

COVER STORY

Feminism is a movement that has lost its way. Although it is energetically promoted by women's studies by the right, few people can articulate the ideology which has brought sexual freedom and economic ambiguity has failed to engage the majority of women and address the problems created by liberation individuality and a greater understanding of the modern woman's position in society.

Analysis

The Feminist Dilemma

Neomi Rao

I am a feminist.
But what does this mean?

As a movement, feminism has failed to provide women with a coherent system of beliefs. What real ideas lie behind the political activism and guerrilla tactics? Schisms within the movement rarely come from self-critical examination, rather differences manifest themselves only in response to specific events. The conflict in the recent campus date rape poster incident should have raised provocative feminist issues. Instead, the debate centered around legal questions of guilt and character analysis. The question of whether the poster was justified became the major focus.

The debate failed to produce any real discourse. Those truly dissatisfied with the system and its inability to cope with women's problems supported the poster, but usually only by half-heartedly withholding condemnation. Opponents to the poster often reduced their arguments to defending the character of the accused. A short period of muddled letter writing ensued until the issue gradually died. The implications and consequences for feminism were left undiscussed.

There have been few successful attempts to intellectually clarify the aims of feminism. This lack of definition will eventually dilute the impact of the feminist movement. Feminist discourse lacks definition. No one can agree about what it means to be a feminist, even though dangerous and misleading popular conceptions exist. An overwhelming majority of women have a great deal of difficulty identifying themselves with feminism, even though most of them would agree with a movement for greater social and political equality. Women as individuals desire the possibility for self-realization, and yet the failure of feminism means that women are unsure about how to assert themselves.

DIFFERENCES

Everyone would agree that women differ from men biologically, however, bitter argument arises over the social ramifications of these differences. The traditional view of women as caring and nurturing has been denied by some feminists and embraced by others. Exalting the emotional, some feminists believe that the world must begin to value nurturing as a social virtue. This transition to a culture which embodies more "feminine" values will help women gain a more equal position in society. In efforts to legitimize traditionally feminine characteristics, these "nurture" feminists advocate such policies as equal pay for predominantly female fields such as teaching and nursing. They strive to change what is commonly viewed as a "man's world" into the prototype for what may be a woman's world.

The other side of the argument refuses to attach specific emotions to the sexes. Only the individual can be aggressive or passive, rational or emotional, and these characteristics exist beyond the feminine or masculine. While the first feminist group values emotions and differences, these feminists focus on reason and equality. This rationalist view essentially accepts the world in its current form and attempts to realistically assess the traits needed to succeed within it. Reason may triumph, but this capacity can be developed in women as well as in men.

This view stems from a reluctance to use group labels as a basis for classifying individuals, and thus denying them certain positions and privileges in society. The nurture feminists seem to be living within their own utopia if they

believe that nurturing elements may one day remake the world. They have fallen into the familiar trap of marginalized groups in modern America. Instead of influencing change through gradual adaptation and assimilation, feminists have tried to create their own subculture. Although women are clearly not a minority, the more radical feminist groups certainly are, and always have been.

This creation of many accepted subcultures perpetuates our ever-increasing relativism. Gradually what is accepted as American culture is becoming fragmented and lacks cohesion. The most effective change can only occur from within the social and political system. The competing solutions offered by the nurture and rational feminist camps often conflict. While the nurture feminists try to create a world less hostile to women, the rational feminists strive to cope with the existing reality.



DATE RAPE

Date rape exemplifies the attempts of the nurture feminists to develop an artificial, alternative world in which women are free from sexual danger and "no always means no". The battle against date rape is a reaction to the problems of a society without traditional protections for women. Changing the behavior of men, rather than educating women is the focus of such movements. The

language of "date rape" is something constructed by white middle class academic feminists in prestigious northeastern universities, who fail to consider the extensive sexual ambiguity involved with relationships. The "date rape" culture has almost no influence in poorer minority communities or in other equally advanced countries in Europe.

The recent adaptation and propagation of such language attempts to bring the dangers women face into popular consciousness. It is true that without traditional social protection, most women are vulnerable and defenseless. Such sexual danger has existed throughout time. Protection from the horrors of date rape do not come from posters and scary statistics. Rather, women must be thoroughly educated about the consequences of their sexuality in order to prevent such problems.

