

The Great Women's Liberation Issue: Setting It Straight

by Murray N. Rothbard

It is high time, and past due, that someone blew the whistle on "Women's Liberation." Like *The Environment*, Women's Lib is suddenly and raucously everywhere in the last few months. It has become impossible to avoid being assaulted, day in and day out, by the noisy blather of the Women's Movement. Special issues of magazines, TV news programs, and newspapers have been devoted to this new-found "problem"; and nearly two dozen books on women's lib are being scheduled for publication this year by major publishers.

In all this welter of verbiage, not one article, not one book, not one program has dared to present the opposition case. The injustice of this one-sided tidal wave should be evident. Not only is it evident, but the lack of published opposition negates one of the major charges of the women's lib forces: that the society and economy are groaning under a monolithic male "sexist" tyranny. If the men are running the show, how is it that they do not even presume to print or present anyone from the other side?

Yet the "oppressors" remain strangely silent, which leads one to suspect, as we will develop further below, that perhaps the "oppression" is on the other side.

In the meanwhile, the male "oppressors" are acting, in the manner of Liberals everywhere, like scared, or guilt-ridden, rabbits. When the one hundred viragos of Women's Lib bullied their way into the head offices of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, did the harried editor-in-chief, John Mack Carter, throw these aggressors out on their collective ear, as he should have done? Did he, at the very least, abandon his office for the day and go home? No, instead he sat patiently for eleven hours while these harridans heaped abuse upon him and his magazine and his gender, and then meekly agreed to donate to them a special section of the *Journal*, along with \$10,000 ransom. In this way, spineless male Liberalism meekly feeds the appetite of the aggressors and paves the way for the next set of outrageous "demands." *Rat* magazine, an underground tabloid, caved in even more spectacularly, and simply allowed itself to be taken over permanently by a "women's liberation collective."

Why, in fact, this sudden upsurge of women's lib? Even the most fanatic virago of the Women's Movement concedes that this new movement has not emerged in response to any sudden clamping down of the male boot upon the collective sensibilities of the American female. Instead, the new uprising is part of the current degeneracy of the New Left, which, as its one-time partly libertarian politics and ideology and organization have collapsed, has been splintering into absurd and febrile forms, from Maoism to Weathermanship to mad bombings to women's lib. The heady wine of "liberation" for every crackpot group has been in the air for some time, sometimes deserved but more often absurd, and now the New Left women have gotten into the act. We need not go quite so far as the recent comment of Professor Edward A. Shils, eminent sociologist at the University of Chicago, that he now expects a "dog liberation front," but it is hard to fault the annoyance behind his remark. Throughout the whole gamut of "liberation", the major target has been the harmless, hard-working, adult WASP American male, William Graham Sumner's Forgotten Man; and now this hapless Dagwood Bumstead figure is being battered yet once more. How long will it be before the put-upon, long-suffering Average American at last loses his patience, and rises up in his wrath to do some effective noisemaking on his own behalf?

The current Women's Movement is divisible into two parts. The older, slightly less irrational wing began in 1963 with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and her organization of NOW (the National Organization of Women). NOW concentrates on alleged economic discrimination against women. For example: the point that while the median annual wage for all jobs in 1968 was almost \$7700 for men, it only totaled \$4500 for women, 58% of the male figure. The other major point is the quota argument: that if one casts one's eye about various professions, top management positions, etc., the quota of women is far lower than their supposedly deserved 51%, their share of the total population.

The quota argument may be disposed of rapidly; for it is a two-edged sword. If the low percentage of women in surgery, law, management, etc., is proof that the men should posthaste be replaced by females, then what are we to do with the Jews, for example, who shine far above their assigned quota in the professions, in medicine, in academia, etc.? Are they to be purged?

