

contain more common sense than the rigid ideologies that dominate public debate. They are often ambivalent but not necessarily contradictory or incoherent. Unfortunately, they find no expression in national politics, and it is for this reason, according to Dionne, that Americans take so little interest in politics. The explanations of political apathy and stalemate offered by other commentators emphasize procedural considerations—sound bites, campaign finance, the overwhelming advantages of incumbency in congressional elections. Dionne's emphasis on substance is a tremendous improvement. The problem is really quite simple: the political process no longer represents the opinions and interests of ordinary people.

The solution, of course, is not simple at all. Dionne probably underestimates the difficulties of finding an approach to family issues that is "both pro-family and pro-feminist." It is an admirable goal; but keeping the schools open all day—one of his suggestions—is not much of an answer. What is needed is a restructuring of the workplace designed to make work schedules far more flexible, career patterns less rigid and predictable, and criteria for advancement less destructive to family and community obligations. Such reforms imply interference with the market and a redefinition of success, neither of which will be achieved without a great deal of controversy.

The problems confronting American society (or any other advanced industrial society) can't be understood simply by taking account of "what Americans believe," though that is certainly a step in the right direction. Polls reveal "far more room for agreement" than we might think, as Dionne argues, but they hardly add up to a public philosophy. As Dionne himself admits, the country's ambivalence often shades into schizophrenia. Americans have a "split personality, which by turns emphasize individual liberty and the importance of community."

These are by no means completely irreconcilable values, but neither can they be neatly balanced simply by splitting the difference. As a guide to sound political practice, schizophrenia is not much better than ideological paranoia. A "coherent notion of the common good"—Dionne's concluding plea—will still have to rest on difficult choices, even if they are not the choices dictated by worn-out ideologies. A public philosophy for the twenty-first century will have to give more weight to the community than to the right of private decision. It will have to emphasize responsibilities rather than rights. It will have to find a better expression of the community than the welfare state. It will have to

limit the scope of the market and the power of corporations without replacing them with a centralized state bureaucracy.

An abandonment of the old ideologies will not usher in a golden age of agreement. If we can surmount the false polarizations now generated by the politics of gender and race, we may find that the real divisions are still those of class. "Back to basics" could mean a return to class warfare, or at least to a politics in which class became the overriding issue. Much will depend on whether men and women of good will shrink from this prospect, as they usually have in the past. □

Ellen Willis**FEMINISM WITHOUT FREEDOM**

FEMINISM WITHOUT ILLUSIONS, by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. University of North Carolina Press, 1991. 348 pp. \$24.95.

During the earliest skirmishes between the women's liberation movement and its New Left progenitors, one of the charges that flew our way, along with "man-hater" and "lesbian," was "bourgeois individualist." Ever since, left criticism of the movement has focused on one or another version of the argument that feminism (at least in its present forms) is merely an extension of liberal individualism and that, largely for this reason, it is a movement of, by, and for white upper-middle-class career women. At first this attack was crude and frankly preventive, aimed at heading off the whole idea of feminism as serious radical politics before it got started. Later, as the power of that idea became ineluctable, as leftist women—even those who were hostile or ambivalent to begin with—began to take it for granted as a reference point, the argument was tempered and recast as dissent over the meaning of feminism and its proper direction. But the basic issue remains: whether the demands for independence, personal and sexual freedom, the right to pursue happiness that have set the tone of feminism's second wave are the cutting edge of cultural revolution, or on the contrary socially irresponsible and irrelevant to most women's economic and familial concerns. That there are self-proclaimed feminists and leftists on both sides of this debate is symptomatic of a larger division—the split between cultural radicals and left cultural conservatives that has been widening for years and is now taking on the proportions of a major political realignment.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's presumptuously titled book (haven't we had enough of intellectuals who imagine they have no illusions?) dives into these roiling waters. The author, who describes herself as "temperamentally and culturally conservative" and committed to feminism "despite firm opposition to some of its tendencies that I regard as irrational, irresponsible, and dangerous," rejects the liberal democratic proposition that individuals have inalienable natural rights and therefore the idea that women have an inherent right to self-determination. Insisting that the claims of society are prior to individual rights, and that all such rights are socially derived, she calls on the feminist movement to break with its individualist roots and find a rationale for women's rights in collectively determined values and interests. Nor, in Fox-Genovese's view, may the collectivity in question be women as a group: for her the concept of sisterhood, whether defined as political solidarity in fighting male supremacy or as commonality based on some version of "female values" (she makes no distinction between the two) is itself an extension of individualism that obscures differences of race and class while denying women's stake in a common human culture and the legitimate claims of society as a whole.

