

*Utopian Dream or
Dystopian Nightmare?
Nineteenth-Century
Feminist Ideas about Equality*

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THREE RECENT DECADES of scholarship about nineteenth-century feminism have left unchanged a long-standing tendency for historians to write about the nineteenth-century women's movement as though it were monolithic. To be sure, there has been considerable discussion about the different wings of the suffrage movement, but that discussion has focused upon differences between suffrage leaders about strategy. We have heard very little about fundamental differences within feminism over what might constitute equality for women.

By my title I mean to convey that there were deep differences within the nineteenth-century feminist movement, differences so deep that what constituted desirable objectives for one segment of the movement represented failure of a profoundly negative kind for another. Let me at once clarify my use of the term feminist. In my usage, I mean it to identify all those, male or female, who want to increase women's power and social status, regardless of their stance in matters of social philosophy concerned with other social issues. Feminists thus may be liberal or conservative, for example, with respect to the rise of capitalism or the growth of industry, but they are all feminists if their objective is to improve women's position.

I emphasize this definition because women and men of the nineteenth century placed great stress on the concept of social boundaries, be they boundaries of class, gender, or ethnic group. Nineteenth-century feminists may be understood as falling along a spectrum, from those who, on the one hand, wanted to improve women's position within the existing pattern of social boundaries to those, at the other extreme, who wanted to improve women's position by altering the social territories assigned to women and men. Historians have differed about the significance they assign to women's cultural life within the social sphere assigned to them in genteel culture. Nancy Cott, in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, sees the cult of domesticity as providing women with a collective life that was prefeminist. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, in her studies of female friendship, suggests also that women's social bonding created a fertile ground for the growth of feminist sentiment. By contrast, Ann Douglas has described the sentimentality of women's culture as mystifying important feminist issues.¹

These apparent contradictions can be resolved if we see two quite distinct strands of feminist ideas in nineteenth-century America. The first we may characterize as utopian-radical, concerned with changing the social and cultural boundaries of the gender system in profound ways. The second is best described as conservative-sentimental. Its proponents were concerned with elaborating and expanding women's claim to authority and influence *because* they functioned only in the domestic sphere and were excluded from the moral hazards of the male life. Typical exponents of the utopian view such as Frances Wright (1795–1852), Robert Dale Owen (1801–77), and John Humphrey Noyes (1811–86) wanted to merge the domestic and public spheres of life. They recognized, as Plato did in the *Republic*, that social equality rests on equity in prop-

¹ See Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Women's Sphere' in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, 1975); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual,' *Signs: A Journal of Women and in Culture and Society* 1 (1975): 1–31; and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977).

erty relationships, sexual expression, and political participation.

Exponents of the conservative-sentimental view, whom we may see as uniquely American types, wanted to retain gendered social territories because of their preoccupation with balance and control in a social system that they perceived as unstable and out of control. Typical conservative spokesmen and women were Horace Bushnell (1802-76), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96) and her sister Catharine Beecher (1800-78), and Dorothea Dix (1802-87). They were troubled by many aspects of emerging commercial capitalism in America, and they hoped to control economic individualism and competitiveness by making the home a center of opposing emotional forces. They thus had a vested interest in keeping the home exempt from politics and in fostering women's identification with service, empathy, and nurturance. They used the rhetoric of evangelical Christianity to express their social views. Jane Addams and the social feminists of the Progressive Era exemplify a similar response to American industrial capitalism, though the ideas of this generation were expressed in terms of evolutionary social theory.

Most American cultural historians underestimate the extent and appeal of the radical-utopian approach because the utopias were so much a part of a vanished rural America. The availability of new land made North America a magnet for Europeans who were critical of the emerging bourgeois industrial society and who sought to preserve idealized rural values. These critics were either secular rationalists wanting to design a society freed from religious superstition or members of anti-Enlightenment religious groups seeking a new moral and religious environment. The secular rationalist point of view was most vividly expounded by such figures as Robert Dale Owen and Frances Wright and the followers of Fourier, who tried to put utopian socialist ideas into action in the United States. The Shakers, Rappites, and the followers of Jemima Wilkin-

son, the *Universal Friend* (1752–1819), exemplify the religious motivations that led to the founding of new settlements in the United States.²

Whether religious or secular, all the communities founded by Europeans shared the desire to control economic individualism and hold property in common, the wish to reform sexual behaviour, and a concern with reshaping the family. The secular communities aimed at creating a new moral order by reshaping relationships between men and women, parents and children, work and economic rewards. The religious communities, inspired by the expectation of the Second Coming, saw no reason to accumulate worldly goods or to procreate future generations. Since popular culture had long enshrined the myth that Christ would return in female form, these communities also had strong motivations to equalize gender relationships. It has been customary to dismiss the era of communitarian experimentation as an aberration, having little influence on longer-term cultural developments. This may be correct with respect to the economic ideas they espoused. However, we may see their sexual ideals and their efforts to modify the family as recurring themes in American culture.