The lower average income for women can be explained on several grounds, none of which involve irrational "sexist" discrimination. One is the fact that the overwhelming majority of women work a few years, and then take a large chunk of their productive years to raise children, after which they may or may not decide to return to the labor force. As a result, they tend to enter, or to find, jobs largely in those industries and in that type of work that does not require a long-term commitment to a career. Furthermore, they tend to find jobs in those occupations where the cost of training new people, or of losing old ones, is relatively low. These tend to be lower-paying occupations than those that require a long-term commitment or where costs of training or turnover are high. This general tendency to take out years for child-

raising also accounts for a good deal of the failure to promote women to higher-ranking, and therefore higher-paying jobs, and hence for the low female "quotas" in these areas. It is easy to hire secretaries who do not intend to make the job their continuing life work; it is not so easy to promote people up the academic or the corporate ladder who do not do so. How does a dropout for motherhood get to be a corporate president or a full professor?

While these considerations account for a good chunk of lower pay and lower ranked jobs for women, they do not fully explain the problem. In the capitalist market economy, women have full freedom of opportunity; irrational discrimination in employment tends to be minimal in the free market, for the simple reason that the employer also suffers from such discriminatory practice. In the free market, every worker tends to earn the value of his product, his "marginal productivity." Similarly, everyone tends to fill the job he can best accomplish, to work at his most productive efforts. Employers who persist in paying below a person's marginal product will hurt themselves by losing their best workers and hence losing profits for themselves. If women have persistently lower pay and poorer jobs, even after correcting for the motherhood-dropout, then the simple reason must be that their marginal productivity tends to be lower than men.

It should be emphasized that, in contrast to the Women's Lib forces who tend to blame capitalism as well as male tyrants for centuries-old discrimination, it was precisely capitalism and the "capitalist revolution" of the 18th and 19th centuries that freed women from male oppression, and set each woman free to find her best level. It was the feudal and pre-capitalist, pre-market society that was marked by male oppression; it was that society where women were chattels of their fathers and husbands, where they could own no property of their own, etc.¹ Capitalism set women free to find their own level, and the result is what we have today.

The Women Libs retort that women possess the full potential of equality of output and productivity with men, but that they have been browbeaten during centuries of male oppression. But the conspicuous lack of rising to the highest posts under capitalism still remains. There are few women doctors, for example. Yet medical schools nowadays not only don't discriminate against women, they bend over backwards to accept them (i.e., they discriminate in their favor); yet the proportion of women doctors is still not noticeably high.

Here the female militants fall back on another argument: that centuries of being "brainwashed" by a male-dominated culture have made most women passive, accepting their allegedly inferior role, and even liking and enjoying their major role as homemakers and child-raisers. And the real problem for the raucous females, of course, is that the overwhelming majority of women do embrace the "feminine mystique," do feel that their sole careers are those of housewife and mother. Simply to write off these evident and strong desires by most

women as "brainwashing" proves far too much; for we can always dismiss any person's values, no matter how deeply held, as the result of "brainwashing." The "brainwashing" contention becomes what the philosophers call "operationally meaningless," for it means that the female militants refuse to accept any evidence, logical or empirical, of whatever kind, that might prove their contentions to be wrong. Show them a woman who loves domesticity and they dismiss this as "brainwashing"; show them a militant and they claim that this proves that women are yearning for "liberation." In short, these militants regard their flimsy contentions as unworthy of any sort of proof; but this is the groundless method of mystics rather than an argument reflecting scientific truth.

And so the high rate of conversion claimed by women's liberationists proves nothing either; may not this be the result of "brainwashing" by the female militants? After all, if you are a redhead, and a Redheaded Liberation League suddenly emerges and shouts at you that you are eternally oppressed by vile nonredheads, some of you might well join in the fray. Which proves nothing at all about whether or not redheads are objectively oppressed.

I do not go so far as the extreme male "sexists" who contend that women should confine themselves to home and children, and that any search for alternative careers is unnatural. On the other hand, I do not see much more support for the opposite contention that domestic-type women are violating their natures. There is in this as in all matters a division of labor, and in a free market society every individual will enter those fields and areas of work which he or she finds most attractive. The proportion of working women is far higher than even twenty years ago, and that is fine; but it is still a minority of females, and that's fine too. Who are you or I to tell anyone, male or female, what occupation he or she should enter?

