

The Noble Lie and the Women's Movement: Equality Will Be A Long Time Coming

by Dr. Susan Leeson

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What follows is not a joyful message for those who wait eagerly for the dawn of the Age of Equality and expect its momentary arrival. That women have been regarded for a long time as second-class citizens, if not second-rate human beings, goes without saying. The definition of woman's role in society occurred centuries ago, in pre-industrial, pre-technological times when a division of labor based on physical strength was a necessary condition of survival. Man's strength was superior; woman's inferior. What is remarkable is not the explanation of how sexual roles originated, but that role definitions based on physical strength have survived so persistently long after ancient conditions which made them useful no longer exist. That they have persisted suggests that the reasons *why* women are regarded as second-rate human beings is much deeper than we usually care to look. Although physically weaker than men by nature, women have been burdened with a stereotype which regards them also as inferior intellectually and emotionally to men by nature, properly relegated to the affairs of the home and child-rearing. Women who challenge the stereotype and seek liberation are interesting, in many people's opinion, not because they demonstrate the fallacy

of the myth of male superiority, but because they are exceptions to the rule—"freaks of nature."

The long existing relegation of women to second-class citizenship will not be challenged easily, despite the contemporary agitation and governmentally instituted Affirmative Action programs. It will not be changed as long as the stereotyped role of women remains an integral part of the myth structures which have regarded women's inferior status as crucial to the maintenance of social order and stability. In short, before the equality of women with men can be realized, new beliefs about the roles of men and women, the organization of the family, and the functioning of civil society must be developed and legitimized.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a context for understanding why the issue of sexual equality will be so difficult to resolve. Three main arguments follow. The first is that the second-rate status of women finds its rationalization in political necessity rather than in biological cause. The second is that an understanding of true human equality requires a philosophic insight into human

nature that goes beyond convention and tradition, and failing that, the truth about equality must be distorted into myths acceptable to the average non-philosophic person. The third is that Affirmative Action, the official response of the American political system to women's claims of equality, is neither adequate nor workable as a mechanism for helping to achieve equality or altering people's beliefs about sexual equality.

"A Woman's Place is in the Home:" A Different View of Why

The ancient authorities, creators and perpetuators of belief systems are virtually unanimous in their view of the status of women. Genesis, setting the basis for the Judeo-Christian tradition, establishes woman as springing from man, and as the instigator of the original sin from which the faithful have sought to escape ever since. Women are told, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth. In pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."¹ The Koran has a similar teaching: "Men shall have the pre-eminence above women, because of those advantages wherein God hath caused the one of them to excel the other."²

From ancient Greek historians to American revolutionaries, this view has been ingrained. Xenophon: "War, politics and public speaking are the sphere of man; that of a woman is to keep house, to stay at home, and to receive and attend her husband."³ John Adams: ". . . their delicacy renders them unfit for practice and experience in the great businesses of life, and the hardy enterprises of war, as well as the arduous cares of state. Besides, their attention is so much engaged with the necessary nurture of their children, that nature has made them fittest for domestic cares."⁴ Underlying the tradition that a woman's authenticity is domesticity, and that she should be ruled by her husband, is the assumption that a woman's body, notably her capacity to bear children, makes her role as homemaker "natural." However, the relationship between body and social role is not quite so direct. As Clare Booth Luce notes, "Nature assigns no 'roles' to her creatures. She endows them with instincts and functions which are not reassignable. And she lets her role-playing children take it from there."⁵ The role assignment of "woman-as-wife-and-mother" must find its explanation not in physical nature, but elsewhere, even though its legitimacy has been attested to by religious beliefs and prominent historians.

The reasons women have been regarded as second-rate human beings may relate more to

political necessity than to physiological cause: the necessity of the family as a condition of stable political society. The importance of the family was emphasized by Aristotle in his treatise on *Politics*. In order to understand the political association (polis), Aristotle argued, it is necessary to understand the elements which comprise it. The most fundamental element is the family, which comes about primarily because of the pairing of male and female for purposes of



reproduction. The family does not exist solely for the purpose of reproduction, however. The function of the family in a stable society is to provide an incentive for men to work and remain productive—thus helping to make them good citizens—and to promote moral development in children. It is through the family, Aristotle argued, that children receive their fundamental education regarding religion, personal discipline and political values.⁶ Over 2000 years later, this view prevails. Edward Banfield, for example, contends in *The Unheavenly City, Revisited*, that basic values and attitudes towards learning are established in the home at such a young age that children from "culturally deprived" homes are at a considerable, if not permanent, disadvantage when they reach school age. Banfield comes to pessimistic conclusions regarding the possibility of social reforms, given

the substantial number of "culturally deprived" individuals in the United States.⁷ Obviously, the importance of the family has not diminished since ancient times. It is still regarded as the fundamental socializing agency—the *sine qua non* of a stable and healthy political culture.⁸

