

# Man on Women

Benjamin R. Barber

Being a woman," said Joseph Conrad, "must be a terribly difficult trade, since it consists principally of dealing with men." And for men, women have forever been a mystery—less a separate gender than an alien species to be prudently admired or nervously ridiculed but almost never understood. Eternally misperceived, women have been systematically disadvantaged: undereducated or overprotected, denied employment or unequally remunerated, excluded from the professions then excoriated as inept, driven to the limits of reason then indicted as hysterical. They have been used as property, abused as servants, neglected as things, patronized as children, idealized as fictions and enshrined as myths. When they have not been belittled by vilification they have been maligned by idolatry.

No wonder then that among thoughtful women the cry "let my people go" is heard with increasing frequency and escalating bitterness. No wonder that impatient feminists are ready to discard men, give up children, make war if necessary on their own reproductive identities in the search for an unfamiliar emancipation. There is hardly a complaint in the too ancient litany of woman's grievances that is not founded on some real injury, some persistent abuse, some irrefutable indignity, hardly a single woman's aspiration that has not sometime been obstructed, deformed or mocked.

And yet, although the grievances are plain enough, their origins are obscure. Symptoms abound, but the presence of a diagnosable pathology cannot be verified. Those who write with most venom produce least clarity, while those whose dilemmas are being dramatized remain oddly silent. The diffuse ideology that has developed in response to the present crisis—radical feminism—seems, as with so many current

revolutionary ideologies, to be shot through with the contradictions that have created the inequitable conditions deplored. Irony again exacts its due, and the rebels are polluted by the dirt they scour, the emancipated enslaved by the tools that sever their chains, the righteous sullied with the wrath of their vindictiveness.

Radical feminism is an ideology weighed down with the baggage of our times: with the misconceptions of liberalism, the parochialisms of media fashion, the anachronisms of last century's Marxism, the technologism of voguish science, the narcissism of a middle class that complacently reads the world as an extension of itself. Foundering under the weight of this baggage, the feminist movement sometimes seems reduced to foisting abstractions on an uncertain constituency whose real grievances are distorted to fit an inchoate but defiant utopia. As such, it can only obstruct the meaningful amelioration of woman's condition, while it inadvertently risks reinforcing the most dangerous establishmentarian biases: uniformity, technocracy, irresponsibility, hedonism, narcissism and innovation for its own mindless sake.

These are serious charges. To substantiate them I propose to examine some of the major ideological claims associated with feminism. Although, like liberal, anarchist or Communist ideology, feminism encompasses a wide spectrum of views, it has in one form or another claimed that

- women are oppressed
- men and marriage are the primary obstacles to woman's human fulfillment
- monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are crucial instruments of exploitative capitalism
- romantic love is the ideology of sexism
- femininity and other manifestations of sexual differentiation are inimical to sexual equality

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While these interrelated claims may be accepted to a greater or lesser degree by individual feminists and



while some may reject one or another of them outright, they do together constitute an integrated ideology. In what follows I contend that they are for the most part unfounded, that they result in programmatic reforms that are as dangerous to women as they are to men, and that significant changes in the status and condition of women are possible only if their inadequacy is acknowledged. My perspective, if contentious, is skeptical rather than reactionary. The goal toward which my critical analysis tends is the creation of a climate for change within which women and men—in the improbable struggle for survival and for justice—are not deprived of the essential comfort of one another's company.

At the very core of the feminist ideology is the conviction that women are the "most oppressed of all people" (Juliet Mitchell), that sexist oppression is even "more endemic to our society than racism" (Kate Millet), that sexism represents the "oldest, most rigid class/caste system in existence" (Shulamith Firestone). These claims echo the stridency of traditional feminism; the Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 proclaimed that

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of tyranny over her.

But they also reflect the unhappy linguistic inflation that has become almost mandatory for dissenters wishing to attract the attention of a jaundiced mass media and hoping to gain a tactical advantage over competing "oppressed" groups. The language of rebellion has been effectively transmogrified and appropriated by consumer capitalism: compact cars are "rebels," cream depilatories are radical innovations, vaginal deodorants are revolutionary discoveries.

And so phrase-starved dissidents with real grievances are forced to verbal escalation: discrimination becomes tyranny, abuse becomes slavery, role differentiation becomes servitude and inequality becomes oppression.

