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FEMINISM AND CLASS CONSOLIDATION

In the late fifties marrying an economic equal was neither necessary nor possible. Most middle-class—or for that matter, blue-collar working-class—men could expect to earn enough to support a wife and children. Moreover, most women who intended to marry and have children did not invest their prime childbearing years in postgraduate education and professional advancement. In 1960, just over 30 percent of American women worked outside the home, and most of those did so because their husband's income was plainly inadequate or because their children had grown up, leaving the house quiet and eternally tidy.

A decade or so later, enough had changed so that the marriage of equals was both possible and, in most cases, necessary. Most American men no longer earned enough to support a family unassisted, and most American women—including wives and mothers—had gone out and gotten jobs. Many married women went to work simply to help compensate for their husbands' declining earning power. In the early years of the women's movement, feminists often cited the estimate that 70 percent of working women were in the work force because their husbands' incomes were far too low to support a family. At the same time, later marriages and the 50 percent divorce rate guaranteed that the great majority of women would have to support themselves and possibly their children on their own earnings at some point in their lives. By the seventies, only the wives of the rich could imagine that employment was simply an option.

But in the professional middle class, women were working not only because they had to, not only because they feared not finding a suitable husband—or any husband at all—but because they wanted to. They were in fact not just working—a part-time job while the children are at school, a stab at catering, or some other expansion of a domestic skill—they were pursuing demanding, fast-track professional careers with at least as much energy and intensity as their male colleagues. And this was the result not merely of crude economic pressure but of feminism.

The feminist movement has of course affected the lives of women in all social classes, and it has changed women's lives in ways that have little to do with economics or the dynamics of any particular class. By abolishing the cruder forms of sex discrimination, the movement opened doors for women of all classes, races, and conditions. Women won the right to abortion, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to equal educational opportunity. And feminists are still working to expand these rights and win new ones—such as subsidized child care, pay equity, and paid maternity leave. Perhaps above all the feminist movement has won enormous gains for all women in the intangible areas of dignity and self-esteem. But for our story, what is important about feminism is that it helped save the professional middle class from economic decline and at the same time healed it of that subtler form of decline that Betty Friedan had described two decades earlier as "progressive demoralization."

Among women's economic gains, perhaps the greatest single achievement of the feminist movement has been the opening up of formerly male professions, such as law, medicine, and management. For most of this century the professions have been the occupational fortress of the middle class, but until recently they were reserved for men. The very traits that early twentieth-century reformers sought to attach to the professions—objectivity, scientific rationality, and a dispassionate concern for society—were conceived of as quintessentially masculine traits. In 1871, for example, the president of the American Medical Association had this to say on the subject of women in medicine:

> Certain women seek to rival men in manly sports . . . and the strong-minded ape them in all things, even in

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dress. In doing so, they may command a sort of admiration such as all monstrous productions inspire, especially when they tend towards a higher type than their own.

Throughout the twentieth century, women who aspired to a profession were directed toward those intellectually "softer" occupations—nursing, social work, teaching—that are deemed "semi-professions" by the sociologists and rewarded commensurately by employers. Those who persisted in trying to gain entrance to the top professions often faced harassment from professors and fellow students, followed by marginalization within their profession. Ellen Richards, for example, one of America's first female chemists, was segregated from the male students when she attended MIT in the 1860s, and eventually consigned to what was felt to be a more suitable "science" for a woman—home economics.

Feminism, when it reemerged in the 1970s, launched a two-pronged attack on the traditionally male professions. On the one hand, women demanded to be let in on an equal footing. On the other hand, they questioned the core assumptions of the professions—their exclusivity, their claims to scientific objectivity and public service. In medicine, for example, feminists simultaneously demanded that women be admitted to the profession and attacked it for its sexism, racism, and greed—qualities that seemed to betray any claims to objectivity and public service. Feminists wanted women to be doctors, but they also wanted to abolish medicine as an elite profession and encourage the skills and participation of more humble health workers, lay practitioners (such as the self-trained midwives who began practicing illegally in the seventies), and the "consumers" of health care. With all the professions, feminists wanted, paradoxically at times, to open them up—and close them down.