Furthermore, the women libs have fallen into a logical trap in their charge of centuries of male brainwashing. For if this charge be true, then how come that men have been running the culture over eons of time? Surely, this cannot be an accident. Isn't this evidence of male superiority?

The Friedanites, who call stridently for equality of income and position, have, however, been outpaced in recent months by the more militant women's liberationists, or "new feminists," women who work with the older movement but consider them conservative "Aunt Toms." These new militants, who have been getting most of the publicity, persistently liken their alleged oppression to that of blacks, and like the black movement reject equality and integration for a radical change in society. They call for the revolutionary abolition of alleged male rule and its supposed corollary, the family. Displaying a deep-seated and scarcely concealed hatred of men per se, these females call for all-women's communes, state-run children, test-tube babies, or just simply the "cutting up of men", as the real founder of militant women's lib, Valerie Solanis, put it in her SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto. Solanis became the culture-heroine of the

New Feminism in 1968 when she shot and almost killed the painter and filmmaker Andy Warhol. Instead of being dismissed (as she would be by any rational person) as a lone nut, the liberated females wrote articles praising Solanis as the "sweet assassin" who tried to dispose of the "plastic male" Warhol. We should have known at that point of the travails that lay in store.

I believe that modern American marriages are, by and large, conducted on a basis of equality, but I also believe that the opposite contention is far closer to the truth than that of the New Feminists: namely, that it is men, not women, who are more likely to be the oppressed class, or gender, in our society, and that it is far more the men who are the "blacks," the slaves, and women their masters. In the first place, the female militants claim that marriage is a diabolical institution by which husbands enslave their wives and force them to rear children and do housework. But let us consider: in the great majority of the cases, who is it that insists on marriage, the man or the woman? Everyone knows the answer. And if this great desire for marriage is the result of male brainwashing, as the Women's Libs contend, then how is it that so many men resist marriage, resist this prospect of their lifelong seat upon the throne of domestic "tyranny"?

Indeed, as capitalism has immensely lightened the burden of housework through improved technology, many wives have increasingly constituted a kept leisure class. In the middle class neighborhood in which I live, I see them, these "oppressed" and hard-faced viragos, strutting down the street in their mink stoles to the next bridge or mah-jongg game, while their husbands are working themselves into an early coronary down in the garment district to support their helpmeets.

In these cases, then, who are the "niggers": the wives? Or the husbands? The women's libs claim that men are the masters because they are doing most of the world's work. But if we look back at the society of the slave South, who indeed did the work? It is always the slaves who do the work, while the masters live in relative idleness off the fruits of their labor. To the extent that husbands work and support the family, while wives enjoy a kept status, who then are the masters?

There is nothing new in this argument, but it is a point that has been forgotten amidst the current furor. It has been noted for years-and especially by Europeans and Asians – that too many American men live in a matriarchy, dominated first by Momism, then by female teachers, and then by their wives. Blondie and Dagwood have long symbolized for sociologists an all-too prevalent American matriarchy, a matriarchy that contrasts to the European scene where the women, though more idle than in the U.S., do not run the home. The henpecked American male has long been the butt of perceptive humor. And, finally, when the male dies, as he usually does, earlier than his spouse, she inherits the entire family assets, with the result that far more than 50% of the wealth of America is owned by women. Income – the index of hard and productive work – is less significant here than ownership of ultimate wealth. Here is another inconvenient fact which

the female militants brusquely dismiss as of no consequence. And, finally, if the husband should seek a divorce, he is socked with the laws of alimony, which he is forced to pay and pay to support a female whom he no longer sees, and, if he fails to pay, faces the barbaric penalty of imprisonment – the only instance remaining in our legal structure of imprisonment for nonpayment of "debt." Except, of course, that this is a "debt" which the man had never voluntarily incurred. Who, then, are the slaves?

And as for men forcing women to bear and rear children, who, again, in the vast majority of cases, is the party in the marriage most eager to have children? Again, everyone knows the answer.

