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# *The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s*

ESTELLE B. FREEDMAN

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IN his suggestive article, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's," Arthur S. Link analyzed the legacy of the pre-World War I "progressive coalition" of businessmen, farm groups, labor unions, and "advocates of social justice."<sup>1</sup> However, he neglected to mention the fate of feminists, either those women active in the suffrage movement or those involved in broader areas of social reform. Despite Link's inattention to women reformers, the question he posed about the progressive movement in the 1920s should be asked of the women's movement as well. What happened to feminism during the decade after the political goal of suffrage had been achieved?

Failure to consider the women's movement in the 1920s is not an uncommon oversight among historians. Even students of women's history, including Eleanor Flexner, Andrew Sinclair, and Aileen Kraditor, conclude their accounts with the passage of the nineteenth amendment.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, this tendency to ignore post-1920 women's history has fostered the repetition of a standard image of American women in the 1920s. Frederick Lewis Allen's account is representative:

The revolution [in manners and morals] was accelerated . . . by the growing independence of the American woman. She won the suffrage in 1920. She seemed, it is true, to be very little interested in it once she had it; she voted, but

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur S. Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920's?" *American Historical Review*, LXIV (July 1959), 833-51.

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959); Andrew Sinclair, *The Better Half: The Emancipation of the American Woman* (New York, 1965); Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York, 1965). See also Page Smith, *Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History: Being an examination of the strange history of the female sex from the beginning to the present with special attention to the women of America, illustrated by curious anecdotes and quotations by divers authors, ancient and modern* (Boston, 1970); and Ishbel Ross, *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve* (New York, 1969).

mostly as the unregenerate men about her did. . . . Few of the younger women could rouse themselves to even a passing interest in politics: to them it was a sordid and futile business, without flavor and without hope. Nevertheless, the winning of the suffrage had its effect. It consolidated woman's position as man's equal.<sup>3</sup>

William E. Leuchtenburg reached a similar conclusion nearly three decades later:

The new woman wanted the same freedom of movement that men had and the same economic and political rights. By the end of the 1920's she had come a long way. Before the war, a lady did not set foot in a saloon; after the war, she entered a speakeasy as thoughtlessly as she would go into a railroad station. . . . In the business and political worlds, women competed with men; in marriage, they moved toward a contractual role. . . . Sexual independence was merely the most sensational aspect of the generally altered status of women.<sup>4</sup>

These and other accounts have attributed several characteristics to the "New Women" of the 1920s: they failed to vote as a block or in greater numbers than did men; their manners and morals differed sharply from those of previous generations; and their legal and economic position had so improved that for the first time in history women had become the social and economic equals of men.

An examination of the record, however, reveals that historians have repeated these descriptions not because research and analysis have confirmed their validity, but because no new questions have been asked about women in the 1920s since the initial impressionistic observations were made. The fact that these interpretations have been handed down for forty years with very little modification makes them suspect, and closer analysis confirms that several important historical questions have remained unanswered. Who precisely was the new woman; what was her fate after 1920; and how does her history relate to that of the women's movement? Specifically, historians need to clarify when and why the organized women's movement lost its influence; whether enfranchisement affected women's efforts for social reform and for equal rights for their sex; precisely what economic gains women made; and how widely and deeply the moral revolution extended.

Original and creative use of primary resources is necessary to answer these questions. But before this research is undertaken, it is essential to understand what has already been written about women in the 1920s. This essay seeks to provide such a historiographical framework by tracing inter-

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York, 1931), 95-96.

<sup>4</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity: 1914-32* (Chicago, 1958), 159.

pretations of the new woman from the 1920s to the present. The influence of historical events and the emphases on political and legal rights as opposed to broader feminist goals is of central concern.<sup>5</sup> But of even greater significance is the shift of conceptual frameworks from the contemporary analysis of the 1920s to the current quasi-feminist approach.

For years, historians agreed with Mary Beard's claim that women have been a positive "force in history." They praised the post-1920 woman as an active participant in American politics and economic life, as if trying to correct what Arthur Meier Schlesinger had termed "the pall of silence which historians have allowed to rest" over women's "services and achievements."<sup>6</sup> Women's history was merely an effort to include more women and their successes in the history books. In later years, after social scientists rediscovered the "woman question" in the 1950s, historians groped toward a feminist view which holds that women have been unable to contribute fully to American society—even after suffrage—because they have remained the oppressed victims of history.<sup>7</sup> If the latter view prevails, women's history must become the study of a unique interest group, a study which requires new forms of research and new conceptual models.

Since historians were relatively silent on the question of the new woman during all but two periods—from approximately 1927 to 1933 and from 1964 to the present—broad accounts and textbooks must suffice as evidence for a review of the literature. Toward the end of the long period of neglect, scholars in other disciplines began to question the validity of the image of the post-World War I woman in America. By the time that a revival of interest in the subject had reached popular dimensions (coincident with but not necessarily related to the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*), historians too had begun to review their conceptions of the new woman. Numerous revisionist interpretations can now be ex-

<sup>5</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Women's Rights and American Feminism," *American Scholar*, 40 (Spring 1971), 235-48. Gerda Lerner's distinction between the women's rights movement and the broader women's emancipation movement has been adopted in the following discussion. She defines the former as a quest for political and legal equality and the latter as a search for "freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by sex; self-determination and autonomy . . . financial and cultural independence, freedom to choose one's own life-style regardless of sex." *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York, 1922), 126.

<sup>7</sup> Mary R. Beard, *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York, 1946). For a discussion of historiographical approaches to women's history and the distinction between Beardian and feminist views, see Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," *Journal of Social History*, 3 (Fall 1969), 53-62. Lerner rejects both approaches; she contends that women are too complex to be considered as a single group, although she recognizes that they have been the victims of group discrimination.

pected; from what historiographical traditions do they proceed?

Social commentators of the late 1920s and early 1930s reached mixed conclusions in their evaluation of the first decade of woman suffrage. Concentrating on political and economic measures of emancipation, they praised women's participation in American society, in spite of strong indications that women had not achieved equality.