This ambivalence reflected a larger quandary. Did feminists want to overthrow what they recognized to be a "male-dominated, capitalist society"? Or did they simply want women to take their place within it? Did they want revolution, or assimilation? The radical answer had drawn confidence from the student left and the black insurgency, but as those movements waned in the early seventies, assimilation began to look like the only practical strategy. I remember how betrayed many radical and left-leaning feminists felt at a 1975 conference held by the New York City chapter of the National Organization for Women, which featured, among the usual workshops on feminist political themes, sessions on how to "make it" in the corporate world. Surely the aim of the struggle was not to propel a few women to the top of a fundamentally unjust hierarchy, in which most women counted for little more than cheap labor. Yet as many quite radical feminists later came to realize, there is no way that an economically marginalized group can be expected to "wait for the revolution," letting moral purity compensate for certain poverty. Mainstream feminism came to stand unambiguously for assimilation, with the proviso or at least vague hope that women would somehow "humanize" the positions into which they were assimilated.

So, empowered by feminism—even if they did not always regard themselves as feminists—women poured into what had been almost exclusively male domains. In medicine, only 9 percent of first-year students were female in 1969; in 1987, 37 percent were female. In law, women had taken only 8 percent of the degrees awarded in 1973; ten years later women took 36 percent. In business, only 4.9 percent of the MBAs graduating in 1973 were women; ten years later 28.9 percent were women.

Not that women have achieved anything like full equality within these professions. A representation of 30 to 40 percent is far short of 50 percent. And within these areas of endeavor, women still find subtle barriers blocking the way to the top. Women doctors are likely to choose, or be channeled into, the relatively low-status field of pediatrics rather than, say, surgery. Women academics are well-represented among the junior faculty, sparse among the tenured senior faculty. Businesswomen complain about the "glass ceiling" that stands between them and the boardroom, and feel blocked at all levels by the almost impenetrably masculine culture of the corporate world. But the fact remains that in little more than a decade women increased their representation among the most prestigious and lucrative professions by 300 to 400 percent. As a change in the fortunes of women, that has to be counted somewhere up near the achievement of suffrage.

It was an achievement, however, that was sharply limited by class. The chief beneficiaries of the opening of the professions were women who already had the advantages of good schools, an encouraging home life, and the money and leisure for higher education. A 1976 study showed, for example, that the women clambering into medical school were likely to come from the same class background as the men who were already there. Nor were there gains of comparable magnitude within the traditionally male blue-collar skilled occupations, in part because so many of these occupations were themselves in decline. While the percentage of

women in professional training was rising from less than 10 percent up to 40 percent, the proportion of women construction workers and skilled craftspersons did not reach 10 percent.

So while some women moved into positions of visibility and even power, the average working woman, who is not a professional and not likely to be college-educated, is still pretty much where she always was: waiting on tables, emptying wastebaskets, or pounding a keyboard for five or six dollars an hour. If the recent opening up of the professions has been feminism's greatest victory, it is a victory whose sweetness the majority of American women will never taste.

But it is the change within the professional middle class that concerns us here. The chasm that existed within that class—separating its achievers from its menial laborers, its husbands from its wives—was potentially bridged. A young women no longer had to secure her membership in the middle class through the tenuous pact of marriage. She didn't have to marry a doctor; she could be one. It remained for the young men of this class to overcome their resentment of the new female competition and understand that they in turn could be married to doctors or lawyers instead of mere wives.

By the seventies this change was well under way. The old notion that a working wife was a sure sign of male inadequacy was hard to find in any class. As I argued in *The Hearts of Men*, the traditional masculine ideal as husband, father, and sole breadwinner had been going out of style for decades. The reasons for this had less to do with feminism, which did not become a mass movement until the early seventies, than with a consumer culture that was increasingly reaching out to men as consumers in their own right. In the words of the early *Playboy* magazine, which should be seen as a promoter of the new masculine ideology as well as of soft pornography, wives were "parasites," trapping men into lives of perpetual toil to support *their* consumerism. Men earned the money, why shouldn't they spend it on themselves?

Feminism, when it came along, offered a socially conscious rationale for this somewhat churlish attitude. It allowed men, especially young, middle-class men, to insist that they were not fleeing from their traditional responsibilities but joining in the general effort to overcome obsolete and restrictive sex roles. As psychologist and men's liberation advocate Herb Goldberg argued in the 1970s, if women were tired of being sex objects for men, men were equally weary of being "success objects" for women. Besides, quite apart from the men's liberationists, the old pressures on men to "prove their masculinity" by marrying young and single-handedly supporting a family were relaxing. By the eighties, no one thought it odd if a man of thirty or so remained single, apportioning his earnings among the products advertised in such places as *Gentleman's Quarterly, Metropolitan Home*, and *Connoisseur*.

