

BOOK REVIEWS

A LESSER LIFE: THE MYTH OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN AMERICA. By Sylvia Ann Hewlett.¹ New York: William Morrow. 1986. Pp. 461. \$17.95.

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It is now generally conceded that the feminist movement is in disarray. An argument could be made, I think, that this is nothing new; feminism always managed to paper over deep splits within its ranks, and an absence of really compelling thought about whom it represents, and what it wants (beyond abstractions such as "equality" or "freedom"). Perhaps this is another way of saying that it was, and is, a *movement*; its momentum was always greater than its sense of direction, its emotional fervor always greater than its intellectual clarity. But now it is losing momentum, and as it slows down, even adherents are beginning to ask questions about its purpose and ideology. As yet, however, the questioning remains shallow; it avoids probing very deeply into the basis of feminist beliefs.

A number of books have recently appeared that reflect this new sobriety, and the, as yet not very penetrating, reappraisal. Sylvia Ann Hewlett's is one of the more interesting ones. It is, up to a point at least, scholarly, and there is a refreshing absence of rhetoric and abstraction. Hewlett goes into some detail on the history of American feminism, comparing it unfavorably with feminism in other Western nations. For reasons which she never examines, feminism in the United States developed quite aberrantly. Elsewhere, the movement had a practical, materialistic focus; it was family-oriented; and organizationally it was tied to labor unions and mainstream political parties. The goal was to make life easier for women, to provide them with protections and benefits at home and on the job. Today, all of these countries have comprehensive family policies, which include such benefits as income supplements to families with young children ("family allowances"), parental leaves

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with full or part pay, and networks of publicly funded child-care facilities.

By contrast, American feminism has, from the beginning, been dominated by abstract, visionary goals, such as “equality” and “liberation.” It has had a distinctly anti-family cast, seeking to “free” women from their traditional roles. And organizationally, it has chosen separatism, and even isolation. Thus, in recent years the movement has been chiefly engaged in fighting for the Equal Rights Amendment, for abortion-on-demand, and for lesbian rights. Far from advocating measures that provide special protection or benefits for women, it has, at least on occasion, actively opposed such measures, as serving to perpetuate ideas of women’s inferiority or special handicaps, and justifying discrimination against them. And so, Hewlett argues, American feminism has only lukewarm support from the majority of American women, or has actually alienated them, for most continue to identify with their roles as wives and mothers, even as they increasingly take on new roles outside the home. And so too, she argues, the movement has produced little of practical benefit for these women. The United States has no coherent family policy; no system of family allowances; no federally assured right to parental leaves (only forty percent of working women have some form of guaranteed leave through union contracts); and there are no federally sponsored—indeed, almost no publicly sponsored—child-care facilities. Thus the average American woman is, in Hewlett’s view, worse off than her European counterpart.

Besides the feminist movement with its anti-family stance, Hewlett sees another culprit in the plight of American women. This is “ultradomesticity”: the cult of hearth and home. For years psychologists, pediatricians, and special interest groups of all sorts have bombarded American women with the message that it is their duty to maintain a perfect home, to have a perfect marriage, to raise perfect children. They have been taught that true motherhood entails “natural” childbirth, breastfeeding, the continuous physical “bonding” of mother and child. They have been filled with fears of the dire consequences of even short-term separation from babies and young children, and inculcated with the notion that everything in their children’s lives—their physical and psychological health, their IQs, their future—depends on the closeness and intensity of their maternal care.

On this score, too, Hewlett draws an unfavorable comparison with European societies, where the attitude toward marriage and domestic roles has always been more practical, less starry-eyed; and where the care of children by surrogates—in or outside the home—

has always been taken for granted. (For hundreds of years many middle- and upper-class parents sent infants away to farm families to be nursed and raised; others employed nannies, governesses; children were, and are, sent off early to boarding schools; working class families sent children away at early ages as apprentices, and so on.) Today, then, European mothers feel less compelled to live up to impossible standards of homemaking, and they view organized, out-of-home child care facilities as accoutrements of normal family life.