When, as they do at times, the female militants acknowledge matriarchal dominance by the American female, their defense, as usual, is to fall back on the operationally meaningless: that the seeming dominance of the wife is only the reflection of her quintessential passivity and subordination, so that women have to seek various roads to bitchiness and manipulation as their route to . . . power. Beneath their seeming power, then, these wives are psychologically unhappy. Perhaps, but I suppose that one could argue that the slavemaster in the Old South was also psychologically uneasy because of his unnaturally dominant role. But the politico-economic fact of his dominance remained, and this is the major point.

The ultimate test of whether women are enslaved or not in the modern marriage is the one of "natural law": to consider what would happen if indeed the women's libs had their way and there were no marriage. In that situation, and in a consequently promiscuous world, what would happen to the children? The answer is that the only visible and demonstrable parent would be the mother. Only the mother would have the child, and therefore only the mother would be stuck with the child. In short, the women militants who complain that they are stuck with the task of raising the children should heed the fact that, in a world without marriage, they would also be stuck with the task of earning all of the income for their children's support. I suggest that they contemplate this prospect long and hard before they continue to clamor for the abolition of marriage and the family.

The more thoughtful of the female militants have recognized that their critical problem is finding a solution for the raising of children. Who is going to do it? The moderates answer: governmental provision of day-care centers, so that women can freed to enter the labor force. But the problem here, aside from the general problem of socialism or statism, is this: how come that the free market hasn't provided day care centers fairly inexpensively, as it does for any product or service in mass demand? No one has to clamor for government provision of motels, for example. There are plenty of them. The economist is compelled to answer: either that the demand for mothers to go to work is not nearly as great as the New Feminists would have us believe, and/or some controls by government-perhaps requirements for registered nurses or licensing laws-are artificially restricting the supply. Whichever reason, then, more government is clearly not the answer.

The more radical feminists are not content with such a piddling solution as day-care centers (besides who but women, other women this time, would be staffing these centers?). What they want, as Susan Brownmiller indicates in her *New York Sunday Times Magazine* article (March 15), is total husband-wife equality in all things, which means equally shared careers, equally shared housework, and equally shared child-rearing. Brownmiller recognizes that this would have to mean either that the husband works for six months and the wife for the next six months, with each alternating six months of child rearing, or that each work half of every day and so alternate the child-rearing each half-day. Whichever path is chosen, it is all too clear that this total equality could only be pursued if both parties are willing to live permanently on a hippie, subsistence, part-time-job level. For what career of any importance or quality can be pursued in such a fleeting and haphazard manner? Above the hippie level, then, this alleged "solution" is simply absurd.

If our analysis is correct, and we are already living in a matriarchy, then the true significance of the new feminism is not, as they would so stridently have it, the "liberation" of women from their oppression. May we not say that, not content with kept idleness and subtle domination, these women are reaching eagerly for total power? Not content with being supported and secure, they are now attempting to force their passive and long-suffering husbands to do most of the housework and childrearing as well. I know personally several couples where the wife is a militant liberationist and the husband has been brainwashed by his spouse to be an Uncle Tom and a traitor to his gender. In all these cases, after a long hard day at the office or at teaching to support the family, the husband sits at home tending the kids while the wife is out at Women's Lib meetings, there to plot their accession to total power and to denounce their husbands as sexist oppressors. Not content with the traditional mah-jongg set, the New Woman is reaching for the final castrating blow-to be accepted, I suppose, with meek gratitude by their male-liberal spouses.

There is still the extremist women's lib solution: to abandon sex, or rather heterosexuality, altogether. There is no question but that this at least would solve the child-rearing problem. The charge of Lesbianism used to be considered a venomous male-chauvinist smear against the liberated woman. But in the burgeoning writings of the New Feminists there has run an open and increasing call for female homosexuality. Note, for example, Rita Mae Brown, writing in the first "liberated" issue of *Rat* (February 6):

"For a woman to vocally assert her heterosexuality is to emphasize her 'goodness' by her sexual activity with men. That old sexist brainwashing runs deep even into the consciousness of the most ardent feminist who will quickly tell you she loves sleeping with men. In fact, the worst thing you can call a woman in our society is a lesbian. Women are so male identified that they quake at the mention of this three-syllable word. The lesbian is, of course, the woman who has no need of men. When you

think about it, what is so terrible about two women loving each other? To the insecure male, this is the supreme offense, the most outrageous blasphemy committed against the sacred scrotum.