As might be expected, many analyses reflected pre-suffrage positions. In a 1927 *Current History* symposium on "The New Woman," Charlotte Perkins Gilman found extensive evidence of women's political, literary, and economic achievement since enfranchisement, and Carrie Chapman Catt wrote that the vote had been used profitably to remove discrimination on the state level and to improve legislation for women and children.<sup>8</sup> Former opponents of woman suffrage expressed discontent in articles decrying "Woman's Encroachment on Man's Domain," and the "Evils of Woman's Revolt Against the Old Standards."<sup>9</sup> Ida Tarbell, an opponent of suffrage in the early debate, wrote in 1930, "I don't feel that women have contributed anything new or worthwhile . . . I maintain that this ten years experience has proved that women have become the tools of party leaders, just as men have."<sup>10</sup>

Positive but apologetic evaluations of women's progress appeared in a special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* devoted to "Women in the Modern World." A regional director of the League of Women Voters argued that it would take more than eight years to break a tradition of exclusion from public affairs and that the contribution of women could not be measured by the size of their vote. Another contributor proclaimed that already "women have successfully stepped from social life into the political realm," even as she felt it necessary to assure her readers that women politicians did not shirk their domestic duties.<sup>11</sup>

Journalists, too, concentrated on political progress. Although generally favorable, their analyses were usually qualified by an apologetic tone. "Not

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Woman's Achievements Since the Franchise," *Current History*, XXVII (Oct. 1927), 7; Carrie Chapman Catt, "Woman Suffrage Only an Episode in Age-Old Movement," *ibid.* See also, "Ten Years of Woman Suffrage," *Literary Digest*, 105 (April 26, 1930), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony M. Ludovici, "Woman's Encroachment on Man's Domain," *Current History*, XXVII (Oct. 1927), 21-25; Hugh L. McMenemy, "Evils of Woman's Revolt Against the Old Standards," *ibid.*, 30-32.

<sup>10</sup> "Ten Years of Woman Suffrage," 11.

<sup>11</sup> Marguerite M. Wells, "Some Effects of Woman Suffrage," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CXLIII (May 1929), 209; Dorothy Ashby Moncre, "Women in Political Life," *Current History*, XXIX (Jan. 1929), 639-43.

many of our editors seem enthusiastic over the showing made under the Nineteenth Amendment," a *Literary Digest* survey found; "Yet on the other hand, few are pessimistic." A representative editorial comment appeared in the *Winston-Salem Journal*:

The women have acquitted themselves well during this first ten years of their political enfranchisement. But even greater results will be expected during the next decade. During the ten years just passed the women have been laying a foundation. The superstructure of achievement now remains to be built.<sup>12</sup>

Social scientists whose early evaluations reported few substantive gains for women were not without sympathy for the problems the new voters faced. The authors of a statistical study of the 1920 election found that women had not utilized the ballot to the same extent as men, nor had they voted predictably; however, they suggested that women were politically handicapped—not by a psychological incapacity for politics, as some critics claimed, but only by lack of experience. "When participating in politics has become through habit as natural to women as to men . . . women will undoubtedly participate in all phases of political life on a basis of actual as well as nominal equality with men."<sup>13</sup>

Although most writers stressed political rights, a few surveyed women's progress in finding new economic and social roles. Radical editor V. F. Calverton believed that "woman's economic independence has been a far more important item in her emancipation than [has] her political enfranchisement." He was impressed by the increasing number of married women who were working and by the effects of the growing women's labor force in fortifying single women's desires for independence. However, Calverton duly noted the pervasive discrimination against women workers, particularly that of organized labor against married women in industry.<sup>14</sup>

Other writers who explored the possibilities of social and cultural emancipation of women in the 1920s found, like Calverton, that anti-feminist attitudes persisted. George Britt wrote that "it is possible for the Southern girl now to an extent never permitted before to . . . become a person and not just another woman." But, after citing individual examples of professional women in the South, the growth of women's clubs during

<sup>12</sup> "Ten Years of Woman Suffrage," 11.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart A. Rice and Malcolm M. Willey, "American Women's Ineffective Use of the Vote," *Current-History*, XX (July 1924), 641-47.

<sup>14</sup> V. F. Calverton, "Careers for Women—A Survey of Results," *ibid.*, XXIX (Jan. 1929), 633-38; V. F. Calverton and Samuel D. Schmalhausen, eds., *Woman's Coming of Age: A Symposium* (New York, 1931), xi-xx. .

the 1920s, changes in personal habits such as smoking, and the involvement of women in social reform, Britt concluded: "The Southern girl may like to earn a little money and have her fling, but the ideal in the back of her head is a nice house in the home town and a decorative position in society."<sup>15</sup> Former Judge Ben Lindsey drew on his experiences counseling youth in the 1920s to make ample references to signs of the moral revolution: premarital sex, birth control, drinking, contempt for older values. Yet almost every case he cited revealed a strong conflict between the appeal of flamboyant freedom and the sense of sin it still engendered. Beneath it all Lindsey suspected that in a few years the lively flapper would become "a happy, loyal wife with several children."<sup>16</sup>

In spite of indications that only limited women's rights and not broader feminist goals had been advanced, the optimistic writers of the 1920s generally hailed the participation of women in American society and the end of discrimination. Typical of their strained efforts was Chase Going Woodhouse's overly enthusiastic tone, even as his evidence wore thin. Women had made significant advances in education, Woodhouse wrote, particularly "outstanding improvements in nursing education," but Harvard still refused to train women for law and medicine; employment figures "increased steadily," he claimed, although for the period after 1919 he had to juggle figures to include housewives among the "gainfully employed"; women achieved professional advances, he noted, adding, however, that they were mainly in teaching and mostly before 1920. Despite the fact that in education, industry, and politics "despair and resentment" characterized women's responses, Woodhouse claimed "steadily gained recognition" for women.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly women had made some advances by the end of the 1920s, although few commentators explained how their economic and political gains compared to previous decades or with the broader social and cultural goals of feminists. In politics, women writers claimed significant progress, while men graciously excused women's supposedly poor voting record, and most writers ignored entirely women's legislative achievements of the early 1920s. A few writers recognized the limitations in women's roles, but most strained to emphasize the positive, although often superficial, aspects of women's history in the 1920s—slight increases in political officeholding

<sup>15</sup> George Britt, "Women in the New South," Calverton and Schmalhausen, eds., *Woman's Coming of Age*, 409-23.

<sup>16</sup> Ben B. Lindsey, "The Promise and Peril of the New Freedom," *ibid.*, 447-71.