Feminism Without Illusions is not a systematic argument but a series of loosely related essays with considerable overlap, held together (often just barely) by a sensibility—characteristic of contemporary left conservatism—that merges two disparate strains of anti-individualist thought. One is a socialist materialism that defines human rights primarily in terms of distributive justice, the other a communitarian, cryptoreligious moralism that laments the decline of traditional forms of social authority, especially the family. Neither philosophy has much use for individual freedom, which is seen mainly as a threat to the social fabric. Both endow human beings with an amoral, insatiable will to power that must be subject to external controls. Both object to the capitalist marketplace on the grounds that it unleashes the individual and undermines social and moral order. Both evince a puritanical suspicion of pleasure, particularly sexuality, that powerful manifestation of the anarchic, imperial will. For the socialist in Fox-Genovese, individualism leads to Hobbes's nightmare war of all against all; for the communitarian, to a disastrous denial of any concept, "however secularized," of original sin. Her contempt for liberty is straightforward: on pornography she declares, "I would ban the more extreme forms without a second thought, and with precious few worries about the public expressions of healthy sexuality that might be banned along with

them"; she takes issue with the Supreme Court decision defining flag-burning ("an affront to our collective identity") as free speech; she rejects the idea of an absolute right to abortion, arguing that the question of when life begins must be decided collectively, not left to "individual conscience or convenience."

Despite certain convergences between this brand of illiberalism and that of the anti-pornography movement, the project of assimilating it to feminism is, to say the least, a challenge. Feminism is indeed, as Fox-Genovese puts it (with a disconcerting air of floating a daring new idea), "the daughter of individualism"—not only because of its origins in the demand that the ideals of the enlightenment apply to female as well as male individuals, but because the market opened up alternatives to women's absolute economic dependence on the family. Furthermore, Fox-Genovese and I agree, contemporary feminism has uncovered the profoundly radical implications of the idea that individual rights are innate.

We differ, however, on what this means and how to evaluate it. For Fox-Genovese, the depredations of individualism have been limited by restrictions on who counts as an individual, and the claims of the dispossessed, women especially, are now demolishing those saving limits. As I see it, the problem with liberal individualism in capitalist societies is not its liberating tendencies but its coexistence with, and masking of, systemic domination. Liberal social-contract theory assumes—can make sense only by assuming—an adult, putatively genderless but implicitly male citizen engaging in a public political and economic life, which in turn means taking for granted an apolitical sexual and domestic realm in which patriarchal relations are unquestioned. Capitalist ideology defines the economic rights of the individual not simply as freedom to produce and exchange goods and services or to benefit from the fruits of one's labor but as freedom for some individuals to monopolize economic resources and thereby control the lives of others.

From this perspective, the left-conservative (and right-libertarian) conflation of an unbridled market economy with the expansion of personal freedom comes apart. It is not, for instance, inconsistent—as Fox-Genovese would have it—for feminists to ground their defense of abortion in individual rights while rejecting economic individualism in support of comparable worth; rather, it is contradictory for employers to invoke "individual rights"—their own or those of workers in "male" jobs—to justify the

economic and sexist domination involved in systematically devaluing "women's work." To be consistently for freedom and against domination does not, as Fox-Genovese claims, destroy the distinction between freedom and license. Rather, it means making that distinction at the point where my exercise of freedom interferes with yours: the true equivalent of unconstrained capitalism would be unlimited freedom to impose one's will through violence.