In the not so distant past women attended single-sex colleges, or at the very least lived in an all women's dorm, in which they were locked away at night, making it difficult to partake in sexual mischief. The excitement and thrill of sexual relations was merely having them by sneaking out of windows.

Today, women are free to enter into almost any sort of sexual situation. They have the right to drink, go to fraternity parties and date whomever they choose. All rights, however, come with certain responsibilities. Women must come to terms with the powers of their sexuality. Feminists have struggled to dismantle the traditional structures which seemed to restrict women, but in the process they have unleashed other forces. The same rules and practices which proscribed an ostensibly subordinate position for women in society also provided greater protection from horrors such as rape.

Just as women want to control their education and then choose their career, similarly, they must learn to understand and accept responsibility for their sexuality. The terminology of "date rape" removes the burden of sexual ambiguity from the woman's shoulders. The controversy has been painted in terms of "yes" and "no", reducing sex to something merely consensual. In interactions between men and women, non-verbal communication plays an undeniable role. Despite sexual liberation, a strong social stigma continues to be attached to promiscuous women. In addition casual sex for women often leads to regret and a profound loss of self-esteem. This in turn can force women to run from their choices and actions.

Although I am certainly not arguing that date rape victims ask for it, when playing the modern dating game women have to understand and accept the consequences of their sexuality. Some feminists chant that women should be free to wear short skirts or bright lipstick, but true sexual signals lie beyond these blatant signs. Misunderstandings occur from subtle glances, ambiguous words. Sexuality has a power largely misunderstood in modern interaction. Or worse, perhaps it is understood all too well and merely ignored. Sexuality's feigned subtlety allows us to discount its power.

Camille Paglia's view on date rape has often been criticized for its insensitivity because she seems to "blame the victim". Paglia, however, accurately describes the dangerous feminist idealism which teaches women that they are equal. Women believe falsely that they should be able to go anywhere with anyone. "Their view of sex is naive and

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prudish" says Paglia of the academic feminists. This naiveté misleads women by helping them ignore and look beyond the powerful effects of their sexuality.

There is a modern tendency to look towards the future, because in the past women were oppressed and restricted. Yet this view ignores the intense and powerful role women have exerted throughout history. Paglia says of the discarded history and myths that they "show us the turbulence, the mysteries, and passions of sex. . . . Feminism, coveting social power, is blind to woman's cosmic sexual power."

In their attempts to create equality, women raised in this new mindset have not been properly educated in their own sexuality, and thus lack awareness about sexual ambiguity and danger. While prepared to enter a theoretical world of sensitive men and equal opportunity, women often have little understanding of the real world and the relations which they will encounter within it.

THE TRADITIONALIST CRITIQUE

The traditionalist critique of feminism has lacked efficacy primarily for two reasons. First, the feminist movement as popularly understood has failed to develop a coherent definition and agenda in the minds of women and men, and therefore remains very difficult to attack. Secondly, the traditionalists have largely misunderstood the problem, since they choose to argue from antiquated dichotomies and which fail to account for present reality.

The traditionalist critique of feminism attacks its crass aspirations for power and focus on materialism. Respect and power often accompany wealth in our society, and therefore with modern innovations women have chosen to leave the home in order to partake more fully of the world. Testing boundaries for actualization, and not accumulation of power per se, have been the goal of more moderate feminists. Our society often confounds power and wealth with happiness or self-realization. So while the quest for wealth may be criticized, this focus can be linked to a larger and more profound cultural crisis beyond the feminist movement. Any critique of feminism will be a critique of modern America - its preoccupation with materialism and lack of spirituality.

The traditionalist critique also primarily attacks the outer manifestations of feminism, rather than the movement itself. This occurs partially because feminism as an ideology is often difficult to discern.

Leon Krass writes in *Commentary* magazine, "Young women, humorless and grim, with jaws clenched and shoulders padded, cut an angry path across the would-be field of dreams, supported in their demands for empowerment by those oh so-sensitive males." Yes, there are certainly angry, crass and power-hungry elements in feminism, but these characteristics are not unique to feminism. Chest-beating, man-hating lesbians do not a woman's movement make.