<sup>17</sup> Chase Going Woodhouse, "The Status of Women," *American Journal of Sociology*, XXXV (May 1930), 1091-96.

and nonprofessional jobs and greater sexual freedom. Nevertheless they confidently portrayed the period as one in which feminist goals were well on their way to fulfillment.<sup>18</sup> By proclaiming emancipation a *fait accompli* and denying the existence of discrimination, they only helped to discourage further feminist efforts for deeper social change.

Meanwhile, historians began to incorporate the 1920s into their works, and they too stressed positive roles and women's increased participation in American life. Although published in the early 1930s, the first histories reflected the tone of the years before the crash rather than the Depression. Charles and Mary Beard, Allen, and Preston William Slosson echoed the feelings of the generation that had seen both the pre-suffrage woman and the new woman, and their accounts emphasized the changes in woman's social position during the 1920s.

"Women," wrote the Beards, "now assumed an unquestioned role in shaping the production of goods, material, humanistic, literary, and artistic." The ballot had enlarged women's influence in politics, while economic power, education, and social freedom had made women "powerful arbiters in all matters of taste, morals, and thinking." The Beards seemed pleased with these successes, but they were also apprehensive about some of the consequences of women's emancipation—the decline in the authority of fathers, defiant and divorce-prone women, and the "more intransigent" demand for "'absolute and unconditional equal opportunity' in every sphere" of an equal rights amendment.<sup>19</sup>

Slosson reported the "complete acceptance of American women in political life" and even greater progress, if that was possible, in economic status and social prestige. But Slosson's main concerns centered on areas traditionally defined as women's spheres. In a chapter entitled "The American Woman Wins Equality," Slosson devoted six pages to economic and political developments and twenty-two pages to the family, home, and fashions. Shorter skirts, more comfortable undergarments, shorter hair, the use of cosmetics, smoking, drinking, and the "breezy, slangy, informal" flapper characterized the era for him. As suffrage "disappeared from politics," women became content, he wrote, with the exception of "the more doctrinaire type" who pressed for equal rights.<sup>20</sup> Women's history was reverting to women's spheres of home, fashions, and sex and finding there little or no oppression.

<sup>18</sup> A similar confidence among social scientists in the 1920s has been described by Henry F. May, "Shifting Perspectives on the 1920's," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII (Dec. 1956), 405-27.

<sup>19</sup> Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization: The Industrial Era* (New York, 1930), 753-58.

<sup>20</sup> Preston William Slosson, *The Great Crusade and After: 1914-1928* (New York, 1930), 130-61.



According to Allen, women did not vote in the 1920s, but they did work, if not in offices or factories, then in the professional job of homemaking. But the job, or the potential for earning, created a feeling of comparative economic independence in women, which, for Allen, threatened husbandly and parental authority. Even with all of this, woman wanted more: "She was ready for the revolution"—sexual freedom, as enhanced by Sigmund Freud, the automobile, and Hollywood. Changes in fashion, Allen implied, were signs of deeper changes in the American feminine ideal.<sup>21</sup>

With these three historical views, women in the 1920s began to be presented as flappers, more concerned with clothing and sex than with politics. Women had by choice, the accounts suggested, rejected political emancipation and found sexual freedom. The term feminism nearly disappeared from historical accounts, except in somewhat pejorative references to the Woman's party. While critics claimed that women had achieved equality with men, they issued subtle warnings of moral and family decay.

At the same time, women writing about the 1920s remained more concerned about political and economic equality than about the flapper and the moral revolution. In 1933, Inez Haynes Irwin offered *Angels and Amazons*, an all too glowing chronicle of the advancement of women in American history. Looking back over the first decade of new freedom, Irwin found four organized feminist activities "worth remembering": work for child welfare, self-education as voters, influence on world peace, and the struggle for equal legal status for women.<sup>22</sup> None of these subjects had been discussed yet by historians, and Irwin left the moral revolution entirely to them.

In the same year, Sophonisba Breckinridge offered a more sophisticated approach to women's history in a monograph which Henry F. May has called "a monument of the chastened social science of the thirties."<sup>23</sup> Entitled *Women in the Twentieth Century*, her volume was a statistical survey accompanied by analytical comment on women's organizations, occupations, and political life. It is an invaluable aid for the study of American women, in sobering contrast to the superficial treatment of women in other works.

Breckinridge's conclusions suggested that perhaps women were not the emancipated, satisfied participants in American society that historians were describing. While an increasing number of women worked, she found that

<sup>21</sup> Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 97-109.

<sup>22</sup> Inez Haynes Irwin, *Angels and Amazons: A Hundred Years of American Women* (Garden City, 1933), 411.

<sup>23</sup> Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *Women in the Twentieth Century: A Study of the Political, Social and Economic Activities* (New York, 1933); May, "Shifting Perspectives on the 1920's," 410.

they were severely restricted in their range of employment. In the realm of public activity, Breckinridge reported that "the moment seems an unhappy one at which to attempt to take account of stock." Women had become disillusioned with the ballot and had turned to government agencies and educational institutions for bases of emancipation, but they had not as yet been successful in obtaining political power. Breckinridge described women's lobbying efforts and their roles in the national parties, but her picture is nowhere as promising as either Irwin's account of public life or the "progress" implied in Slosson's or Allen's descriptions of the flapper. The Breckinridge study provided the data which might have prompted historical revisions on women's emancipation in the 1920s. On the contrary, with one exception in the mid-1930s, her work seems to have been unconsulted for several decades, and the new woman remained an assumption rather than a subject for historical inquiry.

The one writer who did examine Breckinridge's work was Ernest R. Groves, a sociologist of marriage and the family who stressed the economic roots of feminist activity. Groves outlined the effects of industrial employment during World War I in raising women's expectations and in a "heightening of the feelings of self-interest." Groves was aware that the growth of a female labor force did not automatically change attitudes toward working women and the family, and he suggested that the continued existence of a temporary female work force contributed to an exploitative double standard of wages geared to nonpermanent help. While the vote had quickened the trend to legal equality and reinforced lobbying activities, women were not yet, in Groves' view, active and equal subjects in history. Later writers would agree with him that women were a special class, treated unequally, the "feminine side of a masculine civilization."<sup>24</sup>

From the mid-1930s through the late 1940s feminism was not a popular subject among historians, just as women's rights was not one of the raging issues of the day. A country struggling through a prolonged depression saw woman's emancipation and her entry into the job market in a very different light than had an earlier, more prosperous society. Working women were being asked, if not forced, to leave their newly acquired positions and return to the home, either to allow men to take up their jobs or at least to

<sup>24</sup> Ernest R. Groves, *The American Woman: The Feminine Side of a Masculine Civilization* (New York, 1937), 364, 377. Legislative victories included the Women's Bureau, which became a permanent agency in 1920, and the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, which funded welfare and hygiene centers for maternity and infancy care. Ernest R. Groves also connected the sexual revolution with economic roots: because women's motives for marrying had become less economic, he reasoned, women had begun to "demand from the experience a fulfillment of personality which more and more includes satisfactory sexual relationships." *Ibid.*, 389.

offer moral support to families in a time of crisis.<sup>25</sup> When rearmament and the war provided new jobs for women, American society had ample reason to readjust to working women; but by no means had a consensus been reached on the proper place of women in American society, for the postwar years witnessed renewed debate over women's roles.