A genuinely radical libertarianism is not unconcerned with community. On the contrary, it requires communities committed to negotiating social conflicts and deciding on social priorities in ways that maximize freedom and minimize coercion, that allow people the widest possible latitude in meeting their perceived needs while still respecting the rights of others, including the others in their own households. It also, of course, implies equality of power, including the power of dissident individuals and groups to resist coercion by majorities. In short, such a community is democratic—which means that it gets its validation and its aims, which are always provisional, from the individuals who participate in it, not vice versa.

Critics of social-contract theory have justly argued that social life is a given of human existence: each of us is born embedded in and dependent on social relations. Indeed, the very idea of rights implies a society that recognizes and supports them. Still, we experience ourselves, primally, as individuals with urgent impulses and desires—in relation to others, to be sure, but also apart from and in conflict with them; any parent can attest to how early babies begin to struggle, poignantly, for autonomy. Nor is this struggle synonymous with a destructive will to power: on the contrary, in my view, it is the cumulative suppression of basic human needs for freedom and pleasure that has given rise to the sadistic rage at the root of this century's barbarities, from Nazism and Stalinism to the anomic violence of today's inner cities. For those of us who draw that lesson from history, the idea that human beings have inherent rights and freedoms transcending any given form of social organization is indispensable. This ought to be particularly obvious in the case of women, who have been to varying degrees subordinated in all known cultures, whose sexual and reproductive functions—intimate aspects of their being—have always been collectivized. While men of oppressed classes and races may at least have their subjectivity recognized within their own groups, women are everywhere defined as existing

in relation to men and children. How are women's rights to "derive from a collectivity" when the very definition of human society has been so closely linked with the definition of women as a resource?

Fox-Genovese makes passing acknowledgment of this problem, but it doesn't deter her from advocating a society that defines the common good as "the good of the whole, with the whole understood to have an existence in some way independent of, or logically anterior to, the individuals who compose it" and that functions as a collective conscience. In practice that means a society based on the repressive, patriarchal norms of Judeo-Christian morality and enforced by traditional institutions, or some form of authoritarian collectivism based on a secular ideology and enforced by the state, or a combination of the two.

The implications for feminism are perhaps most evident in Fox-Genovese's discussion of abortion. She asserts:

The vast majority of women who seek abortions are still in their teens, unmarried, and poor. They have scant, if any, prospects of providing bare essentials for a child, and the attempt to do so almost invariably destroys their own prospects. . . . The hard truth is that our society is not prepared to provide adequately for children. . . . The argument for abortion as a woman's individual right, by conflating pregnancy and child rearing, confuses sexual and economic issues. . . . Pregnancy itself does not long interfere with a woman's opportunities to live the life she chooses; child rearing frequently does. A woman can, in principle, afford to share her body—and even to give up drugs, alcohol, and tobacco—for nine months without serious consequences. . . .

This argument accepts the entrenched assumption that a woman's reproductive capacity is not an aspect of her selfhood but a social resource; it ignores the pervasive impact of that assumption on women's alienation from their bodies, their sexuality, and their sense of themselves as agents; and it trivializes women's experience of unwanted pregnancy, which often includes intense feelings of bodily and psychic violation as well as the knowledge that every pregnancy has potentially "serious consequences." For that matter, its economism ridiculously oversimplifies the issues involved in child rearing. Melodrama aside (it is simply untrue that the "vast majority" of women who seek abortions are in dire economic straits), Fox-Genovese is clearly suggesting that a good enough welfare state could restrict abortion without violating women's rights. If this is the socialist talking, the

communitarian surfaces in her endorsement of a collective definition of life, linked to fetal viability: without such a definition, the right to abortion "can logically lead to the right to murder with impunity." Which is to say that the moment women are permitted to determine whether and on what terms they will give birth, Sodom and Gomorrah will ensue.

