

## Gloria Steinem

*In the December 2, 2001, issue of the New York Times Magazine, the novelist Jane Smiley reflected on the "Women's Crusade" as presented by Laura Bush after the first lady had made a public statement that the United States deserved credit for liberating women in Afghanistan during our country's war against terrorism there in the months after September 11. Smiley observed that "she can ally herself with women for whom any sort of life other than imprisonment is a liberation but protect herself from feminists . . . because her position doesn't require any theory or analysis that might reflect on the corporate or multinational goals of G.O.P. sponsors or the failures of American foreign policy over the years." Reflecting back on thirty years of the Women's Movement, Smiley acknowledged the naïveté of the early feminists and what she called the "dangerous business" of women's liberation:*

*When we were sitting around in consciousness-raising groups and talking about jobs and boyfriends and sister-*

*hood, we were new to the moral complexities and potential risks of liberating women. For one thing, we didn't know that our drive to define the meaning of our own lives would call out a conservative backlash, that we would be accused of destroying the family and tearing up the fabric of American life by the very party now trumpeting its determination to have Afghan women at the negotiating table where the future Afghan government is decided. We didn't know how much some men would resent sharing power and how stubborn their resentment would be. We didn't know that our ideas weren't universally good and that women in other parts of the world would have different needs and use different methods to liberate themselves.*

*In 1971, the year before she founded Ms. magazine, feminist leader Gloria Steinem gave a talk at Harvard University that was one of the most balanced and insightful accounts of the goals of the Women's Movement in the United States at the time. "A New Egalitarian Life Style" was published in the Op-Ed section of the New York Times on August 26, 1971. It was included in About Women (1973), a paperback anthology edited by S. Berg and S. J. Marks.*

## A NEW EGALITARIAN LIFE STYLE

THE FIRST PROBLEM for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn. We are filled with the popular wisdom of several centuries just past, and we are terrified to give it up. Patriotism means obedience, age means wisdom, woman means submission, black means inferior: these are preconceptions imbedded so deeply in our thinking that we honestly may not know that they are there.

Whether it's woman's secondary role in society or the paternalistic role of the United States in the world, the old assumptions just don't work any more.

Part of living this revolution is having the scales fall from our eyes. Every day, we see small obvious truths that we had missed before. Our histories, for instance, have generally been written for and about white men. Inhabited countries were "discovered" when the first white male set foot there, and most of us learned more about any

one European country than we did about Africa and Asia combined.

We need Women's Studies courses just as much as we need Black Studies. We need courses on sexism and American law just as much as we need them on racism. The number of laws that discriminate against women is staggering. At least to women.

"Anonymous," as Virginia Woolf once said bitterly, "was a woman."

If we weren't studying white paternalistic documents, after all, we might start long before Charlemagne in history, or Blackstone in law. More than 5,000 years before, in fact, when women were treated as equals or superiors. When women were the gods, and worshipped *because* they had the children. Men didn't consider child-bearing a drawback, and in fact imitated that envied act in their ceremonies. It was thought that women bore fruit when they were ripe, like trees.

When paternity was discovered—a day I like to imagine as a gigantic light bulb over someone's head, as he says, "Oh, *that's* why"—the idea of ownership of children began. And the possibility of passing authority and goods down to them. And the origin of marriage—which was locking women up long enough to make sure who the father was. Women were subjugated, the original political subjugation and the pattern which others were to follow, as the means of production. They were given whatever tasks the men considered odious, and they became "feminine," a cultural habit which has continued till today.

When other tribes or groups were captured, they were given the least desirable role: that of women. When black people were brought to these shores as slaves, for instance, they were given the legal status of wives; that is, chattel. Since then, our revolutions have followed, each on the heels of the other.

I don't mean to equate women's problems with the sufferings of slavery. Women lose their identities: black men lose their lives. But, as Gunnar Myrdal pointed out more than thirty years ago, the parallel between women and blacks—the two largest second-class groups—is the deepest truth of American life.

We suffer from the same myths—childlike natures, smaller brains, naturally passive, lack of objectivity (Harvard Law School professors are still peddling that), inability to govern ourselves, identity as sex objects, supernatural powers—usually evil, and special job skills. We're great at detail work for instance, as long as it's poorly paid, but brain surgery is something else.

When we make a generalization about women, it helps if we

substitute black, or Chicano or Puerto Rican. Then we see what we are saying.

The truth is that women are so much more durable than men at every stage of life, so much less subject to diseases of stress, for instance. Child-bearing shouldn't mean child-rearing. Motherhood is not all-consuming, nor is fatherhood a sometime thing. In fact, there are tribes in which the fathers rear the children, and the famous mother instinct turns out to be largely cultural.

The problem is achieving a compassionate balance, something this society has not done. It's clear that most American children suffer from too much mother and too little father.

Women employees in general lose no more time from work than men do, even including childbirth. They change jobs less, since they have less chance of trading upward, and tend to leave only after long periods of no promotion; thus benefiting male employes by financing their retirement plans.

[Women don't want to imitate the male pattern of obsessive work ending up with a heart attack and an engraved wrist watch. We want to humanize the work pattern, to make new, egalitarian life styles.]

We are not more moral, we are only less corrupted by power. But we haven't been culturally trained to feel our identity depends on money, manipulative power, or a gun.

From now on, no man can call himself liberal, or radical, or even a conservative advocate of fair play, if his work depends in any way on the unpaid or underpaid labor of women at home, or in the office. Politics doesn't begin in Washington. Politics begins with those who are oppressed right here.

And maybe, if we live this revolution every day, we will put a suitable end to this second 5,000-year period: that of patriarchy and racism. Perhaps we have a chance for a third and new period—one of humanism.

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