In short, says Hewlett, American women, more than any others, have been victimized by two sets of messages which are not only incompatible, but individually unrealistic. The feminist messages denies that there are significant differences between the sexes and tells women to work and compete in all public spheres like men; the "ultradomesticity" message makes a cult of women's domestic and reproductive functions and tells them that any diminution of their devotion to home and child care means that they are cheating themselves and their children.

Many women, particularly those who came of age in the 1950's and later, internalized both messages, and set out to be Superwomen. Hewlett supports this claim with her own story. An economics professor at Barnard in the 1970's, she was imbued with the standard ideals and dogmas of both feminism and "ultradomesticity." She was convinced that she could combine her professional career with the roles of wife and mother: she could be a dedicated, productive scholar, or scientist, and teacher as well as an ever-present, completely devoted mother. Neither sphere need impinge on, or complicate, the other; no role need hinder or detract from the rest. To no one's surprise (except Hewlett's, apparently), this turned out not to be the case; and she recounts—affectingly, and at points, insightfully—how the attempt failed. Barnard at the time had no provision for maternity leave, and when she became pregnant (and determined on "natural" childbirth, and all the rest of it), she found her colleagues, and the administration, unsupportive. (Very much later, when she brought her nursing infant to the office, and to departmental meetings, she again found them unsupportive: for example, they were "not amused if Lisa started to wail or filled her diaper in the middle of a meeting.") She was eventually denied tenure at Barnard because, she believes, while pregnant, nursing, and toting around a small child, she found it impossible to keep up with her research; she also withdrew, to some extent, from other professional responsibilities, such as committee work. At the same time, however, the strain of trying to maintain even a reduced level of professional activity while still trying to reach the "ultradomes-

ticity” goals (natural childbirth, breastfeeding, avoiding any separation from the baby) took a toll of her physical and emotional health: she ascribes to this attempt—to live up to two sets of unyielding, unrealistic demands—years of fatigue and illness; a miscarriage, and in its wake, depression; and later, after two successful pregnancies, persistent feelings of guilt and anxiety.

Repeatedly, Hewlett compares her experience, and the experiences of other American women, with those of European women. This is done by means of reminiscences, anecdotes, and interviews, which make no pretense of being systematic or rigorous. Invariably, the American experiences are grim, the European ones joyous. European mothers have family allowances that permit them to remain at home for long periods, if they choose; they have leaves during pregnancy and after childbirth that safeguard their health and the health of their babies; when they return to work, they have the option of part-time, flexible schedules; “excellent” nurseries and day-care centers are everywhere. In short, American women have been misled and swindled. What they need, and want, is not what “ultradomesticity” demands of them, and not what feminists are fighting for, but what European women already have: parental leaves, day-care centers, and family income supplements—a liberal, comprehensive, national family policy.

I

Superficially, it seems hard to quarrel with the case Hewlett makes. Other countries have programs that ease the lot of women who are combining domestic and employment responsibilities; why shouldn't we? But as one looks more closely at Hewlett's story and arguments, questions emerge and some reservations must be voiced.

First, it should be noted that many feminists have denied that the movement has been anti-family, or that it has given family-oriented measures such as parental leaves or day care centers low priority. As noted, the movement is not monolithic, and there have been voices within it (most notably, Betty Friedan's) that have argued somewhat along Hewlett's lines. Nevertheless, I think Hewlett's point is undeniable: the most audible voices in the movement, and organizationally its major thrust, have not been for measures of the sort Hewlett is urging. They have been for ERA, “reproductive freedom,” lesbian rights—essentially, freedom *from* the traditional roles of wife and mother, rather than support for women *in* these roles. And there has also been an unmistakable animus against existing political and economic structures, which are seen as part of an oppressive, enslaving male establishment.