Since the family is such an important element of political culture, it has been necessary to establish and maintain stable roles to make the functioning of the family possible. Many of the tasks required to maintain the necessary conditions of the family—washing clothes, cleaning, changing diapers for infants, mending, cooking—are tedious and repetitive. But they are tasks which must be done. In order to justify the assignment of such tasks to women, it has been necessary to develop and sustain the myth that women are inferior intellectually and emotionally to men, thus suited for the routine tasks of household management. The role "woman-as-wife-and-mother" can be rationalized only on the assumption that women are incapable of doing anything else *well*. While the myth of female inferiority has been useful in establishing and maintaining the stable roles needed to make the functioning of the family possible, it has had the additional consequence of excluding women from broader patterns of social and political participation. The pervasiveness of the myth of women's inferiority is illustrated by the fact that even when women are released from menial household tasks by hired help, the stigma of intellectual, social and political inferiority still persists.

It appears, in sum, that the explanation for the social role assigned to women is more complex than it seems on the surface. If the relegation of women to the home and child rearing was required only by pre-technological society, then the "liberation" of women should have been another benefit of our mass-production mass-consumption society. But the social-political importance of the family was not altered by these advances, and neither was the role of women. This being the case, the women's movement constitutes a fundamental challenge to the traditional structure of the family.

Human Equality: A Basis in Nature

Plato's *Republic* is one of the few treatises which seriously and systematically examines the essential nature of the similarities and differences of men and women. The *Republic* is a lengthy dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors about human nature and politics. Serious participation in the dialogue forces the interlocutors to question everything they have been taught to believe, and to examine the assumptions underlying even their dearest opinions. One of the main

themes of the *Republic* is that there is a difference between nature (what is ultimately true) and convention (what people generally accept to be the case). In the *Republic* Socrates constructs "in speech" a political society based on nature which would remedy the defects of actual political societies.

Only after lengthy preparation does Socrates begin to explore with Glaucon the conditions necessary for actualization of the City in Speech. The conditions are the equality of women, the community of women and children for guardians, and rule by a philosopher-king. Clearly, all three challenge the basic beliefs which have guided, and continue to guide, actual civil societies.

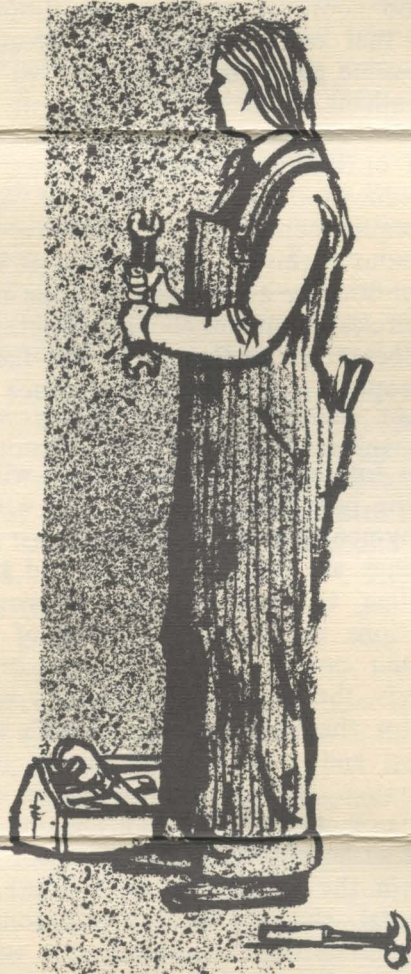
That men and women differ by nature was a belief held even during Socrates' times. Thus Glaucon's immediate response, "But of course she differs," when asked by Socrates if it is conceivable that woman's nature is very similar to man's.⁹ What Socrates proceeds to argue with his young interlocutor is that a consideration of human nature requires first that one look at human capacities with respect to functions to be performed. If differences between men and women are based only on the grounds that ". . . the female bears and the male mounts, we'll assert that it has not thereby yet been proved that a woman differs from a man. . . ." with respect to differences among human beings regarding their capacity to excel in various arts and other practices.¹⁰ Socrates contends that the practices of governing the city should not fall necessarily to males or females due to sex, but that natural aptitudes are distributed in both. He establishes equality of human beings not in terms of causes which can be attributed to the body, but rather in terms of participation in human activities in which ability is attributable to human nature that is beyond sexual differentiation.