It is not surprising that during these crisis-ridden years, historians were either silent or ambivalent about the emancipation of women. The only sense one can get of their interpretations must come from textbooks and broad surveys of American thought, most of which contained brief sections on the new woman.<sup>26</sup> While no one seemed to doubt that emancipation had occurred, several historians were unsure whether to welcome or denounce the new woman.

Historians often cited the relationship between urbanization and the emancipation of women to explain economic opportunities in the 1920s: a rising standard of living, more household appliances, and compulsory public education provided women with unprecedented leisure time which enabled them to join women's clubs or to enter the work force.<sup>27</sup> These developments in turn influenced family life, the texts claimed, as evidenced by a declining birth rate and a climbing divorce rate. At this point historians often highlighted woman's new role of "professional homemaker." For example, Dwight Lowell Dumond's 1937 college text explained that feminists in the nineteenth century had made only small gains, but "Since then household electrical appliances have done more to emancipate women than all the generations of agitation by militant suffragettes." Consequently, "women were living in a new and happier world. . . . The joy of homemaking replaced the drudgery of housekeeping. . . ." <sup>28</sup> Merle Curti's image

<sup>25</sup> According to Robert and Helen Lynd, the need for women to work to supplement reduced family incomes during the Depression confused traditional roles and placed renewed emphasis on femininity and on the value of women as homemakers. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937), 102-43. E. Wight Bakke noted that although women worked during the Depression, their employment was always considered a necessity, and their proper place remained in the home. E. Wight Bakke, *The Unemployed Worker: A Study of the Task of Making a Living without a Job* (London, 1940), 118.

<sup>26</sup> Jeannette P. Nichols, *Twentieth Century United States: A History* (New York, 1943); Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (2 vols., New York, 1942); John D. Hicks, *The American Nation: A History of the United States from 1865 to the Present* (Boston, 1949).

<sup>27</sup> Harold Underwood Faulkner, *American Political and Social History* (New York, 1937), 651-52; Foster Rhea Dulles, *Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), 176-77; Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Roosevelt to Roosevelt: The United States in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1937), 35; Merle Curti, Richard Shryock, Thomas Cochran, and Fred Harvey Harrington, *An American History* (New York, 1950), 452-60; Louis M. Hacker and Helene S. Zahler, *The United States in the 20th Century* (New York, 1952), 355-56.

<sup>28</sup> Dumond, *Roosevelt to Roosevelt*, 35.

of women in the 1920s displayed ambivalence toward working women. While he found that women's magazines devoted space to careers "in the big world outside the home," he added that they "naturally" gave more space to the efficient management of the home.<sup>29</sup> Foster Rhea Dulles' one page on the emancipation of women related increasing opportunity in business and professions to divorce rates, as well as to the development of independent social lives for women.<sup>30</sup> Harvey Wish discussed women's employment outside the home and then cited Robert and Helen Lynd's Middletown study to demonstrate the weaknesses in modern marriage—the loss of companionship in marriage, the use of birth control, and the new manners (smoking, drinking, and masculinized fashions) of women.<sup>31</sup>

These authors may not have intended to link working women with family decline, but often the proximity of the two statements, if not an explicitly drawn connection, brought them together in the mind of the reader. Similarly, historians in the 1930s and 1940s viewed the "moral revolution" in more negative terms—as a threat to the family—than it had been seen in the late 1920s, when the short skirt and bobbed hair were likely to be used as symbols of emancipation.

Once again, historians disagreed about the political effects of enfranchisement. Some believed that voting rights for women had little or no effect.<sup>32</sup> Others claimed that women had won total equality, as in John D. Hicks' statement that even before 1920 "Legal discriminations against women, aside from suffrage, were brought near the vanishing point."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Henry Steele Commager wrote that while the emancipation of women had begun in the 1890s with the typewriter, telephone exchange, and labor saving devices, it was "dramatized by the vote, and guaranteed by birth control."<sup>34</sup> Dumond pointed to women's political roles in the Women's Joint Congressional Committee and stated that "Their success in securing

<sup>29</sup> Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, 1943), 700. Merle Curti left the reader with the impression that women remained at home in the 1920s as efficient homemakers, occasionally glancing up from the card table to take note of the world. But during his discussion of the 1930s, Curti looked back on the decade as a time of "expanding economic opportunities from which so many ambitious women had profited. . . ." The 1930s, he claimed, "dealt blow after blow at women in the professions, in the arts, and in business. Feminists regretted that the new turn of events undermined the progress women had been making. . . ." *Ibid.*, 721. When this progress had been made is unclear.

<sup>30</sup> Dulles, *Twentieth Century America*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> Harvey Wish, *Society and Thought in Modern America: A Social and Intellectual History of the American People from 1865* (New York, 1952), 445-47.

<sup>32</sup> Hacker and Zahler, *United States in the 20th Century*, 356; Faulkner, *American Political and Social History*, 651-52.

<sup>33</sup> Hicks, *American Nation*, 408.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven, 1950), 46.

state legislation for child welfare, women's legal rights, social hygiene and education have been little less than phenomenal."<sup>35</sup> A 1950 textbook by Curti, Richard Shryock, Thomas Cochran, and Fred Harvey Harrington also acknowledged women's fight for progressive legislation and local good government in the 1920s, but contrary to Dumond claimed that women rarely joined political parties.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, then, historians briefly portrayed post-1920 women as emancipated by the vote and by an urbanized, industrialized society, but choosing to remain for the most part in the home. Their portrayals of satisfied professional housewives or unstable career women were doubtless both products of and reinforcements for the Depression psychology which sought to bring women out of the work force. While legal and political equality were praised, social and cultural emancipation evoked gentle reproaches. In no sense, however, did historians acknowledge the persistence of discrimination in all realms.

