

Kate Millett and Her Critics

April 13, 2010

[This article appeared in the old series of *New Politics*, Fall 1970.]

Sexual Politics by Kate Millet
Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, N.Y. 1970, 393 pp. \$7.95

KATE MILLET'S *SEXUAL POLITICS* HAS ELICITED AWE, praise and sober criticism, but proof of its effectiveness is the appearance of a variety of articles and reviews marked by utterly unselfconscious vulgarity, philistinism and venomous hostility.

"These are not normal women. I think they are freaks. Besides, they are dead wrong in their assumption that most women detest men, marriage and housework so much they can't wait to be liberated from them so they can rush out to work all day in factory, shop or office. ... Most women have a strong nesting instinct and they *like* taking care of their homes." So writes Helen Lawrenson in the January 1971 issue of *Esquire*, a publication which has been trying manfully to change its "girlie" image since its editors realized years ago that it could not compete successfully with *Playboy*. The Lawrenson article, "The Feminine Mistake," characterized by breezy ignorance and the social sage: "So you see, no matter how you slice it, it's the same old sex game. Liberate me, daddy, eight to the bar." Even the idiom is dated.

Midge Decter's response to women's liberation is a "fable" called "The Liberated Women" which appeared in the October 1970 issue of *Commentary*, written in the form of a prolonged whine. Its whimsy cannot conceal its essential vulgarity:

To judge from what she says and does, however - finding only others at fault for her predicaments, speaking always of herself as a means of stating the general case, shedding tears as a means of negotiation - the freedom she truly seeks is of a rather different kind. It is a freedom demanded by children and enjoyed by no one: the freedom from all difficulty. If in the end her society is at fault for *anything* [my emphasis, P.J.], it is for allowing her to grow up with the impression that this is something possible to ask. Even the good fairies who attended her birth would never have dared so far.

Miss Decter's claim to fame is that, in addition to being the executive editor of *Harper's* magazine, she is in the words of the biographical squib accompanying the article, "married and is the mother of four children." It failed to add that she is married to the editor of *Commentary* which is surely the only explanation for an article of no merit whatsoever appearing in that journal's pages.

Harper's, the magazine of which Miss Decter is the executive editor, selected for its reviewer of *Sexual Politics* a man whose polemical writing is marked by the royal put-down, invariably spiced with words and phrases from language he does not speak: none other than Irving Howe. Despite its pretentiousness (there are almost three full pages on Freud, an area in which Mr. Howe's credentials are highly dubious), the review is marked by much more than his usual nastiness. Miss Millet, we learn is "a figment of the *Zeitgeist*, bearing the rough and careless marks of what is called higher education and exhibiting a talent for the delivery of gross simplicities in tones of leaden complexity. Brilliant in an unserious way. ... She has a mind of great energy but small feeling for

nuance. ... She is the ideal highbrow popularizer for the politics and culture of the New Left. ...” What is more “About the experience of working-class women she knows next to nothing. ...” And then, for a coup de grace. Carried away by his own learned exposition of Freud, Howe steps into the role of diagnostician, “...there are times when one feels the book was written by a female impersonator.”

The hostility of the review (How threatened can Irving Howe get?) is matched only by its philistinism. “And is the poor bastard writing soap jingles in an ad agency performing a ‘human’ task morally of psychologically superior to what his wife does at home, where she can at least reach toward an uncontaminated relationship with her own child?” And capped with truly unselfconscious vulgarity masquerading as “yiddishkeit,” “I think back, then, to the one other world I have known well, the world of immigrant Jewish workers. ... Was my mother a drudge in subordination to the ‘master group?’ No more drudge than my father who used to come home with hands and feet blistered from his job as a presser. Was she a ‘sexual object?’ I would never have thought to ask, but now, in the shadow of decades, I should like to think that at least sometimes she was.” Fadeout to the soft strains of a yiddish folk song. Pure schmaltz!

In any case, the point that escapes Howe is that Momma certainly *was* more of a drudge than Poppa. They both worked in garment factories, where she earned less than he did, both came home exhausted but Momma cooked, washed dishes, scrubbed floors and tended to Poppa’s other needs. Or does the reality intrude on the sentimental drivel Howe concocts for public consumption?

Irving Howe has kind words for Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* now that *Sexual Politics* has arrived on the scene in the context of a women’s movement. Howe’s attempt is to use de Beauvoir to put down Millett. In his characteristically charitable style he says: “...anyone comparing the two books would immediately recognize the extent to which Miss Millett has drawn upon de Beauvoir’s famous work. The central ideas and sentiments of *Sexual Politics* are simply appropriated, in vulgarized form, from *The Second Sex*, and reviewers with some intellectual conscience might consequently have sown some restraint in praising Miss Millett’s originality of thought.” Generous to a fault!