"After all, just what would happen if we all wound up loving each other. Good things for us but it would mean each man would lose his personal 'nigger' . . a real and great loss if you are a man....

"To love another woman is an acceptance of sex which is a severe violation of the male culture (sex as exploitation) and therefore carries severe penalties.... Women have been taught to abdicate the power of our bodies, both physically in athletics and self-defense, and sexually. To sleep with another woman is to confront the beauty and power of your own body as well as hers. You confront the experience of your sexual self-knowledge. You also confront another human being without the protective device of role. This may be too painful for most women as many have been so brutalized by heterosexual role play that they cannot begin to comprehend this real power. It is an overwhelming experience. I vulgarize it when I call it a freedom high. No wonder there is such resistance to lesbianism."

Or this, in the same issue, by "A Weatherwoman":

"Sex becomes entirely different without jealousy. Women who never saw themselves making it with women began digging each other sexually.... What weatherman is doing is creating new standards for men and women to relate to. We are trying to make sex nonexploitative.... We are making something new, with the common denominator being the revolution."

Or, finally, still in the same issue, by Robin Morgan:

"Let it all hang out. Let it seem bitchy, catty, dykey, frustrated, crazy, Solanisesque, nutty, frigid, ridiculous, bitter, embarrassing, manhating, libelous.... Sexism is not the fault of women – kill your fathers, not your mothers."

And so, at the hard inner core of the Women's Liberation Movement lies a bitter, extremely neurotic if not psychotic, man-hating lesbianism. The quintessence of the New Feminism is revealed.

Is this spirit confined to a few extremists? Is it unfair to tar the whole movement with the brush of the Lesbian Rampant? I'm afraid not. For example, one motif now permeating the entire movement is a strident opposition to men treating women as "sex objects." This supposedly demeaning, debasing, and exploitative treatment extends from

pornography to beauty contests, to advertisements of pretty models using a product, all the way to wolf whistles and admiring glances at girls in miniskirts. But surely the attack on women as "sex objects" is simply an attack on sex, period, or rather, on hetero-sex. These new monsters of the female gender are out to destroy the lovely and age-old custom-delighted in by normal women the world over-of women dressing to attract men and succeeding at this pleasant task. What a dull and dreary world these termagants would impose upon us! A world where all girls look like unkempt wrestlers, where beauty and attractiveness have been replaced by ugliness and "unisex," where delightful femininity has been abolished on behalf of raucous, aggressive, and masculine feminism.

Jealousy of pretty and attractive girls does, in fact, lie close to the heart of this ugly movement. One point that should be noted, for example, in the alleged economic discrimination against women: the fantastic upward mobility, as well as high incomes, available to the strikingly pretty girl. The Women's Libs may claim that models are exploited, but if we consider the enormous pay that the models enjoy-as well as their access to the glamorous life-and compare it with their opportunity cost foregone in other occupations such as waitress or typist-the charge of exploitation is laughable indeed. Male models, whose income and opportunities are far lower than that of females, might well envy the privileged female position! Furthermore, the potential for upward mobility for pretty, lowerclass girls is enormous, infinitely more so than for lower-class men: We might cite Bobo Rockefeller and Gregg Sherwood Dodge (a former pin-up model who married the multimillionaire scion of the Dodge family) as merely conspicuous examples. But these cases, far from counting as an argument against them, arouse the female liberationists to still greater fury, since one of their real complaints is against those more attractive girls who by virtue of their attractiveness, have been more successful in the inevitable competition for men-a competition that must exist whatever the form of government or society (provided, of course, that it remains heterosexual).

