

1990

Book Review: The Grounding of Modern Feminism. by Nancy F. Cott.

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Recommended Citation

O'Neill, William L., "Book Review: The Grounding of Modern Feminism. by Nancy F. Cott." (1990). *Constitutional Commentary*. 1131.

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to the *Journal Officiel*, the French version of our *Congressional Record*, or to systematic surveys of the contemporary press, including feminist publications. In addition, the author has an irritating habit of inserting quotations into the text without attributing authorship or date; only the endnotes reveal that she often cites individuals at second or even third-hand. Material from interviews is never cited as such.

Women's Rights in France is nevertheless a very useful book for anyone interested in how another major Western country has addressed and attempted to resolve gender issues in public policy. Readers interested in learning more about the topic of women's rights in France during this period can consult the extensively annotated bibliography, *Femmes: Recent Writings on French Women* compiled by Margaret Collins Weitz.⁸ This work, not listed in Stetson's bibliography, contains sections on all the topics examined there, plus many additional references in French. Those desiring further information in English about recent French feminist theoretical writing should consult two new studies, with accompanying anthologies containing translations of key texts, edited by Toril Moi and Claire Duchén.⁹

THE GROUNDING OF MODERN FEMINISM. By Nancy F. Cott.¹ New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press. 1987. Pp. xiii, 372. \$29.95.

*William L. O'Neill*²

Professor Nancy Cott's history covers the years from 1910 to 1930, when the women's rights movement fought to win the vote and, having done so, quickly fell apart. Professor Cott is especially interested in a particular viewpoint, known as feminism, that achieved coherence around 1910. Historians have often applied the term to all efforts aimed at benefitting women from Mary Wollstonecraft's day to the present. As Cott points out, however, women did not begin calling themselves feminists until about the second decade of this century. "Feminists" sought to distinguish

8. M.C. WEITZ, *FEMMES: RECENT WRITINGS ON FRENCH WOMEN*.

9. TORIL MOI, *SEXUAL/TEXTUAL POLITICS* (1985); *FRENCH FEMINIST THOUGHT: A READER* (Toril Moi ed. 1987); C. DUCHEN, *FEMINISM IN FRANCE: FROM MAY '68 TO MITTERRAND* (1986); *FRENCH CONNECTIONS: VOICES FROM THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN FRANCE* (Claire Duchén ed. and transl. 1987).

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themselves equally from suffragists and the "woman movement," as it was called. Suffragists restricted themselves to campaigning for the vote, which from a feminist standpoint was too limited. The woman movement was much broader, but also much too vague. For the sake of uniting women with radically dissimilar aims and values, it emphasized what they could all agree on, a lowest common denominator that to feminists meant sacrificing substance for the appearance of solidarity.

Rather than pretending that women were alike, feminists wanted to celebrate their differences. As against the women's movement's glorification of service, feminists wanted to make women's rights their central theme. And, as part of a diversified "women's" movement, they meant to promote a social revolution that would include, Cott says, "freedom for all forms of women's active expression, elimination of all structural and psychological handicaps to women's economic independence, an end to the double standard of sexual morality, release from constraining sexual stereotypes, and opportunity to shine in every civic and professional capacity." This is, of course, what feminists still want, and one might ask why it is that a goal established eighty years ago has yet to be achieved. That is not, however, the question Cott has undertaken to answer. Her aim is to analyze in detail the fate of the women's rights movement.

By 1925 the movement had divided into three parts. The largest consisted of social feminists, women who, though they wanted equal rights, gave a higher priority to social reforms, especially those pertaining to mothers, children, and working women—for instance, the kind of maximum hour law that the Supreme Court upheld in *Muller v. Oregon*. The twenties was a hard decade for social feminists. It opened with a red scare, during which super-patriotic women (many of them formerly anti-suffragists) attacked the loyalty of female reformers and social feminist organizations, including even such innocuous bodies as the Girls' Friendly Society and the American Home Economics Association. Although the red scare passed, so did progressivism. During the twenties Americans were in a conservative mood and turned their backs on reform.