While Howe is careful to say about *The Second Sex* only that it is “famous,” by implication he also says that it is a better piece of work. The political conclusion should not be lost on the unsuspecting. When Martin Luther King emerged as the leader of an active, militant, civilly disobedient civil rights movement even downright reactionaries, not to mention the entire political Establishment, suddenly became the champions of Roy Wilkins and the NAACP. Faced with movement and inevitable change, they opted for a moderate. This is not to say at all that Simone de Beauvoir is a moderate on women’s liberation. It is only that her book (with an entirely different emphasis than Kate Millett’s) appeared in the United States during the fifties, a period of political apathy. While it received wide attention and, no doubt, succeeded in shocking its more backward readers, it could not possibly have had the impact and effect that *Sexual Politics* has today in the context of political movement among women. Fearful of any radical change, Irving Howe suddenly embraces Simone de Beauvoir.

WHAT IS THERE ABOUT *SEXUAL POLITICS* that provokes this unseemly response?

The threat is clear. Kate Millett has formulated a forceful indictment of patriarchal society, illustrating her theory of sexual politics with examples from history, psychology and literature. One need not agree with every example, every argument presented to come to the realization that “there remains one ancient and universal scheme for the domination of one birth group by another – the

scheme that prevails in the area of sex.”

The evidence is overwhelming and whether she is discussing women in the economy, in literature, in totalitarian societies or their estimates of themselves, Miss Millett handles her material with great skill and, even more important, with insight, humor and compassion.

Discussing women's role in the economy where they constitute a large and underpaid factory population, Miss Millett draws a sharp difference between men and women in production. While neither owns nor controls the process in which they participate, *women do not even comprehend it*. Her example is illuminating:

...the refrigerator is a machine all women use, some assemble it in factories, and a very few with scientific education understand its principles of operation. Yet the heavy industries which roll its steel and produce the dies for its parts are in male hands. The same is true of the typewriter, the auto, etc. Now, while knowledge is fragmented even among the male population, collectively they could reconstruct any technological device. But in the absence of males, women's distance from technology today is sufficiently great that it is doubtful that they could replace or repair such machines on any significant scale.

The conclusion is inescapable. “If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women.”

And despite the growing numbers of women involved in “higher education,” the society, through its insistence on retaining long outmoded cultural differences, enforces systematic ignorance in a way not too different from the manner suggested by John Ruskin in 1865. Female education for Ruskin was “not for self-development, but for self-renunciation.”

MISS MILLETT'S DISCUSSION OF ANTI-FEMINIST ATTITUDES in totalitarian societies - attitudes which are basically irrational and even harmful to the economies of those societies - bears out her contention that “...sexual politics, while connected to economics and other tangibles of social organization, is, like racism, or certain aspects of caste, primarily an ideology, a way of life, with influence over every other psychological and emotional facet of existence.” To be sure, while both Germany and Russia systematically excluded women from the labor force prior to World War II, there was a material consideration of overwhelming importance - increasing the population for waging war. In both countries there were bonuses for mothers and, in Germany, additional taxes for bachelors and spinsters and marriage loans with tax and interest rebates for each child born.

In Russia, the anti-feminist attitudes and edicts were a product of the Stalinist counterrevolution. Immediately after the October revolution, a conscious effort had been made to free women and restructure the family. There was free marriage, divorce, contraception and abortion on demand. And while Kate Millett is correct when she writes that “Marxist theory has failed to supply a sufficient ideological base for a sexual revolution,” buttressing that judgment with a quote from

Trotsky: "You cannot 'abolish' the family, you have to replace it," such an ideology might have been developed in a revolutionary atmosphere. Instead, the Stalinist reaction was complete and in rapid order free marriage, divorce, contraception and abortion were all outlawed; replaced by strict edicts on bearing many children and strengthening the family. (There are those, otherwise enchanted by *Sexual Politics*, who are very critical of Miss Millett for her discussion of the Russian counterrevolution. Without adducing any evidence to the contrary, Irwin Silber took exception to the material on Russia in an essentially laudatory review which appeared in *The Guardian*. Since he presented no argument whatsoever to account for his criticism, one is led to believe he has none but simply feels that recounting the effect of the counterrevolution is a breach of faith. Miss Millett is fortunate that her book appeared in 1970. Had it come out as late as twenty years ago she would have been referred to as a "fascist mad dog.")

THERE ARE AREAS IN WHICH MISS MILLETT may overstate her case. She has been criticized for her unrelieved attack on Freud and for an imbalance in her treatment of biological differences between the sexes. Yet, she was not writing an appreciation of Freud. What she has done, effectively in my opinion, is to underscore Freud's masculine bias, a bias so pronounced that it raises strong doubts, at the very least, about the value of his psychoanalytic theories of femininity. The quoted material from Freud's books, papers and letters certainly give credence to Miss Millett's view that "It is especially curious to imagine that half the race should attribute their clear and obvious social-status inferiority to the crudest biological reasons when so many more promising social factors are involved." If she has overstated her case, it is unnecessary. The evidence of women's inferior status and oppression that exists in all areas of life and literature is abundantly clear.

