

CURRENT BOOKS

Where Feminism Went Wrong

FEMINISM WITHOUT ILLUSIONS: A Critique of Individualism. By Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. Univ. of N.C. 347 pp. \$24.95

But what do women want?" Sigmund Freud once exclaimed, thereby proving that even men of genius can ask the most foolish questions. For what women want is, after all, fairly simple. They want a fair deal, just as men do. The real problem lies in trying to establish exactly what constitutes a fair deal as far as women are concerned, and how on earth it is to be accomplished.

To the first generation of angry and committed feminists emerging after 1850, the answer seemed reasonably straightforward. Women would achieve liberation only after they acquired the right to vote and won equal access to higher education and to the professions. With the lifting of all artificial barriers to advancement, it was argued, women would blossom into freedom. Women would become like men. Not until the 1960s did this certainty begin seriously to crumble. By then, it was clear that admission to the franchise had led to no sizable female invasion of Congress and state legislatures, just as admission to the universities and the job market had failed to secure women a decent proportion of the top jobs or equal wages. Quite clearly, changing the rules of the game had not been enough. Ideas had to change as well. Consciousness had to be raised. And then there was the matter of sex.

With the '60s came a new feminist demand—for equal rights in bed, free access to sexual pleasure without having to pay the penalty of unwanted pregnancies. The 1970s gave American women what they wanted. Contraceptives became widely available to those who could afford and understand them, and the Supreme Court declared (in *Roe v. Wade*, 1973) a woman's decision to have an abortion to be a constitutionally protected right. Yet, as we

now know, this was not the coming of the feminist dawn but the beginning of a backlash. During the late 1970s and through the 1980s not only did conservative attacks on feminism as an ideology increase but feminists themselves proposed different agendas and quarreled among themselves. Meanwhile, among the uncommitted majority of women, the cause began to seem tedious, misdirected, and of dubious relevance. Hence the value of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's book, which, as well as exploring what has gone wrong, suggests a more realistic program for achieving equality between the sexes.

Some of the iconoclasm that Fox-Genovese, a professor of history and women's studies at Emory University, brings to her subject stems from her Marxist orientation: She is acutely sensitive to the importance of class as well as gender. Her previous book, the prize-winning *Within the Plantation Household* (1988), was a counterblast to more roseate notions of female solidarity, pointing out that the nicest, most intelligent white gentlewomen of the Old South reconciled themselves to keeping black women in slavery. Sisterhood, in other words, was simply not enough. When it suited their economic and social interests, white, upper-class women chose to see their world in white, upper-class terms, not in terms of a common female bond with those who served them. By the same token, Fox-Genovese is scornful of those contemporary feminists who fail to understand that many of their nostrums are likely to interest only the well-educated middle class. Agonizing over how to balance a high-fashion briefcase on one hip and a toddler on the other is not going to mean very much to the pregnant black teenager forced to drop out of school. Nor does the author have much time for high-powered feminist scholars who believe that language is power or that liberation can come through the deconstruction of

texts. What use can such stylized, academic game-playing be for the majority of women who lack the training or the desire to understand it?

But Fox-Genovese's critique of elitism is only part of a broader, more controversial argument. Feminism, she claims, has been too much influenced by the West's often unthinking cult of individualism. Women have justified their claims to equality by exclusive reference to the innate rights of the individual. They would have been on much firmer ground, she argues, had they legitimized what they were trying to do in terms of the larger community. Thus she suggests that women who support free access to abortion by invoking the individual's right to choose risk sounding egotistical to the point of inhumanity. A far more valid argument would bypass the question of rights and point out, practically, that most women having abortions are unmarried, very young, and very poor—in other words, those who are least able to bring up their children adequately. This argument switches the burden of the decision to society at large, which will have to determine in the future whether to make abortion available—to avoid the calamity of unwanted, poorly looked-after or impoverished children—or to disallow abortion but supply free day-care.

