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What is Feminism?

Eli Zaretsky

Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds., *What is Feminism?* (New York 1986).

THIS WORK CONSISTS OF A SERIES of essays, mostly retrospective, by intellectuals and academics, all veterans of the British, American, and Canadian women's movements. The overall idea is to take stock of the prospects and problems raised by the women's movement during the past two decades. It should be stated at the outset that even to raise the question "what is feminism?" is important. "Second wave feminism," like the New Left, Black Power, and Socialist movements to which — at least in the United States — it largely succeeded has developed its own shibboleths and unquestioned assumptions that make criticism from within difficult. The editors' introduction to this volume alludes without being wholly explicit to what appear to have been special problems in its compilation. They speak, for example, of the "enormous difficulty" involved in such questions as defining feminism, of the "many ... people from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds [who] were invited to participate and accepted but got into difficulties," at the fact that "the book develop[ed] into something other than what we first intended" and of their determination not to "lose sight of the celebration behind the worries" but instead to make "creative use of anxiety."

As in most collections, it is hard to find a unifying theme in the essays. Only a few directly address the question that gives the anthology its title — and it is mostly these that I will discuss. Before beginning, however, I wish to note that most of the essays frequently touch upon two related, but distinguishable, themes concerning feminism. The first is the fact of enormous diversity among women which raises the question of what kind of feminist perspective and practice can unify them. The second relates to the reality of internal divisions and contradictions among feminists. The most frequently cited of these divisions is between a point of view that stresses the similarities between men and women, and one that stresses the differences between the sexes. Furthermore, in several of the essays the fact of diversity and or conflicts among women is related — though rarely clearly and directly — to another question: the relationship of the women's movement to its

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contemporaneous social struggles, historically the conflict between some form of socialism and capitalism. I will first discuss the arguments made in several of the essays and then try to speak to this question — ultimately, the relation of feminism to socialism.

The opening piece by Rosalind Delmar is entitled "What is Feminism?" and notes that "unity based on identity has turned out to be a very fragile thing."(11) Delmar illustrates the problem of defining feminism through a discussion of Ray Strachey's *The Cause*, an account by a participant of the nineteenth-century British women's movement. Strachey, in Delmar's account, grappled with many of the problems faced by feminists today. She had to count as forerunners of the nineteenth-century women's movement Mary Wollstonecraft as well as Hannah Moore, an anti-feminist best known for her work with the Sunday School Movement. She had to decide whether Florence Nightingale was or was not a "feminist." (Strachey decided she was not since she was so absorbed in her own work that women's rights became a side issue.) Another important division in the nineteenth-century women's movement was between those who based their belief in women's rights on some conception of "natural" or human rights as opposed to those who relied on property rights. Helen Taylor, for example, daughter of Harriet Taylor and step-daughter of John Stuart Mill, explicitly disavowed "reference to any abstract rights" in her 1866 defense of the suffrage.(19) Instead, she wrote, "by holding property women take on the rights and duties of property. If they are not interested in politics their property is."(20)

Of great interest, too, I believe, is Strachey's discussion of a "silent period" in the history of women's rights between Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and the emergence of a movement forty years later. As Delmar points out, relying on Barbara Taylor's *Eve and The New Jerusalem*, during the "silent period" women's rights including Wollstonecraft's work, played a leading role within Owenite and other forms of utopian Socialism. Delmar writes, if "feminism = the social movement of women ... the period in question reveals nothing. A shift in emphasis unveils a hidden link in feminism's fortunes."(17)

Three other essays, those of Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Cott, and Linda Gordon, all concern how the larger society — capitalism — has shaped the character of the women's movement in ways which participants in the movement were not aware. Mitchell's essay is organized around her rejection of Fourier and Marx's famous saying that the advance of women is the best possible measure for the general level of civilization. Instead, Mitchell raises the possibility that women can advance at least briefly, while society moves backward. She gives as an example, the industrial revolution as described in Frederick Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. The early introduction of the factory system was marked by unemployment for men but rising employment for women and children. According to Engels

this shift "unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow on the man true womanliness or on the woman true manliness ...."(39) Among the consequences Engels describes are sex-based diseases, promiscuity, illegitimacy, infertility, the reversal of the natural relations between adults and children. Ultimately, the introduction of women into the burgeoning factories led to a lowering of the standard of living for both sexes. Further, after the initial period of industrialization, in an outcome that Engels did not and probably could not foresee, women were ousted from industrial employment and the jobs given to, or taken by, men. In other words, for Mitchell, the first industrial revolution was a period in which conditions for women at first seemed to advance whereas the condition of society as a whole was, in many ways, degraded.

Mitchell suggests that we may be in the midst of a similar transition in the history of the capitalist mode of production today: toward a society, pioneered in the United States, characterized by the "acceptance of fairly high full-time unemployment, low social services, and a highly mobile and relatively flexible work-force." In England, she notes, the move toward similar levels of unemployment is "screened by an ideology of a leisure society, a shift from full-time to part-time employment and from manufacturing to service industries." At a time of declining employment the only rise in employment is among women. "The very words — part-time work, leisure, service — sum up our image of women."(39) In other words, women, because of their marginality, can be used as "vanguard troops of change." "Despite 'equal' pay acts, women are used to lower pay and lower conditions of work, to lower expectations; when men, in the future, take over the new jobs from women, the snail of progress future, will have slithered a foot back down the well." Perhaps, though, she modifies this pessimistic prognosis: some progress occurs along with retrogression.