Post-World War II American society faced a dilemma of women's roles: would the many women who had gone to work during the war return to their homes? Popular literature on "woman's place" abounded after 1947,<sup>37</sup> and scholars, too, began to question women's roles in a way that would eventually change the direction of historical writing on the new woman. Once the existing discrimination against women was exposed, historians would have to reexamine their portrayal of the past decades as periods of emancipation.

Evidence of a reemerging intellectual curiosity about women can be found in the publications and reviews of the early 1950s. Alfred Kinsey's report on *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* raised dormant issues of women's sexuality.<sup>38</sup> More provoking, perhaps, was the 1953 English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which produced new hopes and fears of a revitalization of feminism.<sup>39</sup> In the same year, Mirra

<sup>35</sup> Dumond, *Roosevelt to Roosevelt*, 60. The Women's Joint Congressional Committee worked for passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act (1921), the Cable Act (1922), which guaranteed the right of independent citizenship for married women, and dozens of other bills.

<sup>36</sup> Curti, Shryock, Cochran, and Harrington, *An American History*, 462.

<sup>37</sup> On the postwar confusion over women's roles, see William Chafe, "From Suffrage to Liberation: The Changing Roles of American Women, 1920-1970" (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1971), especially chapter ten. William Chafe cites, for example, Frances Levison, "American Woman's Dilemma," *Life*, 22 (June 16, 1947), 101-16.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred Kinsey and others, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia, 1953).

<sup>39</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1953). The generally favorable reviews ranged in opinion from "a very lively thesis" (*New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1953) to ". . . borders on the paranoid" (Charles J. Rollo, "Reader's Choice," *Atlantic*, 191 [April 1953], 86). Two reviewers predicted that the book would dispel myths about women and encourage reform. Patrick Mullahy, "Woman's Place," *Nation*, 176 (Feb. 21, 1953), 171-

Komarovsky defended equal education for women, and another sociologist, Sidney Ditzion, published *Marriage, Morals, and Sex in America: A History of Ideas*. If these offerings were not sufficient to bring women to the attention of the intellectual community, the very title of Ashley Montagu's essay, *The Natural Superiority of Women*, must have raised a few eyebrows (though probably not much consciousness).<sup>40</sup>

These precursors of the new feminism appeared in the 1950s for several reasons. American women were ready for a revival of feminism. They had weathered the years of the Depression and war without making new demands for equality. They now lived in an increasingly affluent society which was beginning to turn its attention to the question of racial equality, a subject which has historically heightened feminist concerns. Furthermore, the generation of women which came to maturity in the 1950s had not lived through and tired of an earlier feminist movement. These women were at a crossroads; would they return to the long interrupted battle for equality, or would they be seduced by the security promised to homemakers? Scholars looked back to the 1920s for clues, and although they considered women's political life, they placed more emphasis on social and cultural forces and explored the social roles open to women.

In 1950, for example, sociologists Arnold W. Green and Eleanor Melnick asked "What Has Happened to the Feminist Movement?" They found that feminism had achieved specific goals of suffrage and job opportunity, as well as contributing to broader change by giving impetus to "the steady nurturing of the philosophy of the service state." But the feminist movement, they believed, had in a larger sense failed, for "about thirty years ago, in both politics and the job world, a fairly stable level was reached which the further passage of time has only indeterminately altered." Three factors hampered women's efforts for further advancement: the "residue of prejudice against working women," especially in non-traditional women's occupations; feminists' ignorance "of the fundamental changes in social structure which must precede women's assuming positions of leadership . . ."; and class cleavages in the women's movement as exacerbated by the conflict over the equal rights amendment (the National

72; and Ashley Montagu, *New York Herald Tribune*, Feb. 22, 1953. Elizabeth Hardwick bitterly criticized the book as one which filled her "with a kind of shame and sadness." Elizabeth Hardwick, "The Subjection of Women," *Patisan Review*, 20 (May 1953), 321-31. Joint reviews on women's literature included S. Rudikoff, *Hudson Review*, IX (Summer 1956); and Robert Bierstadt, "The Women Books," *Antioch Review*, XIV (June 1954).

<sup>40</sup> Mirra Komarovsky, *Women in the Modern World: Their Education and their Dilemmas* (Boston, 1953); Sidney Ditzion, *Marriage, Morals, and Sex in America: A History of Ideas* (New York, 1953); Ashley Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women* (New York, 1953).

Woman's party of upper-class and professional women supported the amendment, while proletarian and middle-class women wanted protective legislation).<sup>41</sup>

The view that women had not yet achieved full equality and that social prejudices were at least partially responsible found even fuller expression in 1951 in a pivotal article by sociologist Helen Mayer Hacker. Elaborating on Gunnar Myrdal's comparison of woman's social position with that of Negroes, Hacker viewed women as a minority group that suffered collective discrimination, received separate socialization, and generally fit sociological definitions of minority group status and behavior.<sup>42</sup> Of particular interest to historians was Hacker's conceptualization of a "sex relations cycle," comparable to the race relations cycle hypothesized by Robert Park. She believed that the latter stages of the cycle of competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation had been reached with the passage of the suffrage amendment, and she suggested prophetically that a new era of women's dissatisfaction was approaching.

The analogy of women with minority groups later appeared elsewhere, including Ditzion's *Marriage, Morals, and Sex* and in a reinterpretation of the flapper by B. June West. Rejecting the traditional view that women's fads and fashions in the 1920s were manifestations of freedom, West's literary analysis suggested that women's fashions were an apeing of men, "as minority groups have always done . . . to the so-called superior group." Although the plays and novels of the 1920s depicted women in a variety of masculinized roles—the aggressor in sex, the divorcee—West cautioned that the literature "implied a moral disintegration that was quite likely more publicized than actually existent."<sup>43</sup>

Another reinterpretation of changes in women's roles in the 1920s which questioned historians' assertions of sex equality was *Women and Work in America* by Robert W. Smuts. The legal status of women, he found, shifted not after World War I but earlier with the passing of the frontier, and by the end of the war the feminist movement was "rapidly subsiding." The war had led to a "remarkable liberalization of views about women's abilities and the propriety of their working outside the home," but the postwar decades were marked by women's lack of interest in many of the vic-

<sup>41</sup> Arnold W. Green and Eleanor Melnick, "What Has Happened to the Feminist Movement?" Alvin W. Gouldner, ed., *Studies in Leadership: Leadership and Democratic Action* (New York, 1950), 83, 296, 301.