The literary examples of sexual politics - Lawrence, Miller, Mailer and Genet - are illuminating and entertaining and if Miss Millett opts for Genet it is because "his notions of sex role and rank are the most flat-footed ones available in his culture, quite without Lawrence's subtlety, archaic in their direct presentation of power and subordination: a vicious and omnipotent superservility contrasted to a fluttering helplessness and abjection."

Sexual Politics is a harsh indictment of the actual status of male and female in patriarchy. More than that, it is a call to rebellion: a call to rebellion at a time when there is a growing consciousness among women of their inferior status and growing women's movement to heed the call. It is the very existence of the Women's Liberation movement that is responsible for the hostile and reactionary response to Miss Millett's book.

IN A POSTSCRIPT TO THE BOOK, Kate Millett deals very briefly with the timing of the emergence of this new feminist movement. She believes that it was inspired by the example of black protest and was given additional impetus by "the sexist character of the New Left." Black protest undoubtedly played an important role in the development of women's movement but the New Left, given the contradiction between its idealistic motives and its elitist nature, was the catalyst.

Filled with idealism and radicalized by a succession of struggles waged for civil rights and an end to the Vietnam war during the sixties, the women found themselves part of a movement which discriminated against them in the most direct and often gross manner. Women in the movement were consigned to the role of clerk-typist and, with the development of the new sexual freedom, to the role of sex objects conveniently available to minister to the sexual needs of the male "theoreticians." Why should this have been the pattern? Was this kind of gross discrimination against women part of the so-called Old Left and therefore a carry-over of previous practice?

Not really. In the movement of old (true, at least of the Trotskyist and neo-Trotskyist movement of which I was part), women were discriminated against in more traditional ways. To obtain positions of leadership, women had to be twice as talented, twice as capable as the men. They were generally made to feel that they could never quite comprehend the intricacies of the more complex political theories. All of which is to say that the movement was far from generous to its women. However, women did play a role and because many were twice as talented and capable they did rise to prominence. It was another age and, much more important, the movement was not characterized by the kind of political and personal elitism which characterizes the New Left.

The movement of the sixties was marked early by its enchantment with the more recent forms of totalitarianism. While it forswore the computerized Russian leadership as "conservative" (Kosygin and Brezhnev while malevolent are also faceless), it took up the cudgels for Mao, Ho, Kim and, better still for its romantic elitist vision, Fidel and Che. The fact that the societies ruled by these "heroes" are totally undemocratic, that freedom is non-existent, that women are particularly oppressed, did not give them pause. Quite the contrary, the virtues of China, North Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba were written about extensively, much in the manner of articles extolling Stalin as "Sun God" that appeared in *Soviet Russia Today* during the thirties, with just as much basis in fact.

Added to the political elitism was the devotion to machismo. What Hemingway is for Norman Mailer, Che is for the men of the New Left. (The number of young men who walk around looking like mirror images of Che is startling, if ludicrous.) Che is the man with the gun, fighting alone against heavy odds, the ultimate guerilla. Alone, or perhaps with a small band of guerrilla fighters, he will free us all. He is endowed with all the virtues of a Hemingway hero: strong, armed, compassionate, and infinitely wise. Even the fact that he blew it (not so infinitely wise after all) did not destroy the myth.

Filled with notions of guerrillaism and machismo, the men of the New Left made the movement a distinctly unpleasant experience for their women comrades. "Throw her off the stage and fuck her," some of them yelled during an anti-war demonstration in Washington when one of the women was speaking. The message of male superiority was nowhere delivered as stridently as it was in the New Left. And having developed some political awareness, women in the movement became convinced of the necessity for a women's movement to struggle for sex equality.

THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT IS A NEW ONE with growing influence. Its very existence is largely responsible for the liberalization of abortion laws in many states. Despite the fact that it is marred by absurdities (the media adore the very notion of bra burning) and by an unfortunate kind of righteous puritanism (one of the purposes of the movement is to free women to enjoy their sexuality not to suppress it), the movement has enormous possibilities. Kate Millett's conclusion

expresses it well:

It may be that a second wave of the sexual revolution might at last accomplish its aim of freeing half the race from its immemorial subordination - and in the process bring us all a great deal closer to humanity. It may be that we shall even be able to retire sex from the harsh realities of politics, but not until we have created a world we can bear out of desert we inhabit.

Humanity is the vision that should inform the Women's Liberation movement.

PHYLLIS JACOBSON *is co-Editor of New Politics.*