Construction of the City in Speech requires not only transcendence of the body, but transcendence of two important conventions. The first is the private family. The best political regime would benefit from the community of women and children for those exercising political power, because it would assure their dedication to the good of the community as a whole rather than to the good of their own private family.

The second convention which must be transcended for the City in Speech is the belief that justice is a product of political agreement. In asserting the need for a philosopher-king, Socrates contends that governing is an art which requires

wisdom, and hence philosophy. Only the coincidence of wisdom and consent—that is, consent by the unwise to the rule of wisdom—will allow a final resolution of the problems of politics and the triumph of justice. The rule of wisdom knows no distinction in human capability based on sex, nor does it permit identification with anything less than the whole.

It is doubtful if Socrates believed these solutions would be made the basis of political practice. He carefully deconstructs the City in Speech after its creation, letting it survive only as an idea and providing a standard for evaluating political actuality. But its construction, even in speech, provides



powerful insights into the nature of politics and the human situation. The crucial insight for our argument is that the unwise will never consent to pure wisdom. Hence wisdom must be diluted to make social cohesion possible. For the sake of social cohesion it may even be more important that human beings share basic beliefs than that those beliefs are true. The myths, or beliefs, which pervade a civilization concerning the status of individuals, the purpose of politics, and the obligations of citizens, are critical to the maintenance of community. Even the City of Speech required myths since not all members of Socrates'

community participated in wisdom. In the Socratic city the myths were "noble" because they were fashioned through wisdom and designed to facilitate a community which would exist in accordance with truth insofar as that is possible. In actual political communities, myths are not grounded in philosophic wisdom. While necessary to the maintenance of each community, they rest on foundations which are often arbitrary and would not stand the test of philosophic scrutiny. Most are so deeply buried in tradition that they have come to be accepted as unquestioned "truths" by those who have learned them.

As noted earlier, the importance of the family and the role of women in nurturing and preserving the family is deeply ingrained in our political heritage. Seen in the light of the *Republic*, it appears that women have suffered the stigma of one of the most pervasive myths of our civilization. Their status *as a class* has been defined in conventional mythology as intellectually and emotionally inferior to men *as a class*, thus suiting them for concerns of the home and the rearing of the young. The family, in turn, has been one of the most revered institutions in history. It is understandable that a great many women, to say nothing of a great many men, find contemporary challenges to the traditional views of women difficult to comprehend, if not totally contrary to what they have been indoctrinated to believe is the nature of women. Unless new sets of myths more in accord with wisdom are developed for the governing of modern civil society—to say nothing of the structure of the modern family—the "liberation" of women will be impossible.

Affirmative Action: The Conventional Response to a Problem of Nature

Unfortunately, it has proven difficult to develop a rational intellectual or political atmosphere to deal with claims of women's equality. In recent years several women's groups have developed, some devoted to the effort of trying to prove that the female organism is superior to the male. Attempting to establish equality on the basis of the organism is just as shallow as the theory to which many men subscribe which holds that women's thoughts and actions can be explained simply by reference to "raging hormones." The issue of human equality is so shadowed by prejudice regarding traditional roles of men and women that reasonable dialogue will continue to be difficult to achieve.

The issue of sexual equality has proven to be a thorny political problem as well. As with other attempts for major social change, it is significant that the impetus has not come from the United States Congress. It took an executive order to

free the slaves. It took Supreme Court orders to desegregate schools and to nullify blatantly malapportioned legislative districts. Now it has taken an executive order to start the federal bureaucracy down the road to establishing rules to facilitate the movement of women into the labor market and higher education. If Congress is any measure of attitudes in the country at large, it is easy to understand why each of the above orders has been controversial and not totally successful.

Executive Order 11,246, as amended and subsequently revised by the Department of Labor and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, requires affected institutions to "take Affirmative Action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, color, religion, sex or national origin."¹¹ Affirmative Action guidelines are being interpreted by many institutions as meaning that they must develop quota systems for the employment of women and minorities as the only way of demonstrating compliance. Unless new federal guidelines are developed, it appears that the "numbers game" is going to be the official response to the problem of sexual discrimination, at least in the immediate future.

Affirmative Action guidelines suggest that we have not learned much from previous experiments with "equal numbers." In the areas of civil rights and reapportionment it has become clear that complex questions of equality are not solved through the simple application of mathematical formulas. Twenty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and twelve years after *Baker v. Carr*, we are forced to admit that we have made but slow progress towards racial equality and still have little insight into the requirements for effective political representation. But rather than learning from those experiences, the same technique—equal numbers—is being employed to attempt to achieve sexual equality in education and employment.