The death of romance is the traditionalist critique which deserves the most attention. The loss of many beautiful social graces and practices has hurt and deprived both sexes. Ironically, in many ways the dismantling of genteel relations has proven more tragic for women than for

men. Liberation has been a double-edged sword. In exchange for access into the working world and sexual freedom, women have lost much of the previous caring and affection of men.

Men have always wanted commitment-free relationships, and now they can have them easily and usually without deceit. This leaves most women lonely and with a hollow security at best. Enduring satisfaction cannot come from casual sex which is devoid of love and emotion and consumed by lust. As Paglia astutely observes of her sixties generation, "We sought total sexual freedom and equality. But as time passed, we woke up to cold reality. The old double standard

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protected women. When anything goes, it's women who lose."

Women usually want, in addition to other things, a gentleman. This has nothing to do with opening doors and being ridiculously respectful. It does have something to do with acting like a lady. Women cannot expect to play with the boys without some cuts and bruises.

The traditionalist critics fail in many of the same ways that the nurture feminists do. Both try to create an utopian ideal and the unrealistic expectations in both systems mean that neither can offer a comprehensive solution to women. The traditional restriction of women to the home denies them their right to choose, their right to the American dream which they have as individuals. Feminists can certainly decide to stay home and raise children, however, this decision must be made from a choice between actual alternatives. Women awakened to their possibilities are unlikely to return to a state of complete dependence on men, but in their independence they have to understand that they are now playing by new rules.

FEMALE MISOGYNY

Women often serve as their own worst critics. Dissatisfied with their body images, we see the continual rise of eating disorders in which women starve themselves to some internalized view of perfection. Is this tyranny perpetuated by society? Women themselves buy the highly successful glossy magazines, and support the lucrative fashion industry. Society is not marketing to a void - obviously many women continue to accept the "beauty myth".

Perhaps the preoccupation with appearance does divert a woman's energies from other more fruitful pursuits, but feminists should try to understand why women continue to follow and perpetuate ostensibly damaging industries. Is there something empowering in objectification? Feminists can point fingers at the evil patriarchy, society and the media. None of these chimeras, however, can succeed without the

compliance of women. I refuse to believe that men can completely manipulate and control women. If the feminist message corresponds with a woman's reality she will change her thinking, and perhaps stop buying *Cosmopolitan*.

To blame society and male cultural dominance for everything is to deny and discount the powers which women can exert over men. What do women really want? If men have told them before and forced them into the household, then in today's world women are being equally prodded by the feminist agenda into accepting a system of belief and action.

POLITICS AND FEMINISM

There exists a tacit assumption that feminism must bind itself to leftist movements and serve the whole gamut of liberal causes. This thinking leads women's centers across the country to espouse platforms for racial unity, Democratic presidents and pro-choice legislation. Feminism does not inherently embody these ideals - although in practice "women of color for reproductive rights" seems a perfectly natural formulation. For many feminists the strange leap from women's issues to a heightened

sensitivity for minorities is natural and necessary. This sort of group thinking usually allows for recognition of the legitimacy of other groups and sympathy for their causes.

Understandably most feminist thinking will be opposed to the traditionalist elements of the right which focus on the family, and usually advocates women staying at home and raising children to the exclusion of other pursuits. But denial of these ideals should not necessarily push feminists toward the left. Empowerment comes primarily from being able to accept responsibility and define oneself as an individual.

The more rationalistic feminists should, at least in theory, align themselves with libertarianism, a political movement associated with the right in modern understanding. These feminists focus on the definition of an individual beyond masculine and feminine. This accords well with libertarian egoism, in which people come into being on their own terms without society's assistance.

A truly effective women's movement, if one should ever exist, cannot thrive on purely leftist ideas. The preference for leftism found among feminists reveals the strength of the nurturing faction—the advocates of the feminization of society. This shallow brand of feminism cannot serve the needs of a modern women's movement.

Emotional nurturing should not become the focus of a woman's self-definition, but it should not be coldly dismissed as ridiculous either. Women can accept certain emotional characteristics without attaching degrading feminine labels to them. This is the first step in articulating a more comprehensive world-view beyond the masculine/feminine, liberal/conservative dichotomies.

Women should be able to realize themselves as human beings without identifying themselves as a marginalized group. True liberation cannot come from coddling and support sessions. The real world will simply not wait for women to come out of therapy.

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