

Feminist Theory's Wrong Turn

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It is becoming increasingly clear that somewhere along the line feminism has taken a wrong turn. The movement used to be identified with eminently sensible goals that enjoyed broad support, but it now seems lost in outlandish, wildly unrealistic ideas. Prominent feminists tell us that men are intent on “destroying, subjugating, or mutilating women” (Marilyn French), or that all heterosexual sex is coercive and hence quasi-rape (Catherine MacKinnon), or that the trouble with men is that they think vertically while women think laterally—where “vertical” is the (defective) mode of thought that gives us modern science (Peggy McIntosh).¹ These ideas seem to interest feminists, while the wider public has no difficulty in recognizing their absurdity. Similarly implausible ideas are so pervasive that they can reasonably be said to characterize the present state of the movement; this, in practice, is what feminism now is. When we are told, for example, that Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., publisher of *The New York Times*, considers himself a feminist and is “an ardent fan of the writer Marilyn French,”² we are no longer surprised that an extremist should be the example chosen to illustrate a feminist viewpoint.

A formerly constructive feminist agenda has given way to destructive attacks on the allegedly exploitive character of the traditional family and of male-female relationships; as a result, feminism is losing support among men and women alike, and it is in danger of isolating itself in angry enclaves on college campuses, where its slide into ever greater unreality can continue unchecked.

What went wrong? There are doubtless many factors involved, but the most important among them is a distorted view of the past. Any movement for social change looks to a better future, but it makes its case by arguing against the past: some existing condition needs to be changed. The more the past is or can be made to seem ugly, the more compelling will be the case for change. That is why movements for social change are always likely to take the dimmest view of the past. But now a tension arises: concrete proposals for change will work only if they are based on a realistic appraisal of the existing state of affairs and of how it came about. If you are to avoid doing damage, you must understand very well the nature of what you are trying to change. On the one hand, then, reformers are tempted to make the worst case for the past, in order to convince everyone that change is needed, but, on the other, successful reform requires that the past be viewed in a sober and accurate way. The rhetorical temptations of the situation are at odds with its practical needs.

What has gone wrong in the case of feminism is that one of these two competing factors has overwhelmed the other; the rhetorical urge has taken

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control to such an extent that the need to disparage the past has completely swamped any rational understanding of it. The result is so unrealistic a view of what gave rise to our current situation that it disables the movement. The word that captures the essence of this view is "patriarchy," shorthand for the belief that what has obstructed political and social equality between the sexes is a conspiracy by men to treat women unfairly. Some feminists think that patriarchy is a world-wide phenomenon as well as one that has endured throughout recorded human history; others see it as the product of our Western society. This limitation is not a sign of a more moderate attitude, however, since it generally concentrates greater hostility onto a smaller target. Yet the idea that the West has been the focal point of patriarchal oppression is so hard to square with the known facts about the plight of women in the rest of the world (forced suicide of widows, genital mutilation, foot-binding, exposure of female babies, and countless other horrors) that it can surely be discarded.⁵

If patriarchy were the source of the problem, we should get this nastiness on the part of men under control by taking steps to enforce equality for men and women. There is much in our past that seems to give initial plausibility to this view: differential rates of pay, men routinely promoted instead of women of comparable ability, the virtual absence of women from the professions until quite recently, the former exclusion of women from government and even from voting, and much besides.

These are certainly facts, but, as feminists insist in all contexts but this one, facts are never just facts: they need to be interpreted. Feminists have thought that the interpretation here was obvious: men systematically treated women badly. But it takes very little to show that this is a superficial and misleading interpretation, and that these injustices are instead partly a predictable consequence of the conditions of life before the modern era, and partly an equally predictable result of progressive change itself. This difference in interpreting the past is a critical one, for here lies the wrong turn that feminism has taken, one that increasingly isolates it from the reality of what is happening to women in the modern world.