Yet, as far as I can see, by all pertinent historical and contemporary standards, the matter is plain enough: Women in Western industrial societies are not oppressed, and those who speak most about oppression (white, middle-class, urban, professional women) are least oppressed of all. Abused, mistreated, discriminated against, patronized, put down, misused, conned, neglected, wronged, deceived and more—but not oppressed. Hurt, restless, bitter, discontent, bored, frustrated, impatient and angry—but not enslaved. By the same token, men may be stupid, abusive, self-indulgent, childish, shortsighted, callous, blind, insensitive and oafish—but they are not oppressors.

These distinctions may seem petty to an abused woman. She might reply: "Call my condition whatever you please; you will not improve it by giving it a different name." But the term oppression is no mere label. It is a crucial legitimizing ticket in those ignominious oppression-sweepstakes through which radical movements have so often debased and undone themselves by trying to outdo others. When feminists expropriate the term oppression to focus attention on their grievances, they inadvertently offend those for whom the term is an unbearable reality. When they call themselves "the niggers of the world," they indulge in a kind of lexicographical slumming that aspires to capture the righteous mana of other persons' suffering with the magic of words. Like so many white, middle-class students of the nineteen sixties, feminists insist not only that they are oppressed but that they are *more* oppressed than blacks, *more* oppressed than the proletariat, that they are *The Most Oppressed* of all people.

Linda J. M. La Rue, a young black woman, is strikingly unresponsive to this claim:

Let it be stated unequivocally that the American white woman has had a better opportunity to live a free and fulfilling life, both mentally and physically, than any other group in the United States, excluding her white husband. Thus any attempt to analogize black oppression with the plight of the American white woman has all the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the rope-burned hands of an amateur mountain climber (*Trans-action*: November/December, 1970).

If—she seems to be asking the feminist—if the white middle-class housewife, for all her very real frustrations, is to be called oppressed, then what are we to call the homeless, impoverished, addicted, black school dropout? Or the Nazi concentration camp victim? Or the starving Bengali refugee? If, as Kate Millet deftly has it, we are to understand "coitus as

killing," then what is homicidal rape? What is murder? Among feminists, rhetorical metaphors have been too readily assimilated as literal truths, to the detriment of both understanding and change. And this in a movement that has assailed Norman Mailer for the injudicious hyperbole of *his* metaphors.

Surely it is both possible and necessary to distinguish the professional woman who makes only \$12,000 per annum *because she is a woman*, instead of the \$16,000 given her male counterpart, from the Appalachian hillswoman who is uneducated and unemployable *because she is poor*; or to distinguish the Yale coed who is excluded from the baseball team because she is "only a girl" from the Vietnamese coed who is raped, eviscerated and murdered because she is "only a gook." Suffering, it is true, is not necessarily a fixed and universal experience to be measured by a single rod: it is related to situations, needs and aspirations. But there must be some historical and political parameters for use of the term—if only so that different forms and degrees of suffering can be given appropriate attention. Nora's plight in Ibsen's *Doll's House* is not identical with that of Anne Frank in a concentration camp: one is harassed, the other imprisoned, one unaware of her potential freedom, the other deprived of her actual freedom, one at war with inner ambivalences and cultural conditioning, the other at war with external enemies and physical persecution. What prisoner of the Warsaw ghetto or of the state penitentiary can walk to freedom by a mere act of self-recognition? What victim of racism or economic oppression can simply decide to be free?

The point is not to belittle the grievances of women but to insist that they are serious and compelling enough without confounding them with oppression. Indeed, nothing is more likely to invite belittlement than the comparative perspective evoked by terms like oppression and tyranny—as some of the dissonant juxtapositions introduced in the last paragraph suggest. The cry "we have been abused" from the abused may provoke attention and compel change, but the dogmatic assertion "we are helpless victims of total oppression" from the abused is easily dismissed, along with the just complaints it is meant to dramatize.

To insist that women are not oppressed is then neither to deny their grievances nor to oppose major social change. It is to insist that the abuse of women is an attribute of their relationship with men, not intrinsic to it. This is a critical distinction, for oppression is not a feature of relationships but a particular kind of relationship—one that is intrinsically exploitative. To speak of oppression is to speak of those overt instances of conscious exploitation where one class of beings literally (not figuratively or metaphorically) crushes and enslaves another, coercing it into a condition of abject and involuntary servitude. What is significant about oppression is that it *constitutes* the

relationship between oppressed and oppressor. Without it there would be no relationship at all. Capitalists and workers are, in the Marxist framework, defined in their relations by exploitation. It is exploitation alone that differentiates them. Likewise, white and black in pre-Civil War America (and probably in post-Civil War America) were defined in their roles of master and slave by oppression. Whatever else might have happened between them as people, the only formal relationship that bound them together was oppression.