Fox-Genovese also disapprovingly equates "women's right to liberation from the reproductive consequences of their own sexuality" with "their right to the male model of individualism," suggesting that the desire for sexual freedom is both morally dubious and intrinsically male. (To give her her due, the desire to be out in the world on "honorary male" terms did have a lot to do with the passion of young, childless feminists in the early legal abortion wars—myself included.) In general, one of her more traditionalist objections to individualism is her fear that it leaches out the concreteness of biological difference, defining women as either abstract, genderless atoms or surrogate men. Yet at the same time she rejects sexual difference or female commonality as a basis for feminist politics.

This is not as contradictory as it sounds. Fox-Genovese is positively Gothic in her rendition of "the inescapable conflict between men and women": "As social facts, male strength and female reproductive power pit the sexes against each other in a conflict rendered only more poignant by the attraction that locks mortal adversaries in each other's embrace." It follows that since this conflict cannot be transcended or resolved, either through androgyny or through an unthinkable separatism, there is no point in politicizing it.

I share Fox-Genovese's lack of enthusiasm for notions of solidarity based on women's alleged special qualities or values, as well as her refusal to dismiss the entire corpus of Western culture as monolithically male. (Ironically, this sort of cultural nationalism offers the most plausible framework for a feminism that subordinates individual rights to collective norms.) Her denial that women have a common political interest is another matter. In arguing against the reductive conception of sisterhood as a bond that transcends race, class, and cultural differences, Fox-Genovese is merely echoing what has been feminist conventional wisdom for a decade or more. No feminist on the left would deny that radical feminists' insistence on gender as the primary political division led to a crippling inability to confront the differences among women; nor that an effective feminist politics must take women's complex, multiple identities into account. But Fox-Genovese goes further: in classic left

antifeminist fashion, she dismisses the very idea that women's "special oppression" derives from gender as an individualist "temptation," which functions to shore up capitalism by denying class and race. She sees feminist consciousness raising as a form of middle-class therapy ("The rising self-awareness brought many to confront how much of the early anger, presumably related to the male oppressors, in fact derived from childhood relations with mothers"), political only insofar as it freed women "from the continual replay of familial psychodramas." (For the historical record, rising self-awareness brought at least some of us to confront how much anger, presumably derived from our relations with our mothers, in fact related to our oppression by men.) As for actual feminist successes in opening up new opportunities for women, Fox-Genovese argues that it is mainly middle-class women who are able to take advantage of them, while working-class and poor women have been hurt by the attendant loss of patriarchal protections, especially the male backlash (my word, not hers) against supporting children. (One might ask when poor women, black women in particular, ever enjoyed any patriarchal protections, but never mind.)

At the start of her concluding chapter, the author writes, "However much this book is intended as a feminist critique of individualism, it is bound to strike some—and perhaps many—as a critique of feminism." The implication is that those so struck are stuffy party-liners; feminism is, after all, the most various and contentious of movements. But in truth, little remains of feminism of any stripe by the time Fox-Genovese gets through divesting it of "illusions." While I don't doubt that she believes women ought to get a better deal, she resists any possible means of translating that sentiment into a political challenge to male power and privilege. In a key passage in her introduction, Fox-Genovese makes the familiar economic argument that feminism is a "symptom" of other social changes, particularly women's increased participation in the labor force—an argument that denies or plays down the role of feminism, as movement or as impulse, in promoting the changes in question. The implicit corollary is that women's equality will also come about as a symptom of economic change. Fox-Genovese never says outright that the woman question will be resolved not by feminism but by socialism; such claims are out of fashion, and for good reason. Yet it seems clear that this is what she means—and that the diffuse quality of her book comes, in part, from the strain of not saying it.

The other major subtext in *Feminism Without*

Illusions is perhaps best expressed by the following personal anecdote:

Early in our marriage we enjoyed playing gin rummy, and, as it happened, I frequently won. Now my husband enjoys winning as much as anyone I know. And one day, when I had not just won, but won big, he turned to me with a wicked gleam in his eye and said, "Yes, but you don't have a penis." We had a good laugh.