Mitchell further suggests — I think more convincingly — that the women's movement may have unwittingly facilitated the current transformation of capitalism by supplying an ideology that minimized or eliminated the significance of class. When she began to write on women in 1962, according to Mitchell, all statistical information was broken down on socio-economic lines and little or none by sex. "Today I find the reverse: it is easy to obtain information on male/female differences but not on social class achievements and positions." Mitchell continues: "In forging a concept of women as a unity, we promoted a situation in which old class antagonisms would shift through a period of chaos into something new." Distinctions of class and race, she holds, were recognized by feminists "on paper" but were not "the focal thrust of our movement." As a result, Mitchell writes, "we contributed to an ideology that temporarily homogenized social classes and created a polarity that disguised other distinctions by the comprehensive, all-embracing opposition — men/women .... By setting up the opposition of the sexes as dominant,

we helped to produce the ideological notion of a 'classless' society."(45) "There was nothing wrong with our visions," she writes, "they just reflected a shift already in process." Her self-criticism: "we should have been conscious of this."

Linda Gordon, in an essay closely related to Mitchell's, explores the problems she faced as an historian of family violence when she realized that women could themselves act as victimizers and exploiters — even of their own children. Whereas nineteenth-century feminists were advocates of "social control," "second wave" feminists, reflecting their origins in the New Left, began by opposing all forms of state or "expert" intervention into the family. In her essay, Gordon urges the women's movement to adopt a more complex or "dialectical" point of view toward the question of social control and toward what is generally called the "welfare state." Of particular interest is Gordon's analysis of the way in which nineteenth-century advocates of women's rights facilitated the transition and reconstitution of family life, especially among immigrants, from the patriarchal family of the peasant, "already economically unviable," to "a modern version of male supremacy." Gordon studied how this occurred through feminist influence on the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The SPCCs encouraged a series of new norms: the need to inculcate children's respect for their parents, the father's responsibility to support his family, the exclusion of women and children from the labour force, and the relatively new ideals of the full-time mother and of child development which capitalist development had itself already incubated and necessitated.

Nancy Cott compares two periods of mass feminist upheaval in the twentieth-century United States: 1912-1919 and 1967-1974. Her essay is a sensitive exploration of the debates between "sameness and difference," that emerged in the earlier period. Her basic point: "What is crucial, of course [sic], is whether women's particular loyalties and gender identity work in tandem or against each other."(58) By "particular loyalties," Cott seems to mean anything other than gender. She concludes that there are two prerequisites for mass feminist activity. First, a conceptualization of the problem broad enough, or an issue — such as the suffrage — capable of multiple enough meanings to allow women to unite around certain goals while disagreeing about what Cott seems to take as the perennial issue of feminism — "women's difference from and equality to men."(59) Second, mass radicalism in general — which did characterize the two periods in question — supplies "fertile ground" (60) for a mass women's movement. "Feminism," Cott writes, "does not have a story discrete from the rest of historical process."(60) In other words the achievement of some kind of feminist consensus among a large and diverse segment of women, and the existence of mass radicalism, are connected.

For reasons of space, I will not attempt to summarize the other essays

but will simply indicate their subject matter. Three develop feminist analyses of basic social institutions: Jane Lewis on the English welfare system, Deborah L. Rhode on Anglo-American jurisprudence, and Sheryl Ruzek on the health care system in Europe and North America. All three explore how fundamental the oppression of women is to the functioning of these institutions and, in specific detail, to their generally oppressive aspect. Two other authors — Ann Oakley and Judith Stacey — discuss in different ways the implications of motherhood for feminist politics. Oakley is concerned with the tension between women's mothering and the state's need to control the processes of reproduction and socialization. Stacey is concerned with "the challenge of conservative pro-family feminism," as represented by such authors as Jean Elshtain, Betty Friedan, and Germaine Greer who reject much of contemporary feminism's critique of the traditional family. Hilary Rose provides a philosophical perspective in arguing that epistemology and science have always been based on (pre-feminist) conceptions of (male) labour and creativity. Rose asks how a feminist perspective would reconstitute our understanding of science and knowledge. Finally, one of the most engaging and optimistic of the essays — that of Heather Jon Maroney — centers on the vicissitudes of feminism at the work place in Canada, and, especially, on the emergence of working-class feminism. All of the essays are well-written and well-edited, all are worth reading, in a way that is unusual in an anthology.

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ALTHOUGH SEVERAL OF THE ESSAYS refer to the fear, once articulated by Deirdre English, that feminism would liberate men first, the essays seem to me haunted by a related question and that is the significance of socialism or Marxism, by which I mean more generally the left opposition to the dominant society. Since the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, there has been such an opposition, though it has generally been weaker in the United States than elsewhere and has never been as close to non-existent as in the past few years. The distinguishing mark of this opposition has been its claim or aspiration to universality. It was because the left had this aspiration and made this claim that "second-wave feminism" could meaningfully reject it since, in fact, it did not speak for women.

