

The Feminization of the American Left

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IT is ironic, in this putatively conservative age, that such a radical social movement as feminism should be so pervasive an influence. It would be difficult to imagine any more revolutionary a transformation that could have occurred in our common life than the rearrangement of relations between the sexes that has developed over the past two decades. What surprises the more is that this transformation should have gone so relatively unopposed and even unremarked. Those rearguard counterrevolutionary skirmishes that have occurred have been put down with little effort, and radical recastings of our language, mores, family relations—even our very definitions of self—have been received as little more than the natural unfolding of events.*

Even as feminism has worked its revolutionary ways with minimal notice, so its correlative doctrines have come to be accepted as being in the nature of things. The spillover effects of feminist thought are everywhere apparent, but they have often escaped being named for what they are. Not the least of these involves a tendency in politics that can without extravagance be labeled the feminization of the American Left.

It is necessary at the outset to emphasize that the concept of feminization implies nothing about the personal behavioral or psychological qualities of those who hold to its tenets. The politics of personal insult does not add to our analytical understanding, and the idea of feminization should not be interpreted as a *tu quoque* response to those who employ the term "macho politics" in dismissing conservatism as a displacement of sexual anxieties onto public life. Feminization suggests a certain set of political reflexes and beliefs, not a tendency of personal behavior.

Nor, for that matter, should feminization and feminism, for all the obvious connections between them, be seen as necessarily equivalent terms. One major strand of feminism, after all, argues that women will only be able to achieve their proper

ends by cultivating qualities quite contrary to the stereotypical attributes of the "feminine." For feminists like these, feminism and feminization are not at all identical; indeed, they view the latter as an impediment to the realization of the former. (Other feminists, of course, see no such contradiction.)

Feminization, as understood here, suggests the establishment of traditionally feminine virtues (those normally associated with the private realm) as norms of behavior for public life. It indicates an ethic of noncoercion, a preference for emotion over rational analysis and for noncompetitive modes of social interaction, a focus on being rather than doing and on interpersonal relations as the primary preoccupation of the good life. The personal, the feminists have told us, is political; feminization proposes not simply that the personal has political implications but that the (feminine) personal should become the preferred model of the political.

At the heart of the feminized imagination lies a reluctance concerning the exercise of power, which becomes either an atavism to be transcended or, if it cannot entirely be gotten around, at least a falling away from political morality ("power politics") that can never truly be participated in with good conscience. It used to be supposed that those who hesitated to traffic in power thereby excluded themselves from active participation in public life. The new refusal of power takes what once would have been dismissed as utopian and makes it into the standard against which politicians should measure themselves.

IT WOULD be a mistake to see this tendency as an entirely new development (which is why it cannot be viewed simply as a product of contemporary feminism). Liberalism

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* The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment might be seen as evidence to the contrary, but it seems clear not only that the ERA commanded majority support but that even many of its strongest supporters came to understand—though they hesitated to say so out loud—that its passage would be essentially redundant. Society had already conceded to women the benefits they originally hoped to extract from the amendment, so ERA's supporters found it possible tacitly to live with, even if they could not openly acquiesce in, its rejection.

has often been associated with a suspicion of power and with a general set of urgings that its opponents dismiss as "soft" and its proponents uphold as "humane." Liberalism and qualities of the feminine (both positive and negative) have for a very long time been set in opposition to contrasting equivalencies of conservatism and the masculine.

Nor can the idea of feminization be dismissed as the invention of conservatives set on the discrediting of left-wing impulses. In his book *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941*, Robert S. McElvaine explicitly and favorably employs the term to characterize left-wing reactions to economic catastrophe. The Depression, he argues, spurred the emergence of "moral economics," an ethic of cooperation, compassion, and sharing.

This represented a movement away from the predominant marketplace—and male—values that had typically prevailed in the economic realm. The "feminization" of the 30's, in McElvaine's view, discredited the "self-centered, aggressive, competitive, 'male,' ethic of the 1920's." Values that had previously been reserved to the feminine sphere—the private world of home and church—now took their rightful place in the public realm.

Yet if the association of feminization with the Left is not new, that is not to say that it has always held. The Great Depression may have given rise to a feminized "moral economics," as McElvaine suggests, but a number of students of the era have emphasized rather the "hard-boiled" manner that characterized the 30's and behind which liberal and radical reformers carried on their activities. New Dealers differentiated themselves from their Progressive forebears by their self-conscious rejection of "sentimentality" and their gruff, masculine, no-nonsense approach to social change. As the historian William Leuchtenburg has said, "If the archetypal progressive was Jane Addams singing 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' the representative New Dealer was Harry Hopkins betting on the horses at Laurel Race Track."