The relationship between women and men has never been intrinsically exploitative or oppressive. Its basis has been, at the biological level, sexual magnetism and the requisites of heterosexual reproduction and, at the cultural level, child-rearing, companionship, complementarity and love. The role *Woman*, however often it has been abused, is not defined by abuse but by primary physiological characteristics and cultural norms. Masters quite literally invent slaves (in order to invent themselves), just as capitalists dialectically invent the proletariat. But men did not invent women, and no amount of controversy about cultural conditioning or the manipulative stereotypes of the male literary imagination can change this paramount fact. As ever before, women still give birth to men, and though men have contrived to return the favor (the Genesis account), only self-deprecating feminist ideologues will admit they have succeeded.

There is another salient difference between female-male relationships and other varieties of human interaction that bears on the present argument. Although different cultural, racial or national groups have evolved independently and then encountered one another as monolithic wholes, under conditions of competition or enmity that permit differences to be made the basis of domestication or subjugation of one by the other, women and men have cohabited the world together, as individuals, from its prehistorical beginnings. They are not two alien races thrown together by geopolitical accident but two versions of humanity who have shared a common destiny, two individually insufficient parts of a species made whole only by one another. Like most other animals, human beings come in pairs.

Not to comprehend these critical differences is to misunderstand completely the character of the present problem. If it is thought that relations between the sexes are primarily exploitative (Kate Millet's perception of sexual relations as sexual politics), then the only logical remedy is the elimination of sexual differentiation—the eradication of sexuality (though Millet and others do not always pursue logic to this conclusion). This can be achieved in a variety of ways: by eliminating men (or, presumably, women); by negating all salient differences between the sexes (the clitoris as penis, the dildo as equalizer, the

orgasm as common denominator); by limiting or terminating heterosexual intercourse (lesbianism as a prerequisite of independence); or by circumventing physiology completely by the application of technology to reproduction (artificial inseminations, extra-uterine gestation, asexual cloning techniques for replicative reproduction).

But these avenues to emancipation make little sense if sexual relations, however perverted by abuse or corrupted by socioeconomic exploitation, are conceived as naturally and essentially healthy and desirable. If marriage is a cancer it must be destroyed; if it *has* cancer it may be savable. For the task then is restorative rather than revolutionary, to reconstruct rather than to eradicate. I suspect that many who argue that differences between the sexes are biologically grounded do not mean to deny that such differences can be conditioned in or out (they can and have been), but rather to suggest that they are not intrinsically exploitative and thus may in their "normal" manifestations be desirable—be worth preserving where they survive and worth recreating where they have been deformed.

The feminist position may not, however, always seem susceptible to this kind of criticism; for the argument that women are oppressed has frequently been inverted to take the more aggressive form, "Men and marriage are the real obstacles to woman's fulfillment." This provocative claim needs to be considered on another level.

Where there are oppressed there are presumably oppressors: enter Men and the institutions they purportedly devise as instruments of their malevolence. "Women," Germaine Greer writes, "have very little idea of how much men hate them." The more generous feminists will concede that the role men have played has been to some degree unconscious and involuntary, more the product of history than of will. Greer, for example, allows that "men do not themselves know the depth of their hatred." To others the role is perceived as knowingly chauvinistic, explicitly coercive, intentionally oppressive. But in either case there seems little doubt about where responsibility for "oppression" lies.

Now it seems indisputable that men have caused women a great deal of grief through abuse, discrimination and neglect. Yet it also seems possible that

women, like all other human beings, have experienced a considerable amount of grief *not* occasioned by men and that feminism is sometimes guilty of a fraudulent scapegoatism. Many of the deprivations suffered by women are the result of bad marriages or abusive men, but how many more grow out of the insufficiency of being, the elusiveness of happiness, the transience of meaning in an era that has abdicated faith, severed its links with the past and left only the arrogance of a soulless technology between itself and an inchoate, hostile universe? Some feminists seem to expect of life not merely opportunity but fulfillment, not a lonely search for relative meaning but the final discovery of absolute truth, not a license for living but a guaranteed warrant for happiness. And then, when life is not forthcoming, a conspirator is conjured up from half-truths to explain the failure of these elephantine expectations. Like the Mafia gunman who, finding himself in Hell, complains that "Italian-Americans just never get a break," some feminists would attribute to a "conditioned Womanhood" frustrations endemic to their humanity.