<sup>42</sup> Helen Mayer Hacker, "Women as a Minority Group," *Social Forces*, 30 (Oct. 1951), 60-69. The definitions she used are those of Louis Wirth and Kurt Lewin.

<sup>43</sup> B. June West, "The 'New Woman,'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, I (July 1955), 55-68.

ories they had won. As evidence Smuts described a low level of interest in politics, a small increase in women working for pay, retirement from work at marriage, indifference of young women to feminism, and a failure to make significant gains in careers other than teaching and nursing. His explanation for this demise of feminism in the 1920s was that feminists, never more than a small minority of women to begin with, had won their primary goals; their demands became less important as the status of men and women became less differentiated. Thus the women's rights movement had failed only in succeeding too well, and women turned from a search for political and economic equality to one for sexual and social identity.<sup>44</sup>

How did historians respond to the postwar interest in the social roles of women? A few studies appeared, some inspired by the centennial of the Seneca Falls Convention, some worthless, such as Eric J. Dingwall's survey of women in American history, and some very suggestive, such as Carl N. Degler's article on Gilman.<sup>45</sup> For the most part, however, historians maintained the older views that women had lost interest in politics after attaining legal equality. Historians' interests in social emancipation remained confined to the "revolution in morals" concept.

Eric Goldman's 1952 history of reform, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, stated little more than that women's suffrage had made no difference, women failed to use the ballot, and when they did vote they did not vote as women.<sup>46</sup> Link's 1955 text repeated the story of the revolution in manners and morals, claimed that women had achieved political and economic equality after 1920, and seemed relieved to announce that the "revolution in morals and customs had run its full course by 1930 [when] . . . [t]here seemed to be certain signs of returning sanity."<sup>47</sup> Leuchtenburg argued that "women's suffrage had few consequences, good or evil"; although millions voted and some held office, "the new electorate caused scarcely a ripple in American political life." Yet in business and social life, Leuchtenburg described a period of accomplishment.<sup>48</sup>

These accounts are not necessarily mistaken, but they are glaringly inconsistent in their evaluations of the progress toward women's emancipation that was made in the 1920s. What is most interesting is that histo-

<sup>44</sup> Robert W. Smuts, *Women and Work in America* (New York, 1959), 142-43.

<sup>45</sup> Eric John Dingwall, *The American Woman: An Historical Study* (New York, 1956); Carl N. Degler, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman on the Theory and Practice of Feminism," *American Quarterly*, VIII (Spring 1956), 21-39.

<sup>46</sup> Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York, 1952), 292-93.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch: A History of the United States since the 1890's* (New York, 1955), 274-75.

<sup>48</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 160.



rians had not yet defined and attempted to resolve the controversies over the women's movement and the history of women after suffrage. Previous writers had claimed all things and nothing for women in the 1920s: that the vote was not used, that it had brought equality; that women became men's equals in the world of work, that they had remained in traditionally feminine occupations; that the sexual revolution had changed women's lives, that the revolution was more a literary than an actual occurrence. Either historians were indifferent to these issues in the early postwar years, or, perhaps, while other scholars pointed to new conceptual frameworks for viewing women's history, historians were contemplating the issues and beginning to design the research which was to take form in the next decade. If the latter was the case, it was a long time before their thoughts actually reached the public, for one must skip to the early 1960s to find them in print. By this time, concern about discrimination against minority groups was widespread; President John F. Kennedy had established a Commission on the Status of Women and several states and localities had followed suit; civil rights legislation was being applied to women's rights; the Negro rights movement was about to turn toward black power; and, in 1963, Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a journalistic polemic which was to sell over a million copies and help spark a revival of feminism in America.<sup>49</sup>

As if to mark the beginning of serious interest in women in American history, two established historians published essays on the subject in 1964.

<sup>49</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963). Although Betty Friedan's book is not a historical study, it does offer several hypotheses on the history of women after 1920 which require clarification. Friedan dated the end of the era of the new woman—the woman who searches for her own identity—around 1950, when a change in emphasis to "femininity" created the feminine mystique of housewife-mother. Her argument is based in large part on analyses of short stories in women's magazines, in which she finds career girl heroines predominant in the 1930s and housewife-mother heroines, who forsake careers for husband, home, and family, characteristic of the 1950s. One explanation for the shift, Friedan asserted, was that career women editors of these magazines were either being replaced by men or were so embarrassed by their own success that they tried to make other women accept a more traditional feminine role. "Did women really go home again as a reaction to feminism?" she asked; "The fact is that to women born after 1920 [and thus coming to maturity in the post-World War II period] feminism was dead history. It ended as a vital movement in America with the winning of that final right: the vote." *Ibid.*, 93. After 1945, the sexual sell of advertising further encouraged the role of homemaker-consumer. *Ibid.*, 200-05. Friedan's argument overlooked the realities of women's history. She hypothesized a generation of liberated career women in the 1920s and 1930s, largely based on one short story published in 1939. She offered some basis for the 1950s model from the magazine literature but had no reason to suggest that the homemaker-consumer had not originated in the 1920s. After World War II, she admitted, statistics on working women show increased female employment. For another use of the women's magazine literature, see Chafe, "From Suffrage to Liberation," 190-201, which finds domesticity and an attack on feminism in the 1930s, if not earlier.

Both works indicated a significant shift away from the view that women's emancipation had been completed in the 1920s and toward one that recognized the persistence of discrimination against women.

David Potter's comments on "American Women and the American Character" credited the city, the business office, and mechanization with the promotion of sexual equality but noted the barriers to full equality remaining, notably the dualism of career and domestic roles which made emancipation of women different from that of other oppressed groups.<sup>50</sup> Degler also traced feminism to industrialization and urbanization. At first, Degler agreed with earlier commentators about the advances women had made. However, he retreated from unqualified congratulations by noting that no permanent increase in the female labor force was made after World War I, that women's occupational gains were not great in the professions, that sexual divisions of labor remained, and that women's educational position later regressed. Why, a historian finally asked, did feminism fail to consolidate and increase its gains after the 1920s? Changes in women's status, he explained, had occurred more through chance of war, depression, and technological change than through planned efforts.<sup>51</sup> American women, "like American society in general, have been more concerned with individual practice than with a consistent feminist ideology."<sup>52</sup> Thus, he concluded, only a strong ideological stand would enable feminists to recognize their goals consistently and continuously.