To make things worse there were deep disagreements among women over a range of issues including pacifism, prohibition, and equal rights. Much of the acrimony was caused by the second branch of the women's movement, the aggressive National Woman's Party led by Alice Paul. The NWP had played a key role in the suffrage fight, and thereafter was the only women's organization to give equality its highest priority. In 1921 it began pushing for an

Equal Rights Amendment which many feared would invalidate legislation that protected working women. Since most employed women were not unionized, social feminists regarded these laws as absolutely crucial. In their view the NWP was putting an abstract ideal ahead of the urgent needs of working women and their children. To the NWP, however, protective laws were discriminatory. By preventing women from working nights and overtime they reserved many of the best jobs for men, who were not similarly limited. It was no accident, militants pointed out, that trade union leaders favored protective laws only for women workers. The feud between social feminists and the NWP raged for years, alienating many women and resolving nothing.

The most interesting and useful parts of Cott's book deal with the original feminists of 1910. For everyone in the movement, but especially for them, the post-suffrage era was confusing. The beauty of equal suffrage as an issue had been that once it came to be seen as a constitutional right, people could support it without having to face the underlying gender questions. By 1912 it was established, as Cott puts it, "that insofar as women were like men they deserved the same rights, and insofar as they differed, women ought to represent themselves." There were to be no such easy formulas after the vote was won.

It is unclear how many women during the 1910s were feminists in Cott's sense. The ones she discusses were a group of younger professional women who lived in New York and belonged to a club called Heterodoxy. Socialists, for the most part, they supported all advanced causes and artists—from birth control to Isadore Duncan. Many published memoirs; in addition, historians and biographers have found them irresistible so we know a great deal about this group of women. What we don't know is how representative they were. Figures like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the IWW's "Rebel Girl," and Crystal Eastman (lawyer, anti-war activist, an editor of the revolutionary *Liberator*), were hardly typical women—though possibly role models. The Progressive Era, with its numerous radical parties and flourishing suffrage movement, was perfect for feminists, unlike the 1920s when they, and professional women as a whole, found themselves out of step with their time.

Politics was a case in point. Suffragists had demanded the vote not just for its own sake but to help women and promote reforms. The catch was that Democrats and Republicans only wanted women workers who were loyal, and party loyalty required that they give up all thoughts of pursuing a separate agenda for women. No wonder female activists quickly became disillusioned. Carrie Chap-

man Catt, who had led NAWSA to victory, recognized this almost immediately. "Suffrage women last autumn numerously confessed that they found real politics "pale and insipid" when it came time to use their first vote. It seemed sordid and commonplace to be striving merely to elect men They felt a vacancy where for years there had been purpose consecrated to an immortal principle."³ To this dilemma there was no solution. Partisan politics would never fill the void created by the nineteenth amendment.

In their work professional women suffered from similar contradictions. They were the cream of the women's movement, evidence that women could function on the same high level as men. In the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries women comprised a growing share of many professions. The pioneers' expectation was that as they became more numerous it would be easier for younger women to follow in their footsteps. They were wrong. Even before 1920 in some instances, and by 1930 in most, women's share of the professions was diminishing. There were often specific reasons for this. Women physicians owed their rapid growth to the existence of female medical schools and hospitals. These declined once formerly male institutions became coeducational, yet the newly integrated schools and hospitals had few openings for women medical students and even fewer internships. During the 1930s some 250 female medical graduates competed annually for 185 internships, while for the five thousand male graduates there were six thousand openings. To compound the irony, medical schools often cited the shortage of internships for women as justifying limits on their admission.

Professional women in the 1920s were nearly always marginal and poorly paid, and the Great Depression pushed women further down the occupational ladder, even in their traditional semi-professions like teaching and nursing. At the end of the thirties fifteen percent of librarians were males compared to nine percent ten years earlier. Male social workers increased from one fifth to one third of the total.