Marriage is often treated in the same scapegoating fashion. Marital relations, the indictment reads, are usually possessive, abusive and inimical to growth. True. But only because *human* relations are usually possessive, abusive and inimical to growth. And this only because the human race appears all too predisposed to acquisition, abuse and stagnation. College roommates fight, brothers and sisters exploit one another's weaknesses, friends become overly dependent, lesbians are enraged by jealousy, business partners liquidate each other's assets and, sometimes, each other as well. Why pin the rap for the whole human race on marriage?

Yet marriage, some may reply, is uniquely stultifying. It compels partners into a lifelong relationship that moves ineluctably from spontaneity and freshness to regularity and boredom and thence to an emotional deadening from which there can be no recovery. This too is true. But again, only because most men and women—married or single—ossify at thirty, petrify at forty and expire emotionally at forty-five. Marriage becomes boring only to bores, who almost always discover that divorce, once the novelty of an illusory liberation wears off, is no less boring. Because for them life is boring, a vapid projection of their own existential impotence. There are, of course, bad and destructive marriages, relationships that ought to be terminated at all costs. But ultimately marriage, even in its rigid, monogamous form, only reflects the capacities and inadequacies of its partners: It does not destroy women and men; women and men destroy it.

It is perhaps unfair, then, to say that feminists misapprehend the character of marriage: it is life they fail to understand. For life, even at its emancipated best, takes the form of necessary, ineluctable tensions, of poignant dilemmas confronting men and

women with the painful hiatus between aspiration and achievement, between desire and fulfillment. Between the infant's fantasy world, which is but an extension of itself, and the mature being's comprehension of its own insignificance in an indifferent cosmos lies a reality into whose subtleties feminists have been unwilling or unable to enter. Hence they seem unaware that alienation is something other than a female disorder occasioned by the malice of men, that insufficiency and a sense of apartness have been our species' fate since Eden.

Dependency is the universal condition of the race, not a proprietary disease of married women in monogamous relationships with assertive men. Moreover, dependency produces a natural scarcity of the inner life—less economic than existential, less political than psychological—that puts the cost of self-realization very high. There has always been a price on living among our fellow creatures, a price demanded by the delicate ecology of human relations that permits total independence only at the cost of estrangement and solitude, that requires of love vulnerability, that makes each choice interdependent with each other choice and makes every consequence a foil to every other consequence.

These existential homilies are hardly news. Nor should they be thought of as a metaphysical redoubt for complacency and inaction. There are multiple evils that have been grafted onto the existential plight of the race which can and ought to be cut away. It is a danger of otherwise thoughtful critiques of woman's liberation, such as Midge Decter's *The New Chastity*, that real evils are made to vanish along with illusory ones. But feminists have themselves abetted this fudging of distinctions; by confounding the remediable abuses of woman's condition with the irremediable insufficiencies of the human condition they divert the search for improved human relations into a quest for metahuman deliverance.

The myopia here charged to feminism only reflects a wider blindness that afflicts the society at large. There is no middle-class political or reform movement in America today that does not to some degree suffer from an intolerance for complexity and subtlety, a self-indulgent and

finally self-defeating narcissism, an existential anxiety that issues as much from enervating leisure as from injustice.

Intolerance for ambiguity can be found in almost every corner of our labile society. It is a society which, as its dilemmas and frustrations multiply, looks more and more to simplistic cure-alls—to demagogic politics, to efficient technologism, to the illusory dogmas of a "science of human behavior." A perverse and common thread runs through the low-brow predilection for unambivalent political solutions and the highbrow predilection for efficacious technological solutions, a thread knitting chauvinist nationalism and religious fundamentalism together with vulgar behavioralism and the worship of science. Each reflects a sense of individual, inner impotence, each looks to totalistic, external solutions for intractable problems, each seeks simplified, reductionist explanations for overwhelmingly complex realities: law and order for society, orderly laws for human behavior, everything neat and in place.