For purposes of illustration, let us consider the cases of the secular reforms attempted by the Owenites at New Harmony, Indiana, and the religious utopia established by the followers of John Humphrey Noyes at Oneida, New York. The economic story of New Harmony is a familiar episode in standard texts on American history. Much less frequently discussed are the goals of the schools of New Harmony and the uninterrupted progression of public lectures on social history and philosophy that were sponsored by New Harmony's leaders. These focused on issues of equality and rights, ideas reinforced by accounts in the New Harmony press of women who displayed physical courage and men who were gentle and nurturant. When we

² See J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1979).

look at this evidence, it becomes clear that New Harmony was in part inspired by the belief that women and men were psychologically the same. This belief was expressed in the goal of the new moral order, in which it would be possible to achieve sexuality without domination and human relationships (male-female, parent-child) in which the emotions were uncoerced. At the successor community of Nashoba, Tennessee, Frances Wright and her followers attempted to put these ideals into practice in a multiracial setting, without success, but the avant-garde idea of multiracial sex came from the same commitment to uncoerced emotional relations.

At the Oneida community, a belief in the importance of uncoerced emotions was the governing idea of a complicated system of sexual relations. From Maren Carden's early book on the Oneida community to Louis J. Kern's recent study,³ the Oneida community has had a bad press. Its leader, John Humphrey Noyes, believed, like many religious radical before him, that individuals who received a true conversion experience were freed from the effects of Adam and Eve's fall. In this perfected state, Christ was one in 'all his males and females,' and there was no longer a need for marrying or giving in marriage. Certainly the resulting Oneida system of 'complex marriage,' in which all males and all females were mutually available as sexual partners, attracted much negative comment. Kern, for instance, has seen the community simply as a setting for male dominance and sexual control. However, I am impressed by the comments made by women converts about what they found attractive in the Oneida environment. The following is a letter written by a woman convert in 1867:

I praise the Lord for the faith and strength he gave me to visit you and the people of your choice. I saw there an inspiration I have failed to find elsewhere—a unity of purpose and feeling—a

³ See Maren L. Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore, 1969); and Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, 1981).

oneness of spirit, that I have never seen manifested in the world or in any branch of the visible church. The last meeting I attended was with you, and it seemed a very happy place to me, notwithstanding the tender criticism that was given me and which I now desire to thank you and the community for with all my heart. The writings of John came to me with a new and special fulness when read by Mr. Hamilton that evening.

I have thought much of the general characteristics of your community, since my visit there. The perfect harmony, order, neatness, together with the spirit of love and improvement, seemed to prevail everywhere. There seemed to be a spirit of inspiration in work in every department of business, which elevates labor to worship, robbing it of all connection or association with the curse pronounced upon Adam, for nowhere did I see anything which seemed like drudgery in work.⁴

We are entitled to believe that the psychological benefits of escaping the curse placed upon Eve were great, also, and that the benefits of the community were precisely what women participants said they were.

Whether religious in inspiration, like Oneida, or secular in motivation, like New Harmony, these communities shared some common psychological assumptions. Their members believed that women were like men in their psyches, that they experienced work, sexuality, and the rearing of children in the same way as men. John Humphrey Noyes, for example, in proposing to his future wife, promised 'not to monopolise and enslave her heart or my own, but to enlarge and establish both in the free fellowship of God's universal family.'⁵ There were similar concerns about work, the other curse inherited by mankind from the garden of Eden. It was important for communarians not to entrap people in forms of work that were not voluntary. Slavery of the heart or of the body were to be

⁴ January 8, 1867, *Daily Journal of the Oneida Community*, American Antiquarian Society.

⁵ John Humphrey Noyes to Harriet A. Holton, June 11, 1838, *Daily Journal of the Oneida Community*, American Antiquarian Society.

avoided in all human relationships. Conversely, uncoerced emotions were the basis for the acceptable moral community.