At the time that Degler and Potter made these generalizations about women, a small number of historians began investigating more closely women's political and social activities in the post-World War I decade. They discovered that there was more to the new woman than the image of the flapper had revealed, and their works offered compensatory balance to former interpretations. Harking back to the emphasis on women's political activities during the late 1920s, the new studies still did not elaborate on the theme of women as an oppressed group, but they did present valuable discussions of women's political efforts and incidentally acknowledged the social barriers impeding emancipation.

One revision was implicit in Clarke A. Chambers' study of social service. Chambers did not discuss feminism *per se*, but he did find women in the 1920s actively working in settlement houses, lobbying for wages and hours

<sup>50</sup> David M. Potter, "American Women and the American Character," John A. Hague, ed., *American Character and Culture: Some Twentieth Century Perspectives* (DeLand, Fla., 1964), 65-84.

<sup>51</sup> Carl N. Degler, "Revolution Without Ideology: The Changing Place of Women in America," Robert Jay Lifton, ed., *The Woman in America* (Boston, 1964), 197.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

regulations and for safeguards for earlier protective legislation, and educating women workers. Chambers proposed that progressive thought did not end in the 1920s but was tempered, to be drawn on heavily by the New Deal.<sup>53</sup> Anne Firor Scott's study of southern women confirmed that women advanced progressivism in the 1920s and weakened historians' monolithic interpretation of the new woman as flapper. Suffrage, she found, greatly encouraged the political life of southern women and prompted efforts for social and political reform. In several states Scott found women's organizations investigating labor conditions, securing children and women's legislation, and even organizing for interracial cooperation. In Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky, women's groups pursued state and municipal government reform. At odds with entrenched politicians, southern women's political progress was "not one to gladden Mrs. Catt's heart," yet their efforts persisted through the decade. However, the 1920s did not witness a new morality in the South: "Through it all the outward aspect of the Southern lady was normally maintained as the necessary precondition of securing a hearing."<sup>54</sup>

James Stanley Lemons' study of postwar women cited successes such as the Sheppard-Towner Act, new marriage and divorce laws, independent citizenship (the Cable Act), and municipal reform, as well as organizations such as the National Women's Trade Union League, the National League of Women Voters, and the National Consumer's League and various professional women's groups as proof that "the woman's rights movement advanced progressivism in the period from World War I to the Great Depression."<sup>55</sup> The list of legislation which the Women's Joint Congressional Committee influenced successfully is a lengthy one, but most of its entries are dated before 1925, for as Lemons shows, forces of reaction after 1925 shifted the emphasis of women's activities from goals of social justice to goals of efficiency.<sup>56</sup> Red-baiting, the defeat of the child labor amendment, decisions of the Supreme Court barring protective legislation, and the rejection of the Progressive party in the 1924 election placed progressive women on the defensive. The equal rights amendment, Lemons believed, was "the hallmark of impatience in the 1920's, and it was an issue

<sup>53</sup> Clarke A. Chambers, *Seedtime of Reform: American Social Service and Social Action, 1918-1933* (Minneapolis, 1963), 82-83.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Firor Scott, "After Suffrage: Southern Women in the Twenties," *Journal of Southern History*, XXX (Aug. 1964), 298-318; Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1970).

<sup>55</sup> James S. Lemons, "The New Woman in the New Era: Woman Movement from the Great War to the Great Depression" (doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 1967), v, vi, 72-73.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 90-91, 100.

which helped fragment the women's movement and weaken the progressive impulse."<sup>57</sup> Although the newly enfranchised sex had achieved no great political gains in public office or party politics, women had continued to push for reforms, laying the groundwork for the New Deal.

Not unrelated to these new interpretations of women in the 1920s was an essay by James R. McGovern, which called into question earlier historians' periodization of the revolution in morals. Citing Breckinridge's statistics on the prewar occupational status of women, pre-1910 advertisements depicting women, changing hair and cosmetic styles in the Progressive era, dance crazes, the practice of birth control, and use of automobiles, McGovern showed that the flapper had been predated by events of the first decades of the century. If, as McGovern suggested, a moral revolution occurred before World War I, were the 1920s as "revolutionary" as they had been depicted, or in fact had a reaction taken place in which women returned to home and family?<sup>58</sup>

The works of Scott on the southern woman's new political awareness, Chambers and Lemons on progressivism and women in the 1920s, and the reinvestigations of the moral revolution by McGovern and others may differ on many counts, but they all point to a new attitude toward women's history. Prompted in part by the political and social movements of the 1960s, these authors looked more closely at the political lives of post-World War I women and more critically at the supposed moral revolution. While they were eager to praise the role women had played in political movements, their researches laid the foundation for recent works which are critical of the failures of the women's movement to achieve lasting reform. Two current studies are evidence of the shift in view from woman as emancipated participant to woman as the victim of discrimination. William O'Neill places the bulk of the blame for feminism's demise on women; William Chafe faults American society for oppressing the "second sex."

*Everyone Was Brave*, O'Neill's history of feminism, was subtitled *The*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 302. Another positive interpretation of women's political progress in the 1920s is found in Martin Gruberg, *Women in American Politics: An Assessment and Sourcebook* (Oshkosh, Wisc., 1968), 9-26.

<sup>58</sup> James R. McGovern, "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals," *Journal of American History*, LV (Sept. 1968), 315-33. See also, Robert E. Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," *American Quarterly*, XV (Fall 1963), 390-401; William L. O'Neill, *Divorce in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, 1967); and Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time 1912-1917* (Chicago, 1959). Kenneth A. Yellis noted that "The new woman seemed to go into eclipse during the period of anxiety [the Depression], but the changed circumstances of World War II, including a manpower shortage, brought her out again." Kenneth A. Yellis, "Prosperity's Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper," *American Quarterly*, XXI (Spring 1969), 64.

