

Book Reviews

Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. London: Yale University Press, 1987, pp. 283 + notes, US\$41.50.

Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics*. London: Yale University Press, 1987, pp. ix–xix, 261 + notes, US\$35.00.

Both of these works are written by scholars who have already made a name for themselves within American history and women's studies – Cott with her work *The Bonds of Womanhood* on nineteenth-century "separate spheres" – philosophy and the women's culture that it generated, Ware with her work *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal*. Despite their different methods – Cott's political analysis and Ware's biographical account – both raise questions central to the history of American feminism and to women's studies. How can the decline of organized feminism in the 1920s and the political confrontations of supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment and supporters of protective legislation in the 1930s be accounted for? On a more theoretical level they raise the question of how to interpret women as a political group when there are many obvious differences among them? How can women deal adequately with the fact that womanhood has both positive and negative implications? And, finally, what is feminism?

In her brilliant introduction, Cott describes her intent with the book and the problems it confronts. Here she makes clear the need to distinguish between the nineteenth-century suffrage movement and twentieth-century feminism since the latter is much narrower in its adherents but broader in its ideological intent. She also characterizes the paradox of feminism in this way: "Feminism asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference. It aims for individual freedoms by mobilizing sex solidarity. It posits that women recognize their unity while it stands for diversity among women. It requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles" (p. 5).

Having thus established her analytical framework, Cott takes her point of departure in analyzing the term "feminism." "Feminism," which was first used in American English in 1913, then denoted the radical questioning of cultural and societal mores found within vanguard New York groups that supported a variety of causes from women's sexual freedom and access to birth control to racial equality and socialism. In the 1920s, however, the meaning of the term was narrowed to imply "equal rights" when the radical National Woman's Party led by uncompromising Alice Paul adopted "The Equal Rights Amendment" as its sole cause of concern. A clear majority of the women active in the fight for women's suffrage took issue with the new NWP stand that the fight for women's equality took precedence over everything else, well documented in Cott's description of the discussions prior to and during the formal adoption of this strategy. The narrowing of "feminism" to "equal rights" meant that toward the end of the 1920s women outside the NWP no longer applied the term "feminist" to themselves.

Cott argues convincingly that the nineteenth-century "woman movement" perceived itself as speaking for all women. She also emphasizes that it perceived women as different from men or as equal to men whatever suited its purposes in a given situation. Not until the twentieth century and the loss of a common

ground among women, did the increasing diversity mean that the two arguments implied different political strategies. Should women strive to become equals to men in every sense or did they need protection to compensate for their different situation as mothers with obligations at home? From these different interpretations of women's conditions and possibilities sprang the polarized discussion over protective legislation for women in the 1920s and 1930s, a discussion that Cott delineates by focusing on the political background and personal conflicts of the women involved.

In her book she repeatedly returns to the paradox of modern feminism that it voices a belief in women as individuals and at the same time presupposes a common feeling of solidarity, two elements of feminism that at times are mutually exclusive and increasingly became so when the common ground – separate spheres – were lost. On this basis she re-interprets the traditional historian interpretation of the 1920s as a time when feminism disappeared after winning the vote for women. Cott emphasizes that the suffrage movement was not identical with feminism but was made up of a variety of women's groups which had as many reasons to support the vote for women. She also documents that the level of organization of women increased in the 1920s but brought other aspects of women's identities to the fore in organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Young Women's Christian Association, the Parent-Teacher Association, disarmament and peace groups such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She connects this diversification of organizations to the increasing diversity of women's lives and opinions after women were no longer socially or politically thrown into the same class by being disenfranchised.

In Susan Ware's biographical account of Molly Dewson, termed "the first female political boss in America," Dewson is described as exemplary for the attempts to integrate women into politics after the vote for women was won. Dewson, a reform-minded Wellesley graduate and social worker, was herself protégéed at the beginning of her career as she herself later protégéed countless numbers of other women in her capacity as director for the Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee. Among some of her accomplishments was the successful campaign to make President Roosevelt appoint Frances Perkins of the National Consumers' League the first female secretary of labor, to have two women appointed ambassadors (to Denmark and Norway) and hosts of women appointed to administrative jobs on lower levels in appreciation of their involvement in the 1932 Democratic presidential campaign. Ware characterizes her technique as a successful transferral of techniques from the suffrage fight to (male) national politics:

Denied access to traditional sources of political power and accustomed to working with other members of their sex, women developed alternative ways of wielding influence in the public sphere. The key instruments were networks that brought together reformers, political activists, and traditional women's organizations on issues of common concern (p. xvi).

Ware also emphasizes the veritable subculture of reform-minded single women or women-couples who remained actively involved in social work and later transferred their activism to the Democratic New Deal legislation. Ware writes:

The collective experience of women in the New Deal demonstrates the importance of women's networks in shaping access to and conduct of power. The women in the New Deal acted both individually and collectively in pursuit of feminist and social welfare objectives. They combined personal friendship with professional activism in a way that

fundamentally shaped Democratic politics and the development of New Deal's social welfare policies (p. 194).

She also makes clear that this kind of politics generated from women's awareness of gender in public life. This perception of gender as a strength rather than a weakness was carried over from the suffrage movement but disappeared with Dewson and her generation.

Ware's book is important because it assesses women's influence on politics and the obstacles that they encounter when attempting to cooperate with male power structures while maintaining a separate power base. In that sense her explorations of women's political involvement in the 1930s has direct ramifications for feminist discussions today about the necessity (and risk of being co-opted) of dealing with society at large. But the biographical layout of Ware's book becomes an obstacle for Ware's intent to place Dewson in a larger perspective and make her an exemplary model for women's collective experience. In a period noted for conflicts among women's organizations, Ware limits her discussions about these conflicts because Dewson characteristically managed to remain outside them: "Never a radical activist, disenchanted liberal, or even a critic of democratic capitalism, she always cooperated with the American political system rather than challenged it" (p. 74). Perhaps Ware should have concentrated on writing an analysis of Dewson's political strategies rather than writing a traditional biography with chapters on her childhood and early career since that is obviously not her forte. One of the good points in Ware's account of Dewson as a person, however, is that she is far from idealized. Repeatedly, Ware notes Dewson's condescending attitude to women around her who married and had children and her lack of understanding that their priorities might differ from hers. (Dewson herself remained at home until her mother's death when Dewson was 38 and then lived together with the heiress Polly Porter the rest of her life.) Further underscoring this distance Ware refers to her subject as "Dewson" rather than "Molly."

It is obviously unfair to compare a theoretical and political account with a biography. Cott's impressive wealth of information and empirical detail are a direct contrast to the much smaller scope of Ware's biography. Yet Ware makes her points strongly and consistently in readable prose, whereas Cott's language and scholarly aspirations hamper the reading process. Despite Cott's and Ware's very different approaches, both re-interpret the gains that women made after winning the vote and escaping the nineteenth-century "bonds of womanhood." Worse than losing the ability to speak with a common voice, women lost their strong network generated by the women's culture and the basis for establishing independent structures to cooperate with male structures. The two authors also emphasize that these women were not passive victims of patriarchal suppression but actively struggled to become equal members of male institutions and structures. And the problems that are raised in the two books are distressingly similar to 1970s political controversy over the ERA in the United States and to the problems of modern women today, trying to steer a course between a positive image of womanhood and the history of exclusion from institutions of power because of their sex.

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