By contrast, for the conservative sentimentalists, the notion of sameness between the genders was frightening and distasteful. For them, order in society rested upon differences in gender temperaments. Order could only be maintained by ensuring that there was a separate sphere in society governed by maternal emotions. This sphere was to counterbalance the amoral world of commerce and contract that they saw developing in American economic life. Thus, Horace Bushnell, the principal religious exponent of the ideal of separate spheres for women and men, argued in 1847 for the household as a sacred place because of the emotions it nurtured. 'The house,' he wrote, 'having a domestic spirit of grace dwelling in it should become the church of childhood, the table and hearth of holy rite, and life an element of saving power.' Religion, he thought, 'never thoroughly penetrates life until it becomes domestic. Like that patriotic fire which makes a nation invincible, it never burns with inextinguishable devotion till it burns at the hearth.'⁶

It is clear that the overwhelming weight of public opinion favored the conservative-sentimental view of society. Women who sought power by stressing the psychic differences between women and men, but the equal importance of their psychic qualities, were strikingly successful. Consider, for instance, the career of Dorothea Lynde Dix (1802-87). Throughout her life, Dix adhered to all the conventions about the separate spheres of women and men and conformed her behaviour to all the rules of polite female conduct. She began her public career in the 1840s, the decade of greatest ferment about abolition, women's rights, and religious revivalism. She chose as her life's work the care of the insane and the need for community commitment to the care of the mentally ill. Without doubt, Dix was the most effective lobbyist and agitator of her genera-

⁶ Horace Bushnell, *Discourses on Christian Nurture* (Boston, 1847).

tion. Her pleas for legislative appropriations for the care and housing of the insane were always made as memorials or petitions read on her behalf by a male legislator. She was scrupulous about never appearing in public as a speaker. She dressed in black, and, in an era of dress reform, she always sacrificed comfort for gentility. The language of her pleas to legislative bodies followed all the conventions of sentimental discourse, and in these pleas Dix stressed the fact that she spoke out of a different experience of life than men in the political arena.

In her memorial urging the legislature of Tennessee to establish a hospital for the insane, she reported that she had been 'made conversant with the cruel sufferings and measureless distresses of which I speak by patient investigations, reaching through long and weary years, over the length and breadth of our land. I represent the existence of troubles no imagination can exaggerate, and I have come to Tennessee as the advocate and friend of those who cannot plead their own cause, and for those who have no friend to protect and succor them, in this extremity of human dependence.'⁷ Dix's approach to political life earned her national status, and her campaigns for state action regarding the care of the insane resulted in a record of outstanding legislative achievement. She was successful in persuading the majority of the existing states and most of the territories to adopt her proposals, a record of legislative activity certainly unrivaled for a single woman activist in the nineteenth century. No insignificant part of this success was her insistence that she was 'outside' politics and had no economic interest in the buildings that would be built and staffed as a result of her campaigns.

Naturally, Dix opposed the suffrage movement and any attempt to expand women's rights. She would have thought the Oneida community a brothel and regarded Frances Wright as

⁷ Dorothea L. Dix, *Memorial Soliciting Enlarged and Improved Accommodations for the Insane of the State of Tennessee by the Establishment of a New Hospital* (Nashville, 1847).

a lewd woman. Yet, Dix also believed in increasing women's power and influence. She thought that it could be done without social upheaval, simply by building on the moral authority that women exercised from their domestic sphere. Dix sought power and influence and was successful in her quest because she believed that women were psychologically different from men. She used that perceived psychological difference, and her location in the supposedly apolitical domestic sphere, to claim a position outside and above politics. In doing this, she was able to exploit the need that many contemporaries felt for a public voice that was above politics and outside the financial and patronage rewards of the political system. The traditional gender system, with its separate social territories, gave women access to influence, provided they followed genteel norms of conduct. For the utopian reformers, influence on those terms was demeaning because it rested on degrading human relationships. But the rural utopian view of the matter was more or less banished from public awareness by the closing decade of the nineteenth century.

In the longer term, however, we are justified in concluding that the utopian view of desirable sexual and work relations has become part of the mainstream culture. Participatory management is now the accepted notion of organizing the workplace, and the idea that emotional bonds must be uncoerced is part of the daily language of the courts as they exercise their powers to dissolve unsatisfactory marriages. Yet, we see the views of Dix and the conservative-sentimental feminists alive and flourishing in the manifestos of the 'Total Woman' movement and in the sizable body of American women who were persuaded to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment during the late 1970s and early 80s. The late twentieth-century feminist movement has been obliged to revisit old quarrels and to rediscover the profound differences of opinion and social philosophy that divide different schools of feminist thought. While the utopia of the radicals remains the dystopia of the sentimental

conservatives, the chances for a future feminist program claiming the support of the majority of American women remain slight. Only a drastic reformulation of the issues surrounding the question of sameness or difference between women and men seems likely to alter this pattern.

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