Evidently Fox-Genovese means this story as an ironic cautionary tale about the tension between equality and difference, the battle of the sexes, and the ways we do and don't transcend it. Myself, I can't help hearing in her husband's joke the intellectual's sublimated equivalent of the truck driver's dick-waving in *Thelma and Louise*. And in Fox-Genovese's appreciative laughter I hear the voice of all social conservatives, saying, in one way or another, settle for sublimation, it's the best you can ever get. If the past decade's defeats tell us anything, it's that no illusion feminism has perpetrated is half so devastating as this one. □

Thomas Bender

A GROUP OF CRITICS

BELOVED COMMUNITY: THE CULTURAL CRITICISM OF RANDOLPH BOURNE, VAN WYCK BROOKS, WALDO FRANK & LEWIS MUMFORD, by Casey Nelson Blake. University of North Carolina Press, 1990. 365 + xvi pp. \$34.95 hardcover; \$12.95 paper.

Though it lasted only sixteen months, the magazine *Seven Arts* (1916–17) defined an important cultural moment in the United States. Distinctively American but cosmopolitan, modernist in commitment but democratic and constructive in spirit, *Seven Arts* was, in the phrase of Henry May, the "pure distilled essence" of the bohemian intellectuals of the 1910s. *Seven Arts* is probably best remembered as the magazine that published Randolph Bourne's brilliant, stinging critique of John Dewey, his teacher. His attack on Dewey's "pragmatic" support of American participation in World War I resulted in the withdrawal of the magazine's patron, thus ending its career.

Although *Beloved Community* does not make the *Seven Arts* magazine its centerpiece, it could have, for the book is about a mode of cultural criticism first given form in that magazine. Casey Blake's

subject, as his subtitle indicates, is "the cultural criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford." The first three wrote for *Seven Arts*; the last, a generation younger but terribly precocious, read the magazine, especially Bourne, and formed himself as an intellectual in its image.

Mumford is no doubt the best remembered of the group. The other three writers, well known in their time, have not worn well, save, perhaps, for Bourne as a sort of cult figure of those who admire his antiwar essays and his articulation of a cosmopolitan American culture. A brilliant writer, Bourne was a leader of the young prewar intellectuals, but his career was prematurely cut off when he died in the influenza epidemic of 1918. Van Wyck Brooks's career falls into two phases. Blake is interested in the first half, when Brooks was a powerful critic of the genteel tradition inherited by his generation. His *America's Coming of Age* (1915) as well as other early essays carried the message, as Lionel Trilling put it, "that ideas should be related to the actual life of a people, that the national existence should be of a kind that permitted ideas to affect it." Waldo Frank is least well remembered, although he does not deserve such obscurity. At its best his criticism (as in *Our America* [1919]) matched that of the other three, though he could drift off into mysticism.

Casey Blake is the first to treat these writers as a group, and he has written sensitive biographical analyses and penetrating criticism. But his book is more than a history of an important movement in American cultural criticism; it is itself a work of cultural criticism. While not uncritical of Bourne, Brooks, Frank, and Mumford, Blake identifies strongly with their cultural critique. Yet I am more impressed by Blake the historian than Blake the critic.

Blake offers a novel perspective on these critics. Beginning with Christopher Lasch's *The New Radicalism in America* (1965), historians have tended to be uncomfortable about the intensely personal roots of the cultural criticism of the intellectuals associated with Bourne. Even those drawn to their work have treated the psychological needs that impelled these intellectuals as at least partially disabling. Blake boldly turns this supposed liability into an asset.

The preoccupation of these writers with "personality" is presented by Blake as a strength. He insists that we ought to take more seriously the constructive, even radical, possibilities inherent in the modernist shift toward heightened awareness of the inner self. Historians have been inclined to interpret the shift from the nineteenth-century concern for