There certainly did exist what we might call the Eleanor Roosevelt wing of Depression-era reform, but it was more than offset within the New Deal by those like Hopkins, Rex Tugwell, and Thurman Arnold who wanted no part of what Leuchtenburg has termed "the Methodist-parsonage morality" characteristic of certain strands of the American progressive tradition. Mrs. Roosevelt may have dreamed of a transformation of human nature, but most New Dealers focused instead on the recasting of institutions. They envisaged new structures of justice, not new burgeonings of love. Enlightened self-interest held more promise for progressive change than did moral regeneration. If New Dealers had feminized ends, they mostly expected to realize them through nonfeminized means.

THOSE to the Left of the New Deal—and there were many such in the 30's—had even less patience for feminized sensibilities. Marxist radicals prided themselves on (and were envied by others for) their tough-minded rejection of liberal sentimentalities. Liberals had deluded themselves that they could unite social with individual values, collectivist ends with private purposes. For those certain they had caught on to the ineluctable laws of history and society—laws that operated independently of human striving—the compromises of liberalism (even New Deal liberalism) could only appear soft and unscientific.

Marxism was not just a political faith, it was an intellectual discipline, one that distinguished the tough-minded from the tender-minded. The cooperative commonwealth would evolve from the trajectory of history, not the feckless strivings and moral yearnings of liberals (of whatever stripe). New Dealers might suppose themselves free of progressive sentimentality, but to Marxists they were still too caught up in the illusions of personal morality to subject themselves to the disciplines of public justice.

In the postwar era, the decline of poverty and the emergence of the cold war crippled Marxism (and radicalism in general), but the preference for tough-mindedness on the Left remained. Reinhold Niebuhr, intellectual and moral mentor to a whole generation of liberals, discarded his earlier sympathies for Marxist analysis but retained a withering disregard for liberal sentimentality. His doctrine of Christian realism (with or without the Christianity) instructed postwar progressives—chastened by the loss of liberal and Marxist illusions alike—to take seriously the necessities and ambiguities of power and to give up their accustomed optimism and moralism for new categories of tragedy, irony, and paradox. Among major reform thinkers of this century—and Niebuhr remained throughout his life an authentic man of the Left—it would be impossible to find a less feminized imagination.

One may question the depth to which Niebuhrian perspectives ever really penetrated on the Left, but there can be no doubt that they did for a time dominate intellectual fashion. The Kennedy administration virtually bristled with masculine assertiveness—recall the Green Berets and the counterinsurgency doctrine—and its leader made unmistakably clear his uneasiness with "soft" versions of liberalism. The troubled relationship between the President and his United Nations Ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, typified the conflict. At one point Stevenson urged that the U.S. make a major push in the General Assembly for general and complete disarmament. Kennedy knew better than to take such a suggestion seriously but was prepared to accept it as a propaganda move; it came to him as a matter of surprise (and no small annoyance) that Stevenson

not only approached the issue with literal-minded earnestness but took it as his duty to lecture the President to do so as well. Stevenson's temporizing instincts during the Cuban missile crisis stirred the same tensions and reflected the same conflict.

IF LIBERALISM for so long resisted its feminizing tendencies, when and why did things turn around? Above all else, as with so much in contemporary American life, looms the specter of Vietnam. A war gone terribly wrong aroused protest not only against itself but against virtually any expression of American power. In the retrospective shadow of Vietnam, cold-war realism came under severe negative reassessment, and much of that reassessment focused on the doctrine's purportedly exaggerated preoccupation with toughness and strength.

More generally, the intense moralism that came to characterize both the antiwar movement and the central domestic issue of the time, the civil-rights crusade, created an atmosphere in the political culture in which feminization flourished. Even after the slogans and the chanting of the 60's died down, the sentimentality that lay behind them remained, as Michael Novak, commenting on a 1972 New York City campaign rally for George McGovern, noted: "'Together at the Garden with McGovern' . . . was as sentimental an effusion of a peculiarly American idealism, teardrop for teardrop, as any the Garden has ever sheltered. . . . 'If only,' Dionne Warwick crystallized the mood, 'we have love!'"* It requires a thoroughly feminized imagination to suppose that politics can be reduced to love.