The women's magazines complained that men—meaning eligible men with attractive incomes—were suffering from "fear of commitment." Many men, however, were displaying a justifiable fear of making the wrong commitment. The young men—stereotypical yuppies, although the word had not yet been invented—who were interviewed for a 1984 article I wrote on the "new man" did not rule out marriage, but they were concerned with finding a mate who could "pull her own weight," who "would not be a burden"—as if they were selecting a companion for an upstream rafting trip. And while this is hardly scientific evidence, I have often polled college-lecture audiences, first asking the women how many of them would like to be full-time homemakers. One or two brave hands go up for this unstylish option. But when the young men are asked how many of them would be willing to support a full-time homemaker wife, the response is a few snickers, and no hands.

Women had once married men who looked as though they would be reliable breadwinners, and men had once married women who simply looked good. But now both sexes were determined to find proven wage-earners. As Harvard economics professor David Bloom told *Time* in 1986: "A pairing-off based on economics is occurring. Higher-income men and higher-income women are tending to find each other." Mimi Lieber, a New York-based marketing consultant, told me in a 1986 interview:

> We're seeing a changing pattern of marriage. It used to be that looks determined how well a woman married. But today the little dime-store girl is not being picked up by the college student. The doctor isn't marrying a nurse, he's marrying another doctor.

The frequency with which college men once married pretty dime-store clerks should probably not be exaggerated. College itself, as a social experience, helped ensure that young middle- or upper-class men would end up with young women of similar backgrounds. But marriage had provided at least a limited avenue of upward mobility for young

women of humble origins, and that avenue was now all but closed. In the fifties, for example, an office romance meant the occasional dalliance between a boss and his secretary. Thirty years later, according to the *Wall Street Journal,* office romance was "flourishing" because "women routinely work beside men as professional and managerial peers."

Besides, a certain social opprobrium now attaches to the man who socializes with women far below him in the occupational hierarchy. Just as a professional woman who fell in love with a blue-collar male would be a subject of wonder and scorn, the executive who dallies with a pink-collar worker would be revealed today as insecure and lacking in judgment. In the 1988 movie *Working Girl,* an ambitious secretary pretends to be an upper-level executive in order to carry out a major deal. In the process she becomes romantically involved with an attractive male executive from another firm. When he finds out about her deception, she challenges him: Would you have fallen in love with me if I were just a secretary? He is abashed, because the answer, of course, is no.

It is as if, in climbing into the middle class on the strength of their own achievements, the new executive and professional women had pulled up the ladder behind them. Of course, they had not done so themselves. *Men* were choosing to marry for money, as well as for love or for looks. But upwardly mobile young women had much to gain from the tightened "pattern of marriage" within the class. Seen as economic partners as well as helpmates, women are more likely to be equals within their marriages. They are also less likely than in the past to be displaced by any of the far more numerous women—secretaries, flight attendants, cocktail waitresses—who lack professional credentials and impressive resumés.

Viewed from outside and "below," then, the professional middle class has simply become a more impregnable fortress. Once only men had had to scale its walls, devoting their youth and young adulthood to preparation and apprenticeship. Women could drift in on the strength of their charm or of so slight a credential as a bachelor's degree in French literature or art history. Today, however, almost no one gets in—male or female—without submitting to the same discipline and passing the same tests that were originally designed to exclude intruders from below.

Almost as soon as the class consolidated itself through its new androgyny, an unaccountable weariness seemed to overcome middle-class feminism. In 1963 Betty Friedan had blamed the "feminine mystique" for the "progressive demoralization" of the professional middle class—men, women, and children. The full-time housewife, she argued, had become a menace. Bored, tranquilized, suffering from "housewife's syndrome," she was not even up to the one job assigned to her—raising children, raising them to be ambitious, disciplined members of the middle class. Excluded from the "battle with the world," she had no way of transmitting the skills required for that battle. The "wasted energy" of housewives, Friedan predicted, would continue "to be destructive to their husbands, their children, and to themselves until it is used in their own battle with the world."

Two decades later, no one could complain that women were insufficiently engaged in the "battle," dazed noncombatants in the world of men. A new problem had arisen in the middle class: whether anyone would have children at all. To the individual professional woman, the problem was experienced as the inexorable ticking of the "biological clock": How would she find a husband before her fertile years ended, and find time from her career for childbearing? To conservative intellectuals, it was the problem of the "birth dearth." There was of course no shortage of population globally, or even a shortfall among Americans in general. But the birthrate among the educated, affluent, white population had fallen drastically. If there had been a question in the early sixties of whether the middle class could reproduce itself as a class, there was now a question of whether its members would reproduce at all.