The media fairly ooze with panaceas. Our political mentors, our cultural heroes, our book awards, our bestseller lists, our *Time* cover stories all peddle panaceas: a respite from chaos through law, order and the bomb (Wallace); interpersonal harmony through behavior modification and environmental conditioning (B. F. Skinner); rebirth of the cities through the expansion of bureaucracy (the Democratic Party); human relatedness through meaning-less touching (Desmond Morris); world community through the universal philistinism of television (Marshall McLuhan); love through terminal sentimentality (Erich Segal); rebellion through buffoonery (Abbie Hoffman); revolution through peanut butter (Charles Reich); self-realization through orgasm (Masters and Johnson); ecology through consumerism (the *Last Whole Earth Catalog*); Nirvana through grass (Timothy Leary); and peace through war, salvation through annihilation and internationalism through genocide (Richard Nixon). The easier the better. The sooner the better. The simpler the better. The less demanding the better. The more painless (to us) the better.

In the face of this desperate plasticity, this society-wide quest for cultural anesthetic, only a misogynist would want to isolate for criticism feminism's penchant for unambiguous answers and total solutions. When Jill Johnston intimates in the *Village Voice* that lesbian motherhood may somehow be an improvement on heterosexual parenthood, when Shulamith Firestone suggests that since "the material basis for sexual division is the reproductive system, the revolutionary means to its annihilation will be man's scientific ability to transcend it," when digital-clitoral stimulation is thought of as an adequate alternative to sexual intercourse and liberation from sexism can no longer be distinguished from the obliteration of sexuality, feminism is merely joining the

ongoing American revolution—with its safe, breezy rhetoric, its box-office sensationalism, its splendid detachment from the difficult realities of both injustice and reform. It remains a pity that feminists seem so intent on emulating the rhetoric-mongers; that despite the fresh constituency for which they speak, they are already so stale with the desperate hyperbole, so captive to the fruitless reductionism and futile technologism of the society they hope to revolutionize.

Nor have they escaped the willful narcissism that has mired so many Americans in permanent adolescence. Pervasive consumerism and the acquisitive mentality it nourishes have encouraged the survival of the pubescent ego far beyond its normal life-span. The deification of youth and its corollary contempt for age act to legitimize this truncation of the maturation process. Consequently, young adults—especially those most sensitized to the hypocrisies of adult society—have increasingly insisted on remaining children. Student rebels demand radical change but eschew the most modest responsibility; young communards seek human contact and the personalization of social relations but seem unprepared for commitment.

All too often feminist writers reason from this same self-indulgent perspective. Leadership is, for example, perceived exclusively in terms of coercion and hence rejected by many as a means of organization. Is this sound political theory or rationalization for evading responsibility? And how much is sound psychology and how much pure rationalization in the claims about children made by some feminists? Jill Johnston, more candid than she is prudent, reveals "I had to let my children go to become myself." Go *where*?! What about the potential self of the child, who can grow only with the protection and non-possessive, selfless presence of mature adults who are presumably already in possession of their own "selves"?

"Certainly none of us were told," Johnston continues, "what a drastic drag it was to become a mother. I mean motherhood was a soft fuzzy tinted photo." What a drastic drag, that is to say, to have to grow up; to have to defer to the needs of younger, more vulnerable beings who rudely shout "you are grown. Now me!" Although she feels forced to become a "pseudo-mother," Johnston persists in viewing herself as a "perennial daughter." Appropriately enough, our society is perfectly satisfied with this arrangement: permanent sons and perennial daughters are after all splendidly permanent consumers and perennial subjects—ideal subjects for manipulation and indoctrination. The establishmentarian success of Charles Reich's *Greening of America* should astonish no one. As a passive utopia for perennial children, where hip living styles will vanquish conflict and suffering, it is a nearly perfect "revolutionary" substitute in a reactionary, capitalist society: it

sells products, keeping capitalism in business; it idealizes apoliticity, leaving the politicians to govern as they choose; it celebrates childish innocence, depriving the young of the maturity needed to bring about change; it enjoins impotence, guaranteeing power to the most venal and unscrupulous. Perennial childhood is finally no solution at all to the problem of adult identity.

Many sensible wives, recognizing this, have been rightly concerned with the infantilism of husbands who use marriage to fulfill unrealizable childhood fantasies, who make of their wives surrogate mothers. But is the radical answer to the immaturity of men to be the immaturity of women? Is the self-indulgent male ego to be checked by unbridling the female ego? Are we really to be condemned to the comfortless choice between the guilt-inspired, overprotective, interfering, vicariously manipulative parents of the last generation and the self-centered, irresponsible, rationalizing nonparents of the next as envisioned by the liberated