One simple question is already difficult to answer: if an enduring patriarchy has indeed been the source of our troubles, why is it being challenged now rather than at some earlier time? The usual answer—that women will not put up with it any more—only moves the question back a stage: why this recent assertiveness? Did women of earlier centuries lack the spirit of today's women? Were they to blame for the patriarchy, too? The idea of an evil patriarchy commits feminists to a dim view of their sisters of yesterday, yet there is no reason to suppose that the temperament of those women was any different from their own. There is a different and more plausible answer to the "why now" question, but it does not support the bitter feminist view of the past. Change is coming for women, not because they have at last awakened to the

enormity of the plot against them, but because the conditions of human life have changed.

It is obvious enough that how people live has changed significantly in recent times, and that some aspects of that change—for example, modern birth control—affect women more than men. But the full impact of modern conditions on the lives of women can be appreciated only if we look carefully at how several aspects of life before the modern era interacted to produce an effect far larger than might have been the case were they taken only one at a time.

Take, first of all, infant mortality. Not long ago, the rate of infant mortality was, by modern standards, appalling. The historian Fernand Braudel calls it “terrifying,” for royal and pauper families alike.⁴ Even in the late nineteenth century, it was not unusual to read stories such as the one I saw recently in a newspaper clipping from 1870, in which all four children in one family died of diphtheria within a period of a few weeks. Today the decision to raise, say, two children means simply two births, but in former times perhaps six or seven births would have been needed in order that two might survive to maturity.

Seven pregnancies and infancies would be considerably more of an obstacle to a woman’s having a professional career or a role in government than two, but we grasp the full force of this obstacle only if we take it together with others. Now we must look at how life expectancy complicates the picture. Because of the increased risk of death resulting from frequent childbirth before modern medicine, the life expectancy of women was not always a decade or so longer than that of men, as it is today, and it was in any case much shorter for both. So what we are really looking at is not simply two births versus something like six or seven: we must compare instead two births and infancies out of an expected lifespan of seventy or more years to seven births and infancies out of perhaps forty years (the figure for mid-nineteenth-century Europe and more recently for Tanzania). The difference between these two cases becomes even more lopsided if we compare only the adult years: then those seven births are taken out of an average of perhaps twenty-five years.

Did this really have to affect all women? Might some not have chosen to downplay the importance of children in their lives in order to pursue professional careers? No, because here another factor comes into play. Today, having children can be a conscious quality-of-life decision, in which a woman weighs career against family and makes a choice or compromise that suits her. Remember, however, that Social Security is a very recent phenomenon. In earlier times *children* were social security, and old age without them would for most have been a frightening prospect: they were a virtual economic necessity.

Modern birth control is the one factor commonly mentioned as a liberator of women, but it is far less important than the combined effect of the three factors I have mentioned so far. Even if modern birth control had been available in earlier times, it is hard to imagine that it could have changed career opportunities for women very much while those other factors were still in place.

Radical feminists generally react dismissively to the idea that childbearing had much to do with creating the unequal situation we inherit from the past, referring contemptuously to it as “biology is destiny” in order to insist that human beings have freedom of choice. But here they are evidently thinking of the freedom of choice that their own era gives them: they know that *they* are free not to have children if they wish, or instead to have just one, or perhaps two, and return to their careers after only a short time out. What they do not see is how unrealistic that attitude would have been in a time of high infant mortality, shorter lifespans, no social security, and no birth control.

Even the factors we have already considered do not begin to give us a realistic sense of how unavoidably restricted most women’s lives must formerly have been by today’s standards. Imagine caring for several children without refrigeration, when transportation was primitive and slow, and when communications were virtually non-existent. Feminists tend once more to react with some impatience: why should all this make any difference to the relative position of men and women? Why should not men have taken an equal part in caring for their children? But that would miss the point: the absence of refrigeration meant that the great majority of women had to breast-feed, and to continue to do so for longer than is usual today. This tied them far more closely to their children than modern women: there was no bottle of formula in the refrigerator for someone else to give to the baby while its mother was at the office. And, if we take this together with the absence of motor vehicles and telephones (that is, with slow transportation and no communications), it is clear that for a woman to work even five miles away from home would have been very difficult: unlike her modern counterparts, *she* could not dash home in the car to feed the baby when the babysitter—or husband—telephoned to say that it was awake and hungry.