To say that contemporary feminism, or at least a wing of its more self-questioning intellectuals is haunted by the question of socialism is to say, in addition, that it is haunted by its relations with men. Historically, the women's rights movement (as opposed to the much broader currents generally termed "women's culture") has been tied by a series of sometimes invisible but nonetheless powerful connections to the left and, thereby, to a vision of universality that stresses the common interests of men and women. The reason women's rights (and feminism) has needed this connection is that

women's rights arises from liberalism and, throughout its history, major segments of that movement have struggled not to remain trapped within the liberal framework of individual rights, interest group politics, and alternative life styles. It is difficult to see how feminism could transcend liberalism without its connection to utopian and socialist politics. Certainly during the previous two phases in the history of feminism in the United States — the period of reform culminating in the Civil War and the progressive era — large groupings within the women's movement were committed to other radical groups as well. This connection was facilitated, however by what might be called an implicit heterosexual bias in the sexual politics of feminism. The nature of the heterosexuality varied. For example, progressive era feminists range from defenders of traditional maternal values, such as Jane Addams, who wish to extend these values into society as a whole, to advocates of free love. In the latter case homosexuality was defended along with heterosexuality but not as a preferred alternative to it.

The history of the present movement is quite different. In the United States, "second-wave feminism" cut its ties with the New Left far more rapidly and thoroughly than the earlier stages of feminism ever did with the left of their days. I believe it is accurate to say that "second wave feminism" was born with an anti-left and anti-socialist stance. This can be seen in such works of the late 1960s and early 70s as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*. While these works formally concede the relevance of socialism to "economic" questions, they reject the actual, historical left in all of its aspects as an expression of male domination. In this respect, Nancy Cott's attempted analogy between the feminism of 1912-1919 and that of 1967-1974 is misleading. According to Cott, feminism went into decline in 1974 along with the New Left. What, in fact, declined around 1974 was the relatively minor tendency known as "socialist feminism." A mass women's movement gathered ground in the United States at least until well into the eighties, however one wishes to characterize the more immediate past. In contrast to earlier phases in the history of women's rights, in which the issue of women's equality was linked to advance on a broad, social front, this movement triumphed during an intensely reactionary period. Whereas contemporary feminists are often, also, "socialists" criticizing the "middle-class" character of the women's movement and calling for the inclusion of working class, black, and other minority women, this is a very different matter from socialism which by definition is concerned with the common interests of women, men, and children. Similarly, on the question of the relations between the sexes, I think it is fair to say that in contemporary women's writings heterosexuality is sometimes defended as a tolerable choice.

What this holds for the future of feminism is hard to estimate but it is important to remember that the gulf between feminism and the left involves

a difference not only over political economy but over sexual politics. Zillah Eisenstein has argued, in her 1981 *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, that contemporary feminism has broken the bounds of liberalism by constituting women as a "sex-class." In the "sex-class" vision of women coming together free from the intruding, critical, and oppressive control of men or male-dominated institutions, "men" are always "present," by virtue of being excluded or rejected. The essays in Mitchell's and Oakley's volume suggest that a problem with this model is that the exclusion of men, no matter how justified in particular circumstances, ultimately encourages a conformist programme for women.

The historic left conception which has also been the vanguard women's rights and feminist vision is of a world in which "sex-roles" or "gender" are irrelevant — irrelevant because men and women have decided or learned the extent to which they are artificial, imposed and constructed — to both sexes. The exhilaration of escaping from at least some measure of sexual reification is captured in Mary Wollstonecraft's statement: "A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it, though it may excite a horse-laugh. I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour."[1] "Men" and "women," in other words, are basically the same; their sameness lies in "difference" — not the difference between the sexes, each with a different character and set of allegiances but the differences that exist between individuals who are not defined by being male or female, black or white, capitalist or working class. Why, in other words, should a woman have to be a certain way because she is a woman? Is this demand upon her more justified if it comes from other women than if it comes from men? Furthermore, that element of reification in our sexual and gender identity is certainly related to political economy.

"Second wave feminism" rejected this vision for the best of reasons: it minimized and underestimated the autonomous power of male domination and the interests and wishes of men in maintaining that system of oppression. By "going it alone" the current women's movement has achieved a success at the level of values and attitudes that was wholly denied its predecessors. Doubtless, infinitely more remains to be done but it is unclear how much more can be done without the growth of a left, and a real left would involve the further transformation of the women's movement, if it did not arise from within it.

"Second wave feminism" was born in what turned out to be the declining days of the New Left. We are now in the midst of the longest conservative period in American history, with no end in sight. How is it possible to work toward the abolition of artificial and unnecessary sexual distinctions on the basis of a "sex-class" model and in the absence of a left? Furthermore, such

[1]Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (London 1975), 67.

a left would have to *presuppose* equality between men and women — that is both sexes would have to act as if they were equal in order to bring that reality about — and not merely work toward that end. Whether it will ever again be possible to create such a left, and what the meaning of feminism can be without it are questions I cannot answer.