Just as Hewlett oversimplifies American feminism, to make it seem all of a piece, so she oversimplifies European feminism, to make it seem entirely pragmatic and family oriented. European feminism is much more complex and contains multiple strands; it too has had, and has, its radical, visionary, anti-family, anti-societal elements. But again Hewlett is basically right: a practical mode of feminism, that works in and with established institutions, and accepts established norms and values of family life and sex roles, is much more in evidence in European societies than in the United States. And here one could wish that Hewlett's treatment were more analytical, for there are fascinating historical and sociological questions involved. In political sociology it is axiomatic that Americans in general and American workers in particular are pragmatic: they care little for abstractions, dogmas, doctrines; hence the "failure" to develop ideologically pure political parties, hence labor unions that are concerned only with bread-and-butter issues, hence the blurring of class lines, and so forth. Why is it, then, that sexual politics has developed so differently: pragmatic in European societies, unrealistic and ideological here? Certainly it is not because of a history of greater oppression or exclusion of women from public life: if anything, there has been less oppression and exclusion here. The answers are not simple or obvious; and one would welcome a more analytic study of the roots of American feminism's hostility to the institutions of the society, and its organizational and moral isolation from the majority of American women. Unfortunately, Hewlett's book doesn't even mention questions of this sort.

Of course, Hewlett did not mean to write a history or analysis of American or European feminism, and the superficialities on this score can be forgiven. A much more serious objection is that her portrait of American and European working women's lives—a portrait in which everything is lacking or bad here, present and good there—is, at best, grossly overdrawn. As already noted, much of the evidence for this view comes from anecdotes, unsystematic "interviews," and so on—and from highly selective snatches of statistics. Again, not only is this not very solid, but some of these very bits and snatches suggest a more complex reality, both here and abroad. The book as a whole leaves the overwhelming sense that American women's sad plight is due to the absence of a national family policy (parental leaves, etc.), a failure for which feminism and "ultradomesticity" are to blame. But repeatedly Hewlett's own materials point to other factors, which she simply disregards. For example, she mentions, and then pays no further attention to, the fact that the European societies with which she compares the United States all have lower rates of divorce. They also have—this

she doesn't mention at all—appreciably lower rates of illegitimacy. This means that some strains on women are less prevalent in European societies not because of more liberal governmental policies but because of a far greater preponderance of intact nuclear families. For whatever reasons, these societies seem to have retained a greater awareness than have most Americans that the first line of defense for women and children—indeed, for everyone—is the family: the intact nuclear family, not government, and not any other agency or institution.³ Moreover, most of these societies also have lower rates of female and especially maternal employment; and, of the women who do work, proportionately fewer (than in the United States) are in professional, technical, or managerial positions. Also, women in these societies have (relative to men, and again by comparison with the United States) lower levels of education; they participate less in public life generally; and, within the family, a much more traditional division of labor, and allocation of authority, remains. (The pattern Hewlett describes, of her husband attending La Maze classes with her, present with her in the delivery room, sharing housework and baby-tending, etc. has made little headway in England, France, Italy, and most other European societies.) Thus women's lives, at home or at work, retain a much more traditional character. This means that women in these societies are less likely to feel driven to "achieve," to "compete," to demonstrate their independence of and equality with men, and consequently there are fewer of the strains and cross-pressures that Hewlett describes in her own life and the lives of other American women she portrays. But again, this is not because of the leaves and day-care centers, but because their work occupies a different place in the European women's lives, and in these societies' more traditional social structures and cultures.

Of course, all of these facts have policy implications. For example, where there are proportionately fewer broken or incomplete families, family policy is easier to formulate, and the economic costs, and probable social consequences, of any particular measure are easier to gauge and more manageable. Where fewer women work, and those who do are more likely to have low-level or routine jobs, it is easier for employers to accommodate requirements for leaves or flexible schedules. Where fewer women work, and those who do are more willing to take routine or "traditional" jobs, child-care facilities are easier to staff, and quality in such facilities is eas-

3. My forthcoming book, *THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NUCLEAR FAMILY*, analyzes the reasons for, and the implications of, this aspect of social life.

ier to maintain. And so on. Hewlett does not discuss these problems.