To be sure, wealthy women might have employed others to nurse their children, but they could not have been exempted from the other factors we have noted, and in any case the pattern of life of the vast majority was bound to have a spill-over effect on the career expectations of all, including those women who were either wealthy or unmarried.

There are countless other features of modern life that affect the way women are now able to live their lives, and they go well beyond the obvious labor-saving devices that enable both men and women to devote a larger share of their time to doing what they like to do. For example, electrical energy has leveled much of what was formerly a decidedly unlevel playing field for women. As a result, very few jobs are left in which the greater upper-body strength of men still matters; that difference has become trivial compared to the energy that can be called upon through electricity. Now men and women alike can push buttons or pull levers to operate heavy equipment, position a fire ladder, fly a plane, use a stun gun, fire a heavy gun, or even kill millions with nuclear weapons. And so today it makes sense to ask why we should not have more

women in the armed forces, police, or fire service—but it makes no sense to deplore the fact that women have begun to enter these services only recently, and to blame sexism in promotion decisions for the small number of women in senior ranks. When upper-body strength was a major factor in the use of more primitive weapons and equipment, nobody could have thought that women and men should be equally represented in the military or the police.

Or take the modern highway patrol, which makes major roads safe: in former times even roads that connected major settlements were dangerous places, and especially so for an unaccompanied woman. This was yet another factor that made a career in the professions almost impossible for women except in the relatively few places where there were large population concentrations.

What most irks modern feminists is the image of the housewife, stuck at home and thus excluded from the stimulus of the outside world and from access to “power.” But the contrast of home and the outside world cannot in the past have been what it is for us today. Our outside world is large, diverse, and beckoning, brought to us by rapid travel, television, books, and the telephone. Today part of the attraction of a career for both men and women is getting out of the home into this enormously stimulating larger world. But when going thirty miles was a major journey, when roads were dangerous and most people stayed within the few square miles of their home area from one year’s end to the next, the world outside the home must have seemed very different—at once more dangerous and less tempting.

These are just some of the recent changes illustrating the lack of historical perspective in the notion that the rule of patriarchy is to blame for the unequal situation we have inherited from our past. The differentiation of the roles of men and women in past ages was due not to an enduring patriarchal conspiracy, but rather to conditions of life that existed until quite recently. Women have changed expectations, not because they have suddenly become aware of the history of discrimination against them, but because of profound advances in science, technology, medicine, communications, travel, and social legislation, which now for the first time make the same opportunities available to women and men—and what a wonderful development in modern life this is!

What about the openly unjust acts that men have committed against women in the past, not just occasionally and individually, but often routinely and systematically? Don’t they prove that patriarchal attitudes were at the very least a significant factor in the unequal past? Yes and no—but the “no” is the more important part of the answer.

There are two parts to this question, but both relate to human, rather than specifically male, failings. To the first: there is no doubt that both customs and legislation in former times could be grossly unfair to women, the most obvious example being the infamous Married Women’s Property Act. Remember, however, that the conditions of human life in those times all but excluded most women from a role in government. The consequences when any interest group

goes unrepresented in government are surely predictable: it will not fare very well. If we imagine a situation in which women held virtually all governmental offices, we could expect that, over time, legislation would slight men, too. It would be foolish, then, to think that the results were simply due to prejudice against men rather than to other well-known limitations of human nature: legislation is enacted under conditions of competing interests, and the outcome generally reflects that competition.

