structure head-on, contemporary feminism will perhaps revert to the form of the earliest feminism—the generalized urge toward individual autonomy—before feminists concentrated their efforts on winning a long list of specific rights which they assumed would add up to autonomy.

I

THE QUESTION OF "SPHERES"

One way of *dividing the chronological history of American feminism is to enumerate three periods. Characterizing the earliest and the most recent is the question: What is woman's proper sphere? In the first period, feminism largely represented a general feeling among educated, middle-class women that the domestic sphere was too confining. Only later, between about the middle of the nineteenth century and the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment, did the vague urge for more freedom receive specific definition in terms of access to professions, legal equality, and so on. That the general question of spheres was not forgotten in the second period is evidenced by the date of the last document in this section. But the Seneca Falls Declaration of 1848 (see pp. 183–88) marks a break between the period in which most feminist tracts expressed a general grievance against artificial limitations on women's activities and that in which they demanded one or more specific changes in law and custom. At the present time the question of spheres is again receiving attention, because although most of the specific demands have been met, women have still to achieve full equality. It has become apparent that the specific changes did not, separately or all together, obliterate those differences between men's and women's spheres that are not biologically determined.*