Women employed various strategies to combat the double standard, which held that any mistake by a woman demonstrated the incompetence of her sex, while any achievement was an exception proving the rule. Spinsterhood was not so much strategic as a prerequisite for women professionals, only twenty-five percent of whom were married in 1930. Over-qualifying for the job was a choice made by many. Women scientists were far more likely than men to earn a doctorate: seventy-two percent of women in 1921 compared to fifty-eight percent of men, eighty-three percent of wo-

3. Quoted in W. O'NEILL, *FEMINISM IN AMERICA: A HISTORY* 266 (1989).

men in 1938 compared to seventy percent of men. Even so, women academicians were neither paid nor promoted equally with men of comparable attainments. Discrimination against women in professional associations led them to form their own societies, the existence of which underlined their marginality. Of course women were also still being discriminated against by business, trade unions, and government, but the professions were most hypocritical, because only they, as Cott says, claimed "to judge practitioners on individual merit as persons (not as men or women) in the dispassionate search for truth and usefulness."

Cott is good at identifying contradictions and ironies. She observes that feminists wanted equality with men but also recognition of what made women different. They promoted gender consciousness while hoping at the same time to abolish gender roles. Feminism was subverted by its own rhetoric of freedom and choice, which was taken up by advertisers and used to promote traditional domestic values. And it was disowned by the emancipated young women of the jazz age who, taking equality for granted, refused to identify with the cause of women's rights. Sisterhood having disappeared, feminists gave up on collective action, Cott maintains, asking instead for equal opportunity and individual advancement.

Cott is hard-pressed to convey the meaning of all this. In her final paragraph she makes three points. Having neglected them for many chapters, she returns to the feminists of 1910, whose unfulfilled agenda, she concludes, "made a subsequent mass women's movement necessary as much as it made it possible." This is certainly true, if also self-evident. Her second point, a running theme, is that the great success of feminism had been to replace the nineteenth century view of "woman" as an undifferentiated mass with the modern emphasis upon women's diversity.

She concludes:

When feminism sprang vocally to life in the 1960s and 1970s, it took new plural forms: women's rights, women's liberation, the women's movement. The women's liberation movement invoked a new ruling fiction of what women shared, a positive concept that women constituted a "sex-class." The new analysis of sexual politics ended disregard of sex. It was steeped in analogues and models of social group oppression. It required a challenge to sexual hierarchy in private as well as public roles and perception of the interrelation between the two. The path that spokeswomen of the 1960s took to arrive at such findings, over which masses of women also thronged, depended on the predisposing ground of that time just as the mass movement of the 1910s depended on its time and place. Feminism takes part in and comprises part of the general cultural order while it has its own tradition and logic. More than half a century after *feminism* came into American language, women reclaimed it, as a term of unity, to transcend the divisions between women's liberation and women's rights. The story of feminism in the late twentieth century continues, as not only women but also feminisms grow toward the plural.

Even to one who has read her book several times, Cott's analysis is sometimes baffling, Cott being most muddled when she needs to be most precise. Never much of a stylist, she compounds her difficulties by mentioning recent events without having prepared the reader in any way for what she seems to regard as truisms. But does everyone agree that feminism unites women's liberation and women's rights, and do we all know what the differences are? For that matter, does the women's liberation movement still exist? And what does it mean to say that feminisms are growing toward the plural?

When an accomplished scholar, whose footnotes demonstrate wide reading and research, and who has many fresh things to say about familiar subjects, writes as badly as this, one looks for the reason. My impression is that Cott was never able to determine the purpose of her study. She disagrees with other historians, including me, on many points, often convincingly. What she has been unable to do is to pull together her own material in such a way as to offer an alternative reading. Cott does not attempt to disguise the failure by cobbling together some rickety thesis after the fact, as often happens. Hers is an honest book, but even so the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

The Grounding of Modern Feminism is still worth reading. Cott's research is superb, and, unlike many who have written on these subjects, her book is not didactic, quarrelsome, or ideological. Further, she has a gift for finding new ways of looking at well known problems. Next time I hope that she will add a fully developed thesis.

GENDER SANITY: THE CASE AGAINST FEMINISM.
Edited by Nicholas Davidson.¹ Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America. 1989. Pp. 260. \$19.95.

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Gender Sanity is an argument against radical feminism, a belief system which says that all men exploit women; that the scientific method is an instrument of subordination; that the beliefs and ideas of Western civilization are oppressive to women; that women are not just equal to but exactly the same as or better than men; that

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