

The Essential Feminist Reader  
Estelle B. Freedman

This is the book I had been looking for when I read Freedman's "No Turning Back."

The pieces are well chosen to show the intellectual development of feminism. The earlier authors she has chosen, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Virginia Wolff, are wonderfully articulate. Moreover, the points they make seem undeniable today. Yes, women deserve the right to own property, to vote, to work, and to control their fertility. This is a good chronicle of the battles they fought to achieve these rights.

The pieces selected show the close connection between women's issues through the ages and the other dominant intellectual currents. The earliest pieces stress women's equality in the sight of God, citing the Bible for authority. Then they cite the writings of the philosophes, asking why the rights of man should not apply equally to women? As industrialism advances, they raise the question of why women workers should be different than men. As the black race seeks emancipation and then full equality, they again ask, what about women? All of the earlier pieces stress the common interests and plead for common cause between disenfranchised men and women.

There are issues peculiar to women. Women are the physically weaker sex. John Stuart Mill is the first of many to condemn men's license to abuse their wives and families. The earlier writers grant the need for women to bear children to perpetuate the society. Their call is for equality in marriage and the right to leave the brute when marriage becomes insufferable.

Socialists like Emma Goldman championed the notion of sexual liberation appears in the late 19th century. Women should be as free to adventure as men. Adultery should be equally culpable in either sex. The writers vary in their opinions on prostitution; either it should be illegal, period, or at least the johns should be viewed as equals in vice to the women themselves. Homosexuality was raised from a private matter to something worthy of public discussion and eventual acceptance.

Sea changes in history are hard to pin down, but I would call the publication of "Le Deuxième Sexe" in 1949 as such a point. It coincided with the Kinsey reports and Zimmerman's pessimistic "Family and Civilization." The Marxists and existentialists managed to divorce the individual - who is here by existential chance - from any obligation to the society into which she was born. From this point forward the focus is on the individual. This is essential. A woman no longer carries the responsibility for "reproductive labor," carrying on the species. It is up to her if she feels like it. If not - to hell with it.

The Feminine Mystique marks the crest of the wave. Freidan bemoans an America in which women had achieved almost all of their historical objectives but still felt an inarticulable dissatisfaction. They live comfortable lives in the suburbs, bearing healthy children raised on the advice of Benjamin Spock, supported by all manner of modern appliances and motor cars, and had been exposed to higher education. But through all this, their full expression as individuals was stunted by their nagging sense of obligation to family and society, and many felt they had unrealized talents in business, the arts, and higher education. Men had given every imaginable inch to satisfy What Women Want within the context of traditional society, and it wasn't enough. Women really wanted freedom from what had hitherto been seen as the physical constraints of their sex.

At this point it gets murky. Quite a few modern writers are conspicuously absent: Germaine Greer, Andrea Dworkin, Catherine Mackinnon, Camile Pagalia, Naomi Wolfe, and Katy Roiphe, among those whom I have read. I did not get much out of those who were chosen. Call me pariochial, but I would have rather seen more focus on ideas from Western society than echoes from the rest of the world.

The piece about rape by Susan Brownmiller is predictable and boring. Brownmiller asks you to accept the thesis that rape is the norm among men, not an aberration. She is the mother of "Take back the night" and other campus scare programs. She would also have you believe that ordinary white guys are the evil perpetrators. Yes, sometimes, but a quick peek at FBI crime statistics on rapes by race will tell you that your grandmother's fears were more pertinent than Brownmiller's.

Monique Wittig assumes her readers' familiarity with, and acceptance of the a priori concepts behind their shorthand use of Marxist language such as "oppressor" and "class." This is the ultimate victim politics. Victim of

what, how, and why exactly are the presumed "oppressors" guilty goes unstated. She assumes it is understood. 'Scuse me, I don't get it. Please be specific.

This is where the discussion ends. There is no note to the effect that women now dominate American campuses, civil service and indeed most white collar workplaces. A vast number of young men, seeing nothing especially worth doing and hearing no call to serve the family, country, church or civilization, remain in an infantile cocoon of video games, "failing to launch." The woman's movement has achieved all of its early goals and many of its later goals. It has profoundly changed society. Now what? Roiphe and Pagalia are addressing these issues. I wish they had been included.

I add as a postscript, this review having been thoroughly panned, that you anonymous ladies simply repeat my recent experience as a grad student. The young female profs gave me miserable marks but never chose to enter a dialog. If you think the review is terrible, apart from that you may disagree with it, please post a comment saying why. I'll be glad to respond.