At the same time, *raising* the children began to loom as a bigger challenge than ever. In the early seventies, ambitious middle-class mothers counted themselves lucky to find a day-care center or a reliable baby-sitter to mind the children while they rushed off to work. But a decade later, with mounting competition for admission to the "good" private colleges—and even to the first-rate urban nursery schools—women were thinking twice about paid child care.

The concern was expressed in various ways: "I don't want to miss the early years"; or "I don't want to leave my child with just *anyone.*" But the real issue was the old middle-class dilemma of whether "anyone"—such as a Jamaican housekeeper or a Hispanic day-care worker—was equipped to instill such middle-class virtues as concentration and intellectual discipline. For many young middle-class couples the choice was stark: Have the mother work and risk retarding the child's intellectual development, or have the mother stay home, build up the child's IQ, and risk being unable to pay for a pricy

nursery school or, later, private college. Unfortunately, feminism had not advanced to the point where these were a *father's* agonizing choices.

Attuned to the new doubts among middle-class women, Betty Friedan announced in 1981 a "second stage" for American feminism. In the first stage, she wrote, "Our aim was full participation, power and voice in the mainstream, inside the party, the political process, the professions, the business world"—in short, assimilation. But where once women had been stymied by the feminine mystique, she wrote, they were now afflicted by a "feminist mystique," which required them to be brittle, masculinized strivers. Just as she had once quoted dozens of frustrated housewives, Friedan now cited battle-weary career women, anguished over their desire to have children before their childbearing years ran out. Thus the second stage would suspend hostilities between men and women. It would "involve coming to new terms with the family" and must be launched "so we can live a new 'yes' to life and love, and can *choose* to have children."

Many feminists found Friedan's proposed truce premature. She did not claim that the struggle for equality was over, but she now saw many familiar forms of sexism as "first stage problems"—as if they required little more than a mop-up operation. For many middle-class women there was some truth to this. Problems of sheer economic injustice, of stinging discrimination, were not looming as large as the problem of when and how to start a family. But a far larger number of women remained, as always, in low-paid, stereotypically female jobs, paid far less than men in jobs requiring similar levels of skill and responsibility. For these women, Friedan's announcement that feminism had moved on to a less militant second stage was, at the very least, insensitive.

Friedan was only one sign of the new quietism of middle-class feminism. In academia, women's studies—long the most reliable reproductive organ of middle-class feminism—began in some quarters to take on a detached and esoteric air. Reviewing an important new anthology of highbrow feminist scholarship, Catherine Stimpson—herself a leading pioneer of women's studies—found the contributions strangely "eccentric in focus, uneasy in spirit." On the campuses, the mood among young career-oriented women was reportedly "postfeminist" and dominated by the conviction that, whatever indignities women had suffered in the remote past (say, 1970), the way was now open for any young woman of spirit to rise straight to the top of whatever lucrative and rewarding field she might chose.

Middle-class feminism is not, of course, all there is to American feminism. A 1986 Gallup poll found that a startling 56 percent of American women considered themselves to be "feminists," and the degree of feminist identification was if anything, slightly higher as one descended the socioeconomic scale. Black women, for example, who are economically disadvantaged relative to white women, professed to be feminists at the rate of 65 percent. But middle-class white women provide the public face of feminism; they direct and staff its major institutions. And by the late eighties, middle-class feminism seemed, even to many of its own stalwarts, to be tired: tired of defeat at the hands of the New Right over issues like the Equal Rights Amendment, but also exhausted from its own successes.

Even in the face of the new problems confronting working women, however, few are likely to trade in the "feminist mystique" for the old feminine one. For above all, the assimilation of women has almost doubled the economic resources of the middle class, helping save it from the decline experienced by the working class and lifting it, in fact, well out of the middle range of income. The $60,000-plus a year that a professional couple can expect to earn by pooling their incomes puts them financially well ahead of over 80 percent of American families. By assimilating women, what we have called the middle class became, in strictly economic terms, the upper middle class. □

Philip Kasinitz

A Private Times Square?

The rags of the squalid ballad singer fluttered in the rich light that showed the goldsmith's treasures, pale and pinched up faces hovered above the windows where was tempting food, hungry eyes wandered over the profusion guarded by one thin sheet of brittle glass—an iron wall to them; half naked and shivering figures stopped to gaze at Chinese shawls and golden stuffs of India.

Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

We live, my more literary minded friends tell me, in an age when irony is highly valued. So I suppose I should not be surprised that the continuing overbuilding of midtown Manhattan has taken a distinctly ironic twist. Still, there is something downright unsettling about the latest chapter in the ongoing assault on the theater district: the plan to