Women as "sex objects"? Of course they are sex objects, and praise the Lord they always will be. (Just as men, of course, are sex objects to women.) As for wolf whistles, it is impossible for any meaningful relationship to be established on the street or by looking at ads, and so in these roles women properly remain solely as sex objects. When deeper relationships are established between men and women, they each become more than sex objects to each other; they each hopefully become love objects as well. It would seem banal even to bother mentioning this, but in today's increasingly degenerate intellectual climate no simple truths can any longer be taken for granted. Contrast to the strident Women's Liberationists the charming letter in the *New York Sunday Times* (March '19) by Susan L. Peck, commenting on the Brownmiller article. After asserting that she, for one, welcomes male admiration, Mrs. Peck states that "To some this might sound square, but I do not harbor a mad, vindictive desire to see my already hard-working, responsible husband doing the household ironing." After decrying the female maladjustment exhibited in the "liberation

movement," Mrs. Peck concludes:

"I, for one, adore men and I'd rather see than be one!" Hooray, and hopefully Mrs. Peck speaks for the Silent Majority of American womanhood.

As for the Women's Liberationists, perhaps we might begin to take their constantly repeated analogies with the black movement more seriously. The blacks have, indeed, moved from integration to black power, but the logic of black power is starkly and simply: black nationalism-an independent black nation. If our New Feminists wish to abandon male-female "integrationism" for liberation, then this logically implies Female Power, in short, Female Nationalism. Shall we then turn over some Virgin land, maybe the Black Hills, maybe Arizona, to these termagants? Yes, let them set up their karate-chopping Amazonian Women's Democratic People's Republic, and ban access to them. The infection of their sick attitudes and ideology would then be isolated and removed from the greater social body, and the rest of us, dedicated to good oldfashioned heterosexuality, could then go about our business undisturbed. It is high time that we heed the ringing injunction of William Butler Yeats:

Down the fanatic, down the clown;
Down, down, hammer them down,

and that we echo the joyous cry of the elderly Frenchman in the famous joke. As a female militant in France addressed a gathering on women's liberation, asserting, "There is only a very small difference between men and women," the elderly Frenchman leaped to his feet, shouting, "Vive la petite difference!"²

Footnotes

I. Ludwig von Mises has written: "As the idea of contract enters the Law of Marriage, it breaks the rule of the male, and makes the wife a partner with equal rights. From a one-sided relationship resting on force, marriage thus becomes a mutual agreement.... Nowadays the position of the woman differs from the position of the man only in so far as their peculiar ways of earning a living differ.... Woman's position in marriage was improved as the principle of violence was thrust back, and as the idea of contract advanced in other fields of the Law of Property it necessarily transformed the property relations between the married couple. The wife was freed from the power of her husband for the first time when she gained legal rights over the wealth which she brought into marriage and which she acquired during marriage.... That marriage unites one man and one woman, that it can be entered into only with the free will of both parties,... that the rights of husband and wife are essentially the same-these principles develop from the contractual attitude to the problem of married life." Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), pp. 95-96.

2. Professor Leonard P. Liggio has brought to my attention two vitally important points in explaining why the Women's Lib agitation has emerged at this time from within the New Left. The first is that the New Left women were wont to sleep promiscuously with the males in the movement, and found to their shock and dismay that they were not being treated as more than mere "sex objects." In short, after lacking the self-respect to treat themselves as more than sex objects, these New Left women found to their dismay that the men were treating them precisely as they regarded themselves! Instead of realizing that their own promiscuous behavior was at the root of the problem, these women bitterly blamed the men, and Women's Liberation was born.

The second point is that almost all the agitation comes not from working class, but rather from middleclass wives, who find themselves tied to the home, and kept from satisfying outside jobs, by the demands of children and housework. He notes that this condition could be readily cured by abolishing restrictions on immigration, so that cheap and high-quality maids and governesses would once more be available at rates that middle-class wives could afford. And this, of course, would be a libertarian solution as well.