*Rise and Fall of Feminism in America*, a phrase indicative of the author's view of the 1920s:

The women's rights movement expired in the twenties from ailments that had gone untreated in its glory days. Chief among them was the feminists' inability to see that equal suffrage was almost the only issue holding the disparate elements of the woman movement together.<sup>59</sup>

O'Neill found that politicians abandoned the women's movement when no women's voting bloc appeared, and he offered several criticisms of women's political activity. The author quoted—and made clear his agreement with—a blatantly antifeminist assessment of women's suffrage which claimed that the vote had done little more than to bring out such undesirable traits of women as fussiness, primness, bossiness, and the tendency to make unnecessary enemies. He further claimed that although the radicals of the Woman's party correctly understood the discrimination against women which existed' after 1920, their "knowledge did them little good because the passions that led them to demand a feminist revival kept them from effecting it."<sup>60</sup>

In nonpolitical realms, as well, O'Neill noted little progress toward emancipation after 1920. The moral revolution had been rooted in the prewar years, and "sexual freedom had little effect on the life styles of most women," who still preferred the stability of home and family to the life of the flapper. Professionalism among women declined by the mid-1920s, he explained, because the novelty and "glamour" of the career experience was wearing out, discrimination in salaries and promotions became apparent to women, and the struggle between home and career exhausted working women.<sup>61</sup>

O'Neill believed that the feminine mystique of fulfillment through motherhood and home originated in the 1920s, when "feminism" came to mean merely sexual liberation within the confines of domesticity. Home economics became woman's professional realm, and femininity became the

<sup>59</sup> William O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago, 1969), 264. For a summary of William O'Neill's distinction between "social feminism" and "hard-core feminism," see William L. O'Neill, "Feminism as a Radical Ideology," Alfred F. Young, ed., *Dissent: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1968), 273-300. Another study which contributes to post-1920 women's history but does not explicitly deal with the decline of feminism is David M. Kennedy's *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, 1970). If Margaret Sanger is representative, which is unlikely, women activists rejected radicalism and left-wing allegiances to pursue the acceptance of their activities by middle-class women. Could a toning down of radicalism in the 1920s account for the view that feminism "disappeared?"

<sup>60</sup> O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave*, 270-73, 291.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

watchword for the "privatized young women."<sup>62</sup> Although the ideas of earlier feminists were kept alive by individuals such as Gilman, Dorothy Bromley, Alice Beal Parsons, and Suzanne La Follette, by 1930 feminism had fallen, to remain dormant until the present revival.

The second recent interpretation and one of greater usefulness is Chafe's study of the changing roles of American women from 1920 to 1970. In an effort to correct what Degler called the "suffrage orientation of historians of women's rights," Chafe began after suffrage, and he has provided a broad and preliminary investigation of women in politics, industry, the professions, and other aspects of American life. Drawing on several of the studies discussed above, he explored the progressive legislative successes of women in the early 1920s and acknowledged the individual accomplishments of women in the peace movement, in the struggle for social welfare legislation, and in municipal government reform. But in general, Chafe found that women had failed to achieve political equality. After surveying the political and sociological literature on voting behavior, he attempted to explain women's political failure in terms of social forces—cross-group pressures on women, discrimination rooted in the authoritarian family structure and the sexual division of labor, and the absence of a strong women's issue for the new voters to focus on. Chafe acknowledged that economic advances by women were minimal. Although he believed that sexually women had "substantially increased the amount of equality," he realized that "shifts in manners and morals did not interfere with the perpetuation of a sexual division of labor." He dated the shift in emphasis from careers to homemaking at 1930 and suggested that the Depression merely wielded the final blow to feminist hopes for equality. Although Chafe placed part of the blame for the decline of feminism on the feminists themselves, especially their factionalism over the equal rights amendment, his analysis emphasized social barriers to emancipation. "For economic equality to become a reality," he wrote, "a fundamental revolution was required in the way men and women thought of each other, and in the distribution of responsibilities within marriage and the family."<sup>63</sup>

In the last few years, the literature on women in the 1920s has reached a new level of historical inquiry. Historians are now trying to understand the decline of feminism rather than to deny the need for further emancipation. Although the revised version finds that women were politically active in lobbying for reforms in spite of failures at the polls, the latest accounts recognize that the 1920s were not the years of economic prosperity

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>63</sup> Chafe, "From Suffrage to Liberation," 56, 120, 185, 211-12. See also Mari Jo Buhle, Ann G. Gordon, and Nancy Schrom, "Women in American Society: An Historical Contribution," *Radical America*, 5 (July-Aug. 1971), 3-66.

for women described so proudly earlier: professional gains were minimal, industrial wages discriminatory, and unionization difficult. Marriage and motherhood brought most women out of the labor force and, supposedly, home to domestic and sexual fulfillment. Historians have generally retained the notion of the revolution in manners and morals, although research on the prewar years and on literary stereotypes may indicate a need for revision. How the social freedom in clothing, manners, and sex contributed to deeper social change must be questioned further in light of the new view of women's history. Rather than proclaiming the contributions of "woman as force" in recent history, historians now explain feminism's decline in terms of societal forces, such as family structure and political trends, the weaknesses inherent in the pre-1920 suffrage coalition, and legal and social discrimination against women as a group.

By further investigations of women's lives, historians can continue to correct their past errors, not only for the sake of historical accuracy, but also to begin to compensate for the disservice which earlier writings have rendered. The portrayal of the 1920s as a period of full equality, when in fact discrimination in education, hiring, salaries, promotions, and family responsibilities was abundant, has perpetuated a myth of equality, one which has helped undermine women's attainment of group consciousness. Similarly, to write and teach—on the basis of unsubstantiated observations—that women were politically apathetic but sexually active during the 1920s is to create sexually stereotyped historical roles for women. Historians' use of the "sexual revolution" as an explanation for women's history in the 1920s was perhaps an extension of their own inability to conceive of women outside of sexual roles. Furthermore, if the admittedly minimal evidence on writings in the 1930s and 1940s is substantiated, American historians' emphasis on woman's place in the home rather than her capacities for non-domestic careers may have contributed to the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes which helped weaken feminism since 1920.

The work of recent historians begins the long overdue revision of historical attitudes toward women. The most serious of the problems which recent studies manifest is that of excessive generalization—the tendency to write about *the* American woman, when race, class, region, and ethnicity have significantly divided women in twentieth-century America. Perhaps by studying the lives of countless individual women during the 1920s and after scholars will begin to discover patterns of response to both opportunities and discrimination. Only after extensive research has been completed can historians generalize successfully about the new woman. Only then can they begin to certify whether women were active participants or struggling victims in American history.