

No Turning Back – A History of Feminism
Estelle B. Freedman

A political and social history, not an intellectual history of the women's movement

One has to be impressed at the amount of social change the woman's movement has inspired. She makes the argument well. Women have been brought closer to the full equality among citizens championed by the Enlightenment philosophers.

Freedman addresses the many spheres in which equality operates. Legally, the right of women to participate fully in civil society has become quite well established in most areas of the world. The backwaters are becoming something of an exception. The abuse that the weaker sex (and children) experience within the family is being exposed and addressed. Women's personal lives have become their own business, no longer subject to the control of men in their families and communities. Women have achieved the opportunity to seek almost any job.

Freedman provides an extensive and accessible bibliography, which should be of use to subsequent researchers. I fault her for a tendency to rely on highly ideological sources... Marxists and other feminists. Her arguments could be made, and would be stronger, if she used citations that would better withstand being dismissed as simply more feminists. This is a general weakness in the social sciences - there is such groupthink that it is easy to find a dozen concurring opinions without adding to the argument.

She says "The myth professes that in America anybody can succeed, as if there were no obstacles based on gender, class or race. To raise questions about fairness implicitly asks whether those who have succeeded are in fact the more deserving."

What people "deserve" relates to rights. They deserve equal treatment under the law. It is a legal question if they do not receive it. It would be naïve to say that women have an equal chance for success in the trucking industry, or that men have an equal chance in the sociology or education department of a modern university. The right to demand and sue for equal treatment does not equate to absolute equality. But it is all that can be offered.

Regimes designed to produce equal outcomes often fail rather conspicuously. No Child Left Behind is a major recent example. Freedman cites examples in which it has worked, such as women in collegiate sports, and some in which it has not, such as salary parity. It is worth asking, in instances where differences persist, whether the causal hypotheses being advanced might be flawed.

There are areas which Freedman does not investigate very deeply. One of the first would be evolutionary bases for male/female differences. Evolution favors success. Freedman cites a rich variety of social arrangements. Societal organizations evolve and go extinct rapidly. Probably 90% of human societies have gone extinct. The Maya disappeared without explanation; more commonly, peoples disappeared when they encountered more technically advanced societies.

Like a species, a society perpetuates itself by controlling habitat, having offspring and perpetuating its identifying practices and beliefs. Hunting and gathering societies took a tremendous variety of forms. Since paternity was often unimportant and unknown, many were matrilineal. They were egalitarian because there were essentially no material goods. However, since inter-tribal relations always involved the threat of war, and men were the warriors, men were most often the chiefs. Also, since warfare created a scarcity of men and placed a premium on that most masculine of traits, fighting ability, it is natural that the excess females would gravitate to the powerful males, who could impregnate them with future generations of warriors.

Anthropologists propose that patriarchy was the best system for perpetuating pastoral and farming societies. Men did the heavy work and fighting, women raised children and performed other farm and domestic labor. With survival at issue, few people talked about rights and private pleasures. Such considerations arose only when there was a foundation of security and material wealth. Individual women emerged as personalities and intellects in Greek, Persian, Egyptian, Indian and Chinese history, although most women, like most men, were condemned to anonymous drudgery and slavery.

Patriarchy, rather than something that invidious men imposed on women, was a natural outcome of Darwinian evolution. As societies become richer and better educated, it is natural for patriarchy to give way to something else. It has given much ground, sometimes with confrontation but often without, over the past century. Many feminist objectives have been met. With regard to those which remain, it begs the question as to whether they are attainable or desirable, and certainly as to whether the causal hypotheses of male dominance are correct.

It was natural for women to enter the workforce. It was natural that there be two breadwinners to better raise a family. But could it have been foreseen that so many women would opt not to have families at all? John Stuart Mill would be pleased that some have chosen to use their freedom and equality to better their minds. But is it not perverse that so many, freed from the need to be supported and protected by men, spend so much of their time and money working to be desirable to the men whose children they still won't bear?

The relative availability of top-notch potential mothers has changed. Privileged, educated women who want to enter marriage and rear children are rare in Western society. Equality notwithstanding, men find themselves paying for access to a nubile, fertile body by buying dinner, baubles, and nice vacations, and feathering as fancy a nest as possible to attract his mate. The factors which ameliorate the situation - guys who don't want children, or who don't even want women, appear likewise to be on the rise. Doesn't bode well for our civilization!

Freedman attributes lack of career success to systematic barriers erected by men. It would be interesting to examine illegal careers, unaffected by such. Women should be able to compete equally in illegal drug distribution, phishing scams and Ponzi schemes. To their credit, they are not. It may be that they are temperamentally disinclined towards crime. Could it be that, given the alternative of marriage and motherhood, more of them avoid high-stress careers as well?