The second aspect of past injustices toward women—the once fierce discrimination against them in the workplace—is essentially a transitional phenomenon. It surely results from an all-too-human resistance to change. As modern conditions began to allow women to entertain thoughts of careers that had previously been inconceivable to them, many men—and in fact many women—obstructed this drastic social change. Such resistance made change much slower and nastier than it should have been, but everyone knows that human beings show signs of distress when faced with disturbance of their settled ways. A natural preference for what is familiar, a reluctance to give up privilege, and a persistence of habits and attitudes formed in earlier times will always impede change.

There is no need to postulate a conspiratorial patriarchy or ingrained male prejudice against women to explain this; it would be surprising if major changes like these did not meet initial resistance. Two points clinch things for the interpretation of workplace prejudice as resistance to change rather than as the result of male hostility to women. First, many if not most women were as hostile to this kind of change as men were—inexplicable on the latter theory, but exactly what would be expected on the former. Second, much of this resistance has now subsided, again exactly what we should expect according to the first theory. Given time, people adjust. But this is not consistent with the patriarchal explanation, because these are still men, only now they act differently.

How we see the past will inevitably shape the approach we take to the present. If women see their situation of today as one that has coalesced gradually over the last century and could never have existed earlier, they will simply move to take advantage of their new opportunities. Determination is still needed to overcome some remaining pockets of resistance to change, but it is also wise to go carefully; no one can fully comprehend a completely new situation. We can only guess how women will eventually take advantage of it. Will they show exactly the same pattern of career interests that men have shown, and, if not, where will the differences occur? Only experience will tell. Will the greater bond with their children that, in the view of some, comes from carrying them, giving birth to them, and feeding them always keep the percentage of women in government and the professions down to a number noticeably less than fifty percent—say, thirty, or forty? Maybe, and maybe not; we shall find out in time.

But for feminists who are committed to the patriarchal theory, only male oppression of women has prevented them from having professional careers, which means that the past and the present are not essentially different. Anything less than a fifty-fifty split of numbers, power, and prestige in the workplace is for them *ipso facto* evidence that oppression continues.⁵ The kind of caution appropriate to any new situation is then unnecessary, because ours is still the old situation, in the sense that the wrong being done to women by men needs correcting now just as always. And so we do not need to explore new possibilities carefully, learning from experience as we go, but simply to set things straight.

If misrule by an oppressive "patriarchy" were a correct interpretation of the past, the logical remedy would indeed be immediate corrective measures: hiring goals and timetables for reaching the parity in all spheres that feminists believe should have existed all along. And so, instead of letting the situation take its natural shape as women choose from among the careers newly available to them, feminist anger about the patriarchy leads them to distort the situation by forcing it immediately into what they consider a correct shape.

This distortion colored the recent search for an Attorney General. Not content to remove the barriers to change and then wait for it to occur naturally, the Clinton administration decided to force it to happen by limiting the search to women. The result was a public-relations disaster that demeaned women (and the office) by implying that they needed to be protected from competition with men. It happened because the administration was captive to the unreal view of the past promoted by radical feminists.

This is by no means the only kind of damage that is done by the obsession with patriarchy. It creates a "victim" culture within feminism that misdirects emotional energy into resentment and hostility. It poisons relations between the sexes, and it catapults into leadership roles in the women's movement angry, alienated people who divert that movement from the necessary task of exploring the changes that are now feasible. Catherine MacKinnon is hailed as a leader among feminist legal thinkers, for example, but in a less resentful and less patriarchy-obsessed atmosphere her extravagant theories (e.g., that all sexual activity is coercive of women) would surely be dismissed as crackpot. Feminist writers on literature routinely use the literature of past ages only to find evidence of patriarchal oppression at work, but, because they take the conditions of modern life as a standard to apply everywhere, their work becomes irrelevant to literature produced by societies whose structure they fundamentally misunderstand. In both cases women are missing the opportunity they now have to take their place among the genuine intellectual leaders in their fields. Meanwhile new and damaging female stereotypes are being created by the obsessive harping on victim status that has become so obtrusive a part of the thought and public comment of many of these recent entrants into the professions. The lesson is clear: when women believe that a continuing patriarchal

conspiracy is the only reason for the differentiated roles we inherited from our past, that belief becomes yet another barrier to their progress.