The disaster of the McGovern campaign acted, to some degree at least, as a reality principle for the Left, and a good deal of sentimental radicalism drifted out of mainstream American politics. One might expect that the decline of radicalism would bring a commensurate decline of feminization, but that does not appear to have been the case. If anything, feminization appears more dominant an influence on the Left than it has been in the past, even if, consistent with the fading of radicalism, it makes less dramatic an impression.

In explaining why that is so, again one necessarily begins with the women's movement. Even for those relatively untouched by feminism *per se*, the women's movement—embracing women's issues and, more extensively, women's sensibilities—has exercised an enormous influence. It is now a commonplace of our culture that women bring to virtually every aspect of public life not just special needs and interests but special perspectives and insights that have hitherto been accorded insufficient attention and that, properly attended to, will soften and humanize the harsh edges of our civilization. As already suggested, the women's movement has kept alive radical

possibilities in a generally conservative age. For those on the Left, it is in many ways the only game in town. Feminization provides a dynamic for left-wing thought that it would today otherwise lack.

A second reason has to do with the fact that no one believes seriously in socialism any more, except as a protest ideal with which to clobber capitalism. Old-line socialists saw their movement as a scientific alternative to capitalism's inefficiencies and contradictions, but the suspension of disbelief now required to believe socialism economically preferable to capitalism is such that even unreconstructed Stalinists cannot be expected to achieve it.

As for the New Left, it based its preference for socialism on moral rather than economic grounds, but since the humane democratic socialism for which it originally professed to yearn had no empirical referents, it could maintain the adherence only of those for whom utopian longings provide adequate sustenance. Even in the realms of pure theory, there was little genuine solace. Postwar Marxists in the West, appalled by what orthodox Marxism had wrought, focused their attention on the young, "humanistic" Marx, but even then they had to involve themselves in extensive interpretive contortions to make his determinedly materialistic version of alienation coincide with their own existential understanding of the term.

Today, in America at least, socialism consists of little more than vague expressive affirmations and repudiations. An Irving Howe indicates his insistence on "decency" and his rejection of "mean-spiritedness," all the while confessing that though he knows capitalism to be morally inadequate he is not at all sure how socialism might be made to work in practice. One admires his modesty, but wonders what is left of his ideology.

Liberals are similarly lacking in ideological substance. The "vital center" of the postwar generation has gone slack. The New Deal generation thought it knew how to accomplish substantial social change, and its successors in the Kennedy-Johnson years saw the New Frontier and the Great Society as the culminations in prosperity of the dreams of social reconstruction born in the Depression. But things have not worked out very well. The War on Poverty foundered in stagflation and social impediments. The Keynesian economics that was to smooth its way, impressive in its early accomplishments, ran aground when politicians proved reluctant to impose its downside disciplines (it may also have paid too little attention to the supply side of the economic ledger), and the social-engineering assumptions on which so much of the reform drive depended turned out to be contrary to fact. It proved to

* "Needing Niebuhr Again," COMMENTARY, September 1972.

be even more difficult for government to reconstruct shattered lives and communities than to fine-tune the economy:

IT is feminization that has to a large extent filled the ideological vacuum that exists among both radicals and liberals. It provides a political resting place and a sustaining vocabulary for those committed to the Left (if by no other criterion than that they oppose the Right) while they attempt to put together substantive replacements for discredited socialisms and Great Societies. Feminization has become a refuge for a Left in ideological crisis.

Nowhere is this more apparent than among mainstream church groups, which have become increasingly visible and active as sources of political enthusiasm on the Left. A while back a writer in the *Nation* declared that "the religious Left is the only Left we've got." That exaggerates matters, but it does correctly suggest both the heightened political profile of the religious Left and the degree to which liberal Protestantism now defines its existence in political terms.

Liberal Protestantism and feminization have always had a close affinity for each other, a point established in social terms—at least for the 19th century—in Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* and in political terms by Robert S. McElvaine's previously-noted study of the Depression era. For McElvaine, the contrast of masculine and feminine economic values translates directly into religious terms. Where the traditional male marketplace virtues encouraged "aggressiveness, toughness, competition, and pursuit of self-interest," the female instincts brought forth by the Depression "emphasized cooperation, sharing, compassion, service to others, self-denial—in short, the traditional Judeo-Christian ethic."

One sees how a Left in intellectual and empirical trouble turns naturally to feminization. Identification with "the Judeo-Christian ethic," after all, covers a multitude of lesser sins. Questions as to whether an ideology works can only be seen as quibbles in the light of such an exalted moral sanction. And even if the quibbles persist, feminization still functions as a formidable weapon for bashing the Right, which is associated by definition with those "male" values that lie at the opposite moral pole from cooperation, sharing, and—above all—compassion.