Perhaps the most telling difference between the United States and these other societies is one that, in a sense, comprehends all that I have already mentioned. All of these societies—which Hewlett holds up as models for the United States, at least in regard to family policy—are *much more male-dominated*, in every sphere, public and private. Hewlett is aware of this, but doesn't seem to realize that it has some bearing on her argument. So, for example, she quotes the following Op-Ed piece from *The New York Times*:

It's good to be home. After nearly six years abroad, I am struck first of all by what a good time it is to be a woman in America. Speak not to me of a gender gap. I have lived for the past four years in London. I now feel a surge of new life akin perhaps to what a ghetto child might experience contemplating an endless expanse of green space. . . .

The country I have just left is light years away from all of this. Life for a woman in Britain can be an energy-sapping experience.

She quotes this and doesn't challenge it. She also quotes a foreign correspondent's observation that American women "are the most liberated in the world." This too, she doesn't dispute—in fact, she appears to agree—but then she simply reverts to the maternity leaves that European women enjoy, and that American women lack. But one cannot simply ignore the fact that the family policies of these other societies occur in a much less sexually egalitarian context. It may very well be that, to whatever extent European women seem to be better off, it is not because they have *more*, but because they have *less*. They settle for less—for a more rigid social structure, and more rigidly defined roles, in the home and in public life. If American women were content with less equality, less freedom, in and out of the home; if they were willing to settle for a much more restricted range, and subordinate status, in every sphere of life—then an array of benefits and protections might well be part of the total package. But I doubt that most American women would willingly make this trade; I doubt that Hewlett herself would. I am not saying that we cannot—or should not—have parental leaves and the rest of what Hewlett advocates, unless we revert to a more traditional social structure and culture. But it is necessary to point out that what we see as a desirable effect, in a very different societal context, and which we attribute to a specific governmental policy, may in fact be due less to the specific policy than to the overall social context. We cannot simply ignore this possibility.

II

Not only does Hewlett fail to analyze her international comparisons in any depth, she never even examines her own policy proposals—in terms of costs, feasibility, or likely social consequences. Take, for example, the matter of parental leaves. There is a bill in Congress now that would guarantee eighteen weeks of unpaid leave for working women in all establishments with fifteen or more employees; the bill envisages a commission to look into the feasibility of requiring paid leaves. Hewlett notes approvingly that many other countries already mandate paid leaves. It should be obvious that for a poor woman, a divorced woman, a single mother, an unpaid leave may be a meaningless benefit; in fact even a partly paid leave may be useless to her. But even aside from this, I can only wonder how it is that Hewlett—after discussing the problems she encountered, *over many years*, and that presumably other women encounter, in trying to combine career and motherhood, can feel that a leave of 18 weeks—or for that matter, of 24 weeks, unpaid or even paid—will significantly alleviate these prolonged strains and hardships.

What is supposed to happen to the child after 18 weeks? Apparently, a day-care center. And here Hewlett fosters some myths, or at least assumptions, of her own, which may be as unjustifiable and harmful as those for which she condemns the proponents of “ultradomesticity,” with their scares of “maternal deprivation” and so on. She has scoffed at the propaganda that tells mothers that they are responsible for stimulating their infants’ cognitive abilities, but she has no qualms about advising readers that children’s IQs rise if they are in day-care centers: it is good for Baby to be cared for in a day nursery. And she repeatedly assures us, again without reservation or qualification of any sort, that European child-care facilities are “excellent.” Nowhere does she mention such facts as these: in no country are organized child-care facilities adequate to the known or assumed need for them; day-care is an enormously costly service (even when providing minimally acceptable care); it therefore always creates a great economic burden, if not for individual families, then for the society as a whole; day-care facilities are more easily staffed, and more widely accepted, in societies that are, culturally, relatively homogeneous (e.g., Sweden) or that have long traditions of strong central authority (e.g., France)—neither condition obtains here; the quality of organized child-care facilities—everywhere—frequently leaves much to be desired (and is sometimes poor); and even where facilities are known, or believed, to be good, they are commonly avoided by families that are able to make

other arrangements (non-organized, non-public, in-home, individual arrangements are preferred); and finally, no studies have dealt with the long-term—emotional, physical, intellectual—consequences for children of prolonged care in group facilities; there is, however, ample evidence that the effects are not simple, and not necessarily good.