The sad thing is that this wrong turn occurred just as women had largely overcome initial resistance to change in the workplace. That there will be significant change in the numbers of women in the professions and in government is no longer controversial, and in recent years women have been establishing an impressive record in government. A short list of the most able members of the Bush administration would certainly have to include Lynn Martin, Carla Hills, Linda Chavez, Condoleezza Rice, and Lynn Cheney. But feminists now seem bent on undermining these gains by discrediting themselves; indeed, the word "feminism" has become so tainted by the recent excesses that more and more women shy away from it. The feminism typical of campus women's studies departments has little credibility among the general public.

The question how to interpret the past is the heart of the matter, because it determines the crucial question how change should come—artificially or naturally. We shall get the best from this new situation only if we see it more positively and more realistically than the preoccupation with an imagined patriarchal evil will allow. We need to be clear about the fact that the technological and medical advances of Western society, and the social changes to which these have given rise, now give women opportunities they never could realistically have had in the past. Powerful emotional resistance prevents many feminists (especially radical feminists) from accepting the fact that the capitalist economies of the West have been the engine of change for women; but, instead of lamenting the entire past of humanity as one long display of male oppression, we should focus on exploring the promising but uncharted future.

Notes

1. Marilyn French, *The War against Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992); Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Peggy McIntosh, *Interactive Phases of Curricular Re-vision: A Feminist Perspective*, Working Paper No. 124 (Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1983).
2. Nan Robertson, *The Girls in the Balcony: Women, Men and the New York Times* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 231.
3. Some feminists have tried to circumvent this evident fact by postulating a prehistoric reign of "the Goddess" before her era of peace and harmony was swept aside by misogynistic Westerners with a patriarchal God. It was the latter who introduced the patriarchal system to the rest of the world. And so, even if the Third World is a miserable place for women, responsibility still lies with the West. The search for Rousseau's elusive primitive harmony finally succeeds, then—but only by locating it in a time before recorded history began, and thus before anyone could actually see and describe it, a convenient circumstance sure to amuse those sufficiently familiar with the history of debate on Rousseau's fantasy. For devastating critiques of the wishful thinking and flimsy evidence on which this new feminist cult of the Goddess rests, see Philip G. Davis, "The Goddess and the Academy," *Academic Questions* (Fall 1993), p. 49, and

Mary Lefkowitz, "The Twilight of the Goddess," *The New Republic*, 3 August 1992, p. 29.

4. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, Volume I: *The Structures of Everyday Life*. Translation from the French revised by Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 90: "None of the royal families escaped the terrifying rate of infant mortality of the period." Braudel cites an enormous amount of compelling evidence on the "precariousness and brevity of life" in those times.
5. A comment in the "Notebook" column of a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (15 June 1994, p. A31) provides a good example of this mindset: "More women each year major in such fields as architecture, mathematics, and engineering, writes Jerry A. Jacobs...but the increase is stalling before parity has been reached." This fact alone is all the evidence that Jacobs needs to conclude that "colleges and universities actually molded men and women into slightly more sex-traditional academic pursuits in recent years," excluding even the possibility that we might be learning something from the choices women are making.

"Scrabble Dictionary Sanitized," by Jane Rea, from *The Editorial Eye*, vol. 17, no. 6, June 1994, page 9:

The politically correct version of the *Official Scrabble Players Dictionary* will be in stores next September. *USA Today* reported that 100 words are now verboten, including common four-letter obscenities and some ethnic slurs. Milton Bradley, maker of the game, asked Merriam Webster, Inc., to ban the words after receiving complaints. Scrabble star Nick Ballard, who used the "F" word to win the top tournament in 1977, said "I owe my victory to that word." Now, however, players will lose a turn if they put together a word that the new dictionary determines is too obscene, sexist, or racist. The report did not mention whether the new rule will be enforced by selective policing of tournaments in private homes.