

New Disputes -- Old Views Trouble Women's Movement*
by
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Editor's Note—The first of a two-part series developed by the Committee for the Humanities and Public Issues and funded by a grant from the New Mexico Humanities Council is reprinted here in full on a subject of particular interest to women who are supporters of today's fight for liberation and also those women who advocate women's traditional role in society. The article, written by W. B. Allen, a visiting tutor from St. John's College, and J. D. Wallin, with the division of political science at Arkansas State University, gives a revealing historical perspective to the women's movement.

The National Women's Conference, scheduled to take place in Houston this month, threatens to be interesting. That, in itself, is interesting.

Only a few months ago planners of the various state conferences called to prepare for the national meeting faced the sad prospect of relative anonymity and obscurity. How, they must have reflected, could they gain national sympathy and support, when there appeared so little controversy in the offing? Would anyone pay attention?

The issues of the day were obvious: the ERA, abortion on demand, the rights of lesbians, and so on. So too were the proper positions to be taken on the more important of these issues. It seemed safe to assume the various state delegations would support the ERA and more liberal abortion laws.

To a large degree this expected scenario has been borne out by events. The 56 conferences (mandated and financed by Congress) provided, by and large, a pleasant though somewhat dull opportunity to discuss the most effective means to agreed upon ends.

In a surprisingly large number of conferences, however, the issues which divided the participants were far more salient than those that united them. In fact, after a day of spirited debate, the women meeting in Alabama failed to adopt any resolutions. In Oklahoma, bus load after bus load of indignant women poured into the meeting, not to support the ERA and abortion, but to defeat them, which, Bible in hand, they did. In Utah charges and countercharges were the order, with planners of that state's conference accusing the Mormon church of interference.

Against all expectations, the state conferences received the publicity they must have desired. Not unexpectedly, publicity has had its price. Mutual sympathy and unity, we may reasonably suspect, will not characterize the national conference. For that very reason, however, national attention and interest will. Now, perhaps, is the time to suggest what that attention ought to focus on.

Obviously, the temptation for those who provide the news coverage will be to reflect, and perhaps even to magnify, the heated emotional content of the expected disputes. In so doing they ought not lose sight of the significance of the very fact that such bitter disputes exist.

* Published in the *Farmington (N.M.) Daily News* (October 30, 1977, p. 6).

This significance is suggested in the remarks of two women who evidently supported ERA and abortion, but who differ in their assessments of the meetings. Sharon Sindall, publicity director of the Birmingham, Ala. conference, was reported by the AP news service as having complained that “The whole point of the conference has been lost... The whole point was unity and a sharing of ideas... Most of the women didn’t even attend the workshops, they just wanted to vote.”

On the other hand, Mary Susan Kananss, of the Albany, N.Y. meeting, who had stated that “There’s a lot of politics going on here – I’m not being naïve about it...” nevertheless felt that “there was a real feeling of sisterhood creeping throughout.”

The phrases “unity and a sharing of ideas” and a “feeling of sisterhood” are well chosen; they nicely anticipate the future crises of today’s woman’s movements. These crises will involve a fundamental question: namely, what is a woman? or What is the goal beyond equal protection of the laws?

This question has always threatened to disrupt the movement, but, until now, has been prevented from doing so by the agreement of most factions on the goal of being treated equally in those matters where candor had to admit of true equality. “Equal pay for equal work” is no longer merely a slogan but a nearly universally accepted tenet, even if not yet wholly implemented. This victory had its price.

So long as the movement emphasized women’s humanity rather than their femininity, the question of whether, from their own standpoint, their humanity or femininity was their most important characteristic, was suppressed. The goal of being treated equally with men on the basis of a common humanity was only reached – perhaps only could be reached – by a union of women on a basis of sexual identification, which is not merely incidentally revealed by the word, “sisterhood.”

The “Bible-bearers” and the “bra-burners” may appear to be miles apart, as indeed they are: but their hostility to one another is a product of what is common to them both: their concern with the essence of being female.

In this battle it appears that the “Bible-bearers” are starting from favored ground. For when their more radical “sisters” attempt to reach those goals by the bringing forth of a united, disciplined “sisterhood,” they admit, at least by inference, that the most truly important thing about their own lives may well be that they are woman rather than human: being a woman is something so complex that no single simple term, such as “sisterhood” or “movement,” is likely to comprehend it.

How Shall Humanity of Women be Preserved?*

{The published version of this article repeats as its first seven paragraphs the material which appears above}

In these two contending factions, we can clearly see two competing views of women’s roles. Though the two views are not necessarily incompatible in every detail,

** Published in the *Farmington (N.M.) Daily News* (November 1, 1977, p. 6).

they offer a sharp contrast between what are, in fact, two kinds of liberation. The first, which is now most familiar to us, is a liberation from responsibilities or restraints not equally applied to men. The second is more complex. It seems to insist that the task of defining woman’s role should fall equally upon women and men, because it is connected with the notion of civilization or society itself. With the first view we identify the “bra-burners.” With the second view we identify the “Bible-bearers.”