Even though the full thrust of Affirmative Action programs has yet to be felt in employment and education, the idea is being attacked from all sides. Administrators claim that the paperwork, documentation and justification which must be produced for the multiple federal agencies is burdensome, if not downright "harrassing."¹² As states and localities develop Affirmative Action programs, the administrative situation will become even worse. Personnel officers argue that Affirmative Action requirements make recruitment difficult and will force them to hire less than fully qualified candidates in order to meet their "quotas." White males, competing with women and minorities in an increasingly tight job market, claim that Affirmative Action constitutes "reverse discrimination."¹³

State and local governments will find it increasingly difficult to let contracts to the lowest bidders due to Affirmative Action strings attached to revenue sharing monies.¹⁴ These are some of the "public" reactions to Affirmative Action. Many of the concerns are justified and suggest that for practical reasons alone Affirmative Action will prove unworkable.

What may be more important, given the context of the previous arguments of this paper, are the not-so-public reactions. If it is true that the women's movement constitutes a fundamental challenge to some of our long established beliefs, the very idea of Affirmative Action may be too much too soon. It is vulnerable simply on the grounds that equal numbers has already proven an impossible game to play in the civil rights and apportionment areas. For the present, however, women who are hired in fields traditionally closed to them or who are admitted to institutions of higher education solely because of Affirmative Action requirements will find themselves victimized by invidious forms of discrimination. While it is no longer socially acceptable to make racial slurs in most circles, comments about "castrating broads" and "libbers" are testimony to the fact that in many people's minds a woman's place still *is* in the home.

In the foreseeable future, women will be considered the proximate equal of men with respect to employment and admission to higher education only if they are superior in skills and knowledge and willing to work harder. If women have qualifications only equal to those of men and enjoy their positions solely because of legal requirements, the cause of true equality will not be served, for the prejudice of woman's inferiority runs deep and cannot be eliminated by law or administrative regulation. This harsh reality of ingrained prejudice was faced long ago by Frederick Douglass as he contemplated the future of racial equality in the United States.¹⁵ Until there are fundamental changes in our traditional beliefs which redefine the subservient role of women, practical equality in the world of work and the world of learning will require that women be superior in ability to their male counterparts.

If the foregoing arguments have merit, they also have rather severe consequences for the immediate success of the women's movement. No matter how militant some women may become, equality will not be achieved in the near future. To expect that it will is to invite frustration and disillusionment. No matter how aggressive Affirmative Action officers are in pursuing quotas, women will not be regarded automatically as equals to men. To expect that they will is to be unrealistic about

social attitudes and how long change takes. Finally, since actual political societies are grounded in beliefs that are deficient in philosophic wisdom, arbitrary assignments of role may be the price of political stability and survival. To expect that society will someday become perfect and completely equitable is to be naive about the human situation. The purpose in setting forth these arguments forthrightly is not to instill cynicism in those committed to the pursuit of equality. Rather, the purpose is to help place the women's movement in a larger context, on the premise that the ability to see the larger context is precisely what *all* human beings need—whatever their sex may be—to liberate themselves.

¹Genesis, 3:16.

²Koran, Chapter IV.

³Quoted in Nancy Reeves, *Womankind* (New York: Aldome-Atherton, 1971), p. 5.

⁴Quoted in Alice Rossi, *The Feminist Papers* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1973), pp. 13-14.

⁵Clare Booth Luce, "The 21st-Century Woman—Free At Last?" *Saturday Review/World*, August 22, 1974, p. 61.

⁶Ernest Barker, trans., *The Politics of Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), Book 1, Ch. 2; Ch. 1-5.

⁷Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City, Re-*

visited (Boston: Little-Brown and Company, 1974), Ch. 10-12.

⁸See, for example, David Maxey, "No More Messiahs, Please: An Interview with Walter Mondale," *Psychology Today*, October 1974, pp. 122-132. "Women Shake U.N. Population Conference," *Planning*, October 1974, p. 5.

⁹Allan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), at 453c.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, at 454e.

¹¹Section 202 quoted in Robert N. Covington and James E. Jones, *Labor Relations and Social Problems* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., 1973), p. 194.

¹²Testimony of R. W. Flemming, President, University of Michigan, before House Committee on Education and Labor, Special Subcommittee on Education, August 12, 1974.

¹³George C. Roche III, *The Balancing Act* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1974), pp. 5; 24-29.

¹⁴Local governments are "equal opportunity employers" and thus must conform to Affirmative Action requirements in order to qualify for federal revenue sharing funds.

¹⁵See, for example, letter to Mrs. H.B. Stowe in Douglass' autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (London: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 284-290. Also, Philip Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), Vol. IV.

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