These *general* considerations apply to all countries. There is good reason to think that in the United States the problems other countries experience with organized child care would be magnified: our cultural diversity, our large population of broken families, with a great concentration of all kinds of social and psychological problems, our long association of public services with the poor, our vast problems with our public hospitals, and public schools—all of these and many other facts suggest that a large-scale program of publicly run, or publicly supported, day-care would be a national disaster. Hewlett ignores these issues, and gives a one-sided, superficial view of a complex subject that is fraught with uncertainties and dangers.

III

And so Hewlett's international comparisons are unconvincing, and her proposals unexamined and unsupported. But perhaps the most disappointing aspect of her book is its failure to distinguish—in regard to working women generally, or even in her own life, about which she tells us at some length—two very different problems; and this goes to the heart of the feminist dilemma. Hewlett steadily confuses two quite different kinds of working women, or working mothers. The problems faced by the woman with a more or less routine job—the typist, salesclerk, factory worker—are of a different order from those faced by the woman professional or executive. Hewlett makes no distinction between them. She implies that the measures she advocates will somehow solve, or at least greatly reduce, all problems for all women who are combining work and family. But to what extent will the measures she recommends in fact solve the problems of the woman who wants a high level of achievement as a professional in a competitive field and also wants to have, and raise, with full inner peace and satisfaction, four children (Hewlett's family at present)? This, I think, is what Hewlett's book is ultimately concerned with. But if this is indeed her subject, then her discussion and her recommendations are woefully inadequate. Parental leaves, day-care centers, etc., do not begin to solve the dilemmas of women like herself. Short periods of leave cannot possibly permit the kind of mothering that women like Hewlett

want to give. On the other hand, much longer periods of leave—years in fact—inevitably interfere with professional competence and commitment; they limit career achievement. Indeed, there is reason to think that, for many women, even without long absences from work, simply having and raising children—motherhood itself—means a channelization of emotional and intellectual energies away from career achievement. And here, in confronting these deeper issues in women's work, Hewlett fails completely—or rather, there is no confrontation at all: she seems unaware that these issues exist. Not only in regard to women generally, but even quite narrowly in regard to her own life, she seems to be unable—or unwilling—to see that there are problems the social programs she advocates would not solve and that even her own behavior cannot be fully explained in the terms she allows.

Hewlett recognizes that most women marry, have children, and want it so, and that many of these same women also work, have jobs or careers, and (again) either must do this, or want to do this. And she has recognized that combining these two roles is difficult. But, quite like the feminists she criticizes—indeed, more than many of them—she locates all problems *outside* of women themselves. She locates them entirely in society's failure to provide support mechanisms for mothers who work (leaves, child-care facilities, etc.), and in the contradictory messages hammered into women by feminists and anti-feminists. This externalization of all things is characteristic of our time; it is particularly characteristic of liberal thought. Hewlett seems to be content to portray her own behavior as simply the result of external pressures, messages from outside that she absorbed and responded to; she is willing to portray herself, and by implication all other women, as robots, puppets, with no inner, autonomous direction. She does grant that “[m]ost women want to have children”; and she does not suggest that this desire was instilled in them by “ultradomesticity” propagandists. But she is unable, or unwilling, to state that this desire must have a biological basis. At no point is there an examination of inner causation (in her life or anyone else's); acceptance of *anything* as biologically based is, in principle, anathema to most liberals, and certainly to most feminists (even moderate feminists, like Hewlett).