Though the first view of “liberation” is familiar to us, we are not generally aware of what lies behind the contrasting view, which is seldom articulated expressly. We might more readily judge the differences between them if we could recover the arguments of the second view of “liberation.” A means of understanding lies in the contrast itself. It reminds us that there are or have been at least two woman’s liberation movements – not just one. The one that is now dominant is actually the second, historically. And what it wishes to achieve, in part, is to liberate woman from the influence of the first woman’s liberation movement – identified with the second view above.

The most sustained presentation of those reasons can be found in the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Twentieth century critics and scholars, like Edmund Wilson and his students, have credited her with the “feminization of American culture.” From Harriet’s perspective in the nineteenth century, however, this so-called “feminization” was “liberation.” The best way to think through her argument is to begin with the fact that she presents it in an intellectual form. What we mean is that she presupposes and ultimately defends an intellectual role for women, as in her novel, *The Pearl of Orr’s Island*. This constitutes an elevation of woman, in her view. Nonetheless, she envisions distinctions between masculine and feminine intellectual activity. Nothing shows this so clearly – to the great chagrin of the second woman’s liberation – than the little known fact that Harriet had her husband’s collaboration on many of her great works, especially *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Calvin Stowe did no writing of the novel, but he provided many of the ideas and concepts which assumed dramatic shape under her hand. To Harriet, this did not represent female subordination to male chauvinism. Indeed, it was the very reverse: the pinnacle of liberation.

When we ask why this is so, we find that Harriet’s idea of feminine masculine intellectual capacities corresponds exactly with her idea of moral responsibilities in the modern liberal state. That is, they are opposite sides of a single coin. She expressed this idea in *The Minister’s Wooing*, and other works. To her mind, the modern liberal state had deprived itself of all the ancient forms of moral education at the same time as it put an end to the subjection of woman and “inferior” social orders. Simultaneously, the established instruments of moral instruction – rabbis, priests, ministers, philosophers, and family or clan heads – had lost nearly all credibility.

Indeed, the chief source of moral education, the family, had itself been redefined. No longer firmly integrated into the larger family of the community, it alone stood between the prospect of rampant individualism and the impersonal state. This is shown most powerfully in her semi-autobiographical work, *Pogonuc People*. Human beings were now devoted to the new life of acquisitiveness and self-interest. It was a safe bet that anyone fully engaged in such activities could give but little attention to the community as such. Yet, children would continue to have to be raised and educated. Clearly, if they were raised strictly with an eye to knowing their own interest, there would be no

way to transfer it to the future even the social forms of modern liberalism. This was the message of one of her last books, *The American Woman’s Home*, co-authored with her sister, Catharine Beecher.

Harriet reasoned, therefore, that the modern world had made necessary two distinct educations. Everyone, male and female, must have both, but both could not be given in the same forms nor with the same instruments. One form of education was to suit the youthful citizens for the world. General schools and exposure to the activities of acquisitiveness and bargaining could provide that education. The other education was in moral responsibility. This Harriet conceived to be the peculiar province of the home and, in the home, of the mother. It is easy to see the distinction between those persons primarily devoted to the pursuits of ambition and self-interest and those persons devoted to the careful preparation of tender souls to resist the extreme temptations of their world education. But why should the one be male and the other female? Harriet believed that female and masculine intellectual capacities differed. She did not, however, believe that the difference amounted to one superiority-inferiority. True, she considered the masculine intellect better suited to the worldly concerns, but in the end that was not the basis on which she separated masculine and feminine functions.

Her decision was based instead on a combination of practical and moral grounds: that is, on grounds she conceived necessary for decency and civilization. Once the past subjection of women was rejected, she considered it of the first importance to avoid re-introducing it. She thought that it could be re-introduced only in those social circumstances which reduced the variety and complexity of human souls to any single standard. In social circumstances where women were to compete with men, she conceived, it would be impossible in the end to avoid dependencies on some single criterion, such as strength. The result of that competition might well be the re-subjection of women. Thus, Harriet assigns the function of worldly education primarily though not exclusively to men and the function of moral education primarily though not exclusively to women. Using these means of differentiating functions by capacities and sex is, in fact, an attempt to preserve the liberation of women.

It is in this sense that the women of Oklahoma and Utah can be understood as following the tradition of the historically first woman’s liberation movement. By striving to preserve a role for women, they prove to be Harriet’s intellectual and moral heirs. By challenging the forces of the second woman’s liberation, they maintain that woman’s role must be defined on the basis of something more than self-interest, if the true interests of both women and men are to be served. Fundamentally, they deny that women alone can define woman’s role and go so far as to suggest that where this is not the case, there can be no genuine women’s role. The crucial dispute centers on the question of preserving the humanity of women while avoiding their subjection – and making that humanity compatible with the current state of American society. Whether this may best be accomplished on the principles of the first or the second liberation is a question which might well be raised at the coming national conference.