By setting up the terms of debate in this manner, of course, the Left arranges things in such a way that it cannot lose. Who would not prefer compassion to callousness? Yet even as the feminized politics of compassion offers the Left an apparent moral advantage, it also reveals, in its inescapable tendency to sentimentality, feminization's fatal analytical weaknesses.

As Mickey Kaus—himself a liberal—has argued ("Up from Altruism," *New Republic*, December

15, 1986), compassion "is a miserable basis for politics," because it "carries the unmistakable implication of dependence and piteousness on the part of those on the receiving end of the sentiment." The end of reform politics, Kaus says, "should be not to increase the incidence of compassion, but to reduce the opportunity for it. Compassion isn't politics." When people with particular needs turn to government for specific aid, "it is (or should be) as self-reliant citizens, and it's a terrible mistake to mix up their plight with the 'weak and unfortunate' charity cases. Charity is a noble impulse. But it is not the relation of free, equal citizens."

Compassion politics is not only sentimental, it is impractical: "It provides no principle to tell us when our abstract compassionate impulses should stop." Kaus suggests that liberals should base their case for affirmative government not on the illimitable demands of altruistic compassion but on the politics of the general interest, by which government programs for particular groups can be justified by their contribution to the general good (economic growth, social stability, etc.). One sees in Kaus the tough-minded tradition of the Left: "If liberals build a new, lasting movement, it won't be because they convince enough people to be compassionate, or because they convince enough people that they are entitled to have others be compassionate toward them, but because enough people correctly see their own interest in solving the problems of others."

To the feminized political sensibility, such arguments will inevitably appear stunted, crabbed, even morally tone-deaf. Why, it will be wondered, must we restrict ourselves to a politics of enlightened self-interest? Can we not expect more of ourselves? Do not, in fact, our deepest religious and moral principles demand more?

Such a reaction has an obvious attraction and a surface plausibility, but it reveals feminization's characteristic confusion of spheres. We cannot, simply by force of moral will, conduct public policy according to the rubrics of private life. Charity is noble (and those who do not participate in it on a community as well as individual basis *are* morally tone-deaf) but it is not politics. What free and equal citizens of a society owe one another in the public forum is not love but justice. Love may motivate us, but it cannot provide the substance of our politics. Love, after all, gives without counting the costs, and a politics that does not count costs is feckless and irresponsible.

Thus, for example, while social-welfare policies constitute an essential element in a just society, such policies must always be administered with careful regard for their effects on their recipients. We want to be, as Kaus notes, a society of free and equal citizens, not one of benefactors and dependents. There will always be those among us who cannot care for themselves and to whom

we owe support, but a society that in ordinary circumstances views any substantial portion of its citizenry as objects of charity has succumbed to a muddled and decadent public philosophy.

All of which explains why Mario Cuomo's celebrated "society as family" speech to the Democratic convention in 1984 was, however eloquent, fundamentally misguided. We love and sacrifice for our families without regard to anyone's deserving. We owe them that because they are family. It is political madness to suggest that we owe everyone in society in the same measure. The image of society as family—perhaps the quintessential metaphor of feminized politics—destroys all sense of proportion, all sense of public/private distinction. That way lies moral unboundedness and political absurdity. (We might appropriately speak of society as family when, say, we are conducting a United Fund drive, but—again—charity and politics are not commensurable activities.)

As Michael Novak has recently reminded us, the first moral duty is to think clearly. Feminization characteristically emphasizes feeling and emotion over rationality and so sacrifices the intricate complexity and ambiguity of serious moral judgment to conventional moral earnestness. It tends to focus more on subjective motivation than actual outcomes and to suppose that the cultivation of correct attitudes constitutes moral behavior. It regularly mistakes words for things (as in carrying out its particular ideological agenda under the banner of "peace and justice," thus both sanctifying its own program and implicitly categorizing those who reject it as partisans of war and injustice), and it derives its political program from a view of the world not as it is but as, under the best of all conceivable circumstances, it might imaginably be.

THE answer to feminization is not amorality or ruthlessness; it is rather the recognition, as Niebuhr attempted to instruct us, that politics is the arena where power and conscience meet. Power unmediated by conscience eventuates in political tyranny, but the dream of a world where power is absent is no politics at all—it is fantasy. It seems that we need Niebuhr yet again.