If a drive or desire to have children is innate in most women—and I suggest that it is biologically based, genetically consolidated, and reinforced over millions of years of evolution—then isn't it possible that certain emotional and cognitive features go with it? Isn't it possible—for example—that the anxieties Hewlett describes—her fears about her children's well-being, her concerns about their care,

her guilt feelings, etc.—have this same biological basis, are part of the same innate make-up, and not the result of the government's failure to provide day-care centers, or Phyllis Schlafly's propaganda? And similarly, isn't it possible that her own career path is not simply the result of Barnard's "unsupportiveness" or institutional discrimination against women, but reflects her own inner predilections and preferences? Having failed to get tenure at Barnard, Hewlett accepted a position as director of The Economic Policy Council, a job she describes as more lucrative and flexible than an academic position, and "well-suited to my abilities." But this career change, while not entirely voluntary in Hewlett's case, parallels that which many other women in professions and business are now making voluntarily. These women are "dropping out" of high pressure, highly competitive positions, to devote themselves full-time to their homes and families, or to setting up businesses of their own, where they can have a more comfortable, freer atmosphere. Is this shift due to lack of leaves and day-care centers? Or to feminist or anti-feminist propaganda? Few seriously suggest that it is. Or does it, rather, reflect these women's own preferences—for a less structured, less competitive environment? Is it possible that women, more often than men, innately *prefer* this?

Reading Hewlett's book I was repeatedly struck by her inability to subject her own behavior to any probing analysis. She blames the ultradomesticity advocates for her troubled attempts at natural childbirth, breastfeeding, etc.; but was it they who told her to have four children (three her own), while trying to advance her career? Most European professional women—despite their countries' leaves and child-care centers—recognize that dedication to a career entails some sacrifice in the domestic sphere, and generally restrict themselves to one or at most two children. Hewlett is unable to consider that, in any society, with any social policies, a woman's attempt to combine the two worlds of family and work requires some sacrifice, some concessions, some ordering of priorities. Instead, she lays all problems at society's doorstep. What emerges from her personal account, then, is the story of a rather immature woman, unable to make realistic choices among the options open to her, and a "career woman" whose drive to be a mother is very much stronger and deeper than her drive to be an economist. She ends up with a (relatively) large family, and writing books of journalism rather than economics. Which is fine—except that, in her case as in so many others, the reduced career aspirations, or limited professional achievement, the stumbling among the various options that exist in a free society—are blamed on the society, or on the presence, or absence, of some specific social policy. A sense of autonomy, of

judgment—of personal responsibility for one's own choices and behavior—is lacking.

In short, Hewlett and others now writing in a comparable vein never consider that the "double-bind" on women Hewlett describes—the multiple burdens, the tensions and conflicts—may not be the result of society's failures, or the clashing demands of feminists and conservatives, but an inescapable dilemma, part of the human condition generally, and the female condition particularly. None of this, I hasten to add, means that parental leaves and other measures are necessarily bad. Women do marry and have children; they also work. Various proposals may be sound. But they must be evaluated realistically, in terms of probable economic and social benefits and costs, for specific groups and for the society as a whole; and they must not be made to seem the answer to inner problems or conflicts, unanalyzed and even unexpressed, which they will not solve. Hewlett's book provides neither an economic or policy analysis of specific proposals, nor an illumination of the dilemmas of the woman who wants a career and a family. These dilemmas have little to do with parental leaves and day-care centers. True, the book is an advance over much feminist writing, which ignores family altogether, or sees it as something from which women should be freed; but it is a very small advance. Feminism has barely begun to ask the deeper questions that need to be asked.

THE DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES, 1789-1800, VOL. I, PARTS 1 AND 2. Edited by Maeva Marcus¹ and James R. Perry.² New York: Columbia University Press. 1985. Pp. lxxii, 599; xvi, 400 (consecutively paginated). \$95.

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This is the first of seven projected volumes of original sources on the Supreme Court's first decade. It focuses on appointments to the Court and the more technical aspects of its procedures. Two more preparatory volumes are anticipated—one on the background of article III, and the third on the circuit court activities of the Justices—and then four dealing *in extenso* with the Court's decisions.

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