Similarly, on the issue of pornography, Fox-Genovese finds it hard to sympathize with the "tortured perspective" of such feminists as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, who condemn pornography as an invasion of their individual rights as women. Such shrill claims, she writes, "extend the concept of civil rights beyond all meaning." Pornography, which degrades men and children too, can plausibly be censored only on behalf of the community as a whole. Morality is a public matter, she argues, not just an exercise of

individual taste: "A society unwilling or unable to trust to its own instincts in laying down a standard of decency does not deserve to survive." We must, Fox-Genovese says, return to thinking in terms of the civil liberties of the group, as our medieval forbearers did, and not allow ourselves to be imprisoned by the assumption that the only freedom that matters is individualistic. Otherwise, she argues, we will be unable to justify policies such as affirmative action, which restricts the rights of individual white males so that representatives from all groups in a society will be able to gain some share in its largesse.

Here, then, is a provocative and



thoughtful work that should stimulate and enrage both opponents and supporters of feminism. No one can deny the importance of the central issue it addresses: namely, that being a housewife is unlikely ever again to be a sufficient career for the majority of women in the United States or anywhere else in the West. Divorce is now too common, and many households can get by only on two incomes. More than half of all American women with young children now work. The huge number of women in the workplace involves an unprecedented and irreversible shift in how our society organizes itself, one of the major changes in world history. Those in

search of an acute and unfanatical guide to its social and political implications will surely find it in this book. Yet to my mind, *Feminism without Illusions* lacks a crucial element that would enable it to become the kind of well-thumbed classic that, say, Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) or Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) have deservedly become. It is no less intelligent—far from it. But it lacks laughter and people and hard politics. It is too much of an abstract and immaculately annotated academic tract.

This failing reflects, in part, the very success of women's studies, which is no longer merely the preserve of brilliant and eccentric writers working on the margins of respectability. Women's studies has become respectability itself, entrenched in every American university, with its own faculty, its own learned journals (hundreds of them), and its own much-debated methodologies. The gain in scholarly rigor has been enormous. But what has been lost along the way is some of the anecdote, wit, and wickedness which made Greer or Gloria Steinem fun to read and accessible to all. Those worried by the declining support for feminism would do well to give some thought to the question of how its proponents can recover a popular voice. For as it is now, we have an astute women's studies specialist who understands the need to attack elitism but still feels obliged

to write in a manner which only the well-educated and the deeply serious are likely to find congenial.

Moreover, the same restraints that keep Fox-Genovese's analysis so detached and impersonal make her shrink from offering a political program. Yet the nature of her argument should have persuaded her to take the risk. Fox-Genovese protests against individualism in the name of "society," "the community," and the "collectivity," but nowhere does she spell out what she means by these abstract terms. The logical outcome of her reasoning, however, as she must surely recognize, is a re-assessment of the role of the state. For good historical reasons, Americans are far more suspicious of state intervention than are most Europeans. Yet the state is nothing more than a human contrivance. It can oppress and interfere, certainly, but it can also protect, enable, and create. Sooner or later Americans, and particularly women and others who feel disadvantaged in some way, are going to rediscover how to use the state to help themselves. As is always the case, the changing status and demands of women are symptoms, not causes, of much wider and still more unsettling transformations.

—Linda Colley, professor of history at Yale University, is the author of *Lewis Namier* (1989).

The Last Southerner

SIGNPOSTS IN A STRANGE LAND. By Walker Percy. Edited with an Introduction by Patrick Samway. Farrar, Straus. 428 pp. \$25

Born in 1916 into a distinguished family of the southern patriciate, Walker Percy had many advantages. Yet he had also known disorder, sorrow, and displacement even before he found himself in 1942 in an Adirondacks sanatorium, the victim of pulmonary tuberculosis contracted when he was a medical intern at Bellevue

Hospital. Some 13 years earlier, when Percy was 13, his father killed himself, and three years later his mother died in an automobile accident. These traumatic experiences were made somewhat bearable when a remarkable bachelor cousin whom they loved and revered as Uncle Will adopted Walker and his two brothers. Uncle Will was William Alexander Percy, the author of *Lanterns on the Levee*, decorated hero of the Great War, disciple of Marcus Aurelius, and gentleman-poet,