He could remind the feminized Left of an essential moral dilemma of politics: that it is concerned more with the behavior of groups than of individuals, and that group behavior is inherently less subject to moral restraint than is that of individuals. Human behavior in any form is characterized by egoism and pursuit of self-interest, but individuals have a capacity for self-transcendence and self-criticism that allows some room at least for the biddings of conscience to moderate pure self-aggrandizement. Collective bodies exhibit little in the way of those moderating influences. It is notoriously difficult, to put

it mildly, to appeal to the conscience of groups. One simply has to expect, Niebuhr concluded, a certain element of brutality in the behavior of collectivities. (An associated point: it is because the scale of modern life necessitates massive bureaucratization that requirements of coercion, competition, and impersonal rationality triumph over their traditional feminine counterparts. That is the nature of collective life.)

The special problems of group behavior aside, Niebuhr's acceptance of the doctrine of Original Sin (and one does not have to accept his theological baggage to concede his point) made him skeptical of any political program that would, like feminization, require faith in the goodness or infinite malleability of human nature. Niebuhr's Christian realism assumed that the imperfections of politics follow from the imperfections of human nature. Those who would improve the world—and Niebuhr always included himself in that company—must learn to work with those forces, not wish them out of existence or suppose that they might be obliterated. The realities of power and the pursuit of self-interest exist in the nature of things; the job of the statesman is not to overcome them but to manipulate them, so far as is possible, in the direction of humane ends.

It was Niebuhr's tough-minded realism that made him, in the end, so fervent a believer in constitutional democracy. We require a system of checks and balances, a pluralism of power, to thwart the potential for the demonic in human nature. One recalls his classic defense of democracy: it is man's capacity for justice that makes democracy possible, but it is his tendency to injustice that makes it necessary.

The application of Niebuhrian tests to feminized politics produces its most cautionary results in international affairs. Niebuhr understood that those who would establish a just international order must maintain the balance of power. The power of evil must be checked by the counterpower of (relative) good. For all his profound insistence that sin taints all human endeavors and thus all social orders, Niebuhr never supposed that recognition of the ambiguities of virtue should render democrats incapable of defending themselves against democracy's enemies.

The feminized reluctance concerning the use of power—which is today the single most distinctive characteristic of left-wing doctrine in foreign policy—hobbles the pursuit of justice and stable order in world politics. The instinctive hesitation of the Left to employ force or the threat of force in foreign affairs goes well beyond the prudential caution that a nuclear age requires; it amounts in practice to a denial that maintenance of the balance of power is any longer necessary to sustain a just peace. Although liberal politicians will not, for reasons of political survival, concede that that is the point to which they have come, their

practice regularly belies their profession. They typically call for preparedness, but their policy prescriptions make it clear that theirs is a preparedness they are never prepared to put to the test.

IT MAY BE unfair to suggest disingenuousness in this or other aspects of the infiltration of feminization into left-wing politics. One suspects that most people on the Left are unaware of the degree to which they have been overtaken by feminized impulses. Feminization, after all, is not a fully-elaborated ideology; it is rather a set of political instincts, always subterraneously present on the Left, that has in recent years wielded more influence than is customary because of the debilitated condition of left-wing political thought. Its ideological resources almost exhausted, the Left has had only its emotional reflexes to fall back on. It may currently have little useful to contribute to the making of a public philosophy, but it retains its most admirable characteristic: its sense—speaking now only of domestic affairs—that society must never lose concern for those least able to make it on their own.

But concern for the marginalized, the victimized,

and the oppressed—to adopt the Left's preferred vocabulary—lapses into sentimentality (and moral posturing) when it lacks a larger coherent framework into which that concern might fit. Expressions of compassion and solidarity with the disadvantaged become self-indulgent when they are not attached to credible programs by which those disadvantaged might rise to self-sufficiency and self-respect. (The same judgment applies to cries for "peace" that appear to assume that if only they are uttered urgently enough and with pure enough hearts they will somehow become self-fulfilling.) Feeling sorry for others and virtuous about oneself does not constitute an adequate politics. All people of good will, after all, desire the good for their neighbors and their society. The significant political question remains: how do we get there from here?

The feminized mode of politics—when it is not simply being exploited for ideological or partisan purposes—tells us eloquently of the Left's moral yearnings, but its present detachment from any usable social philosophy, its situation in fact of serving as substitute for such a philosophy, tells us even more eloquently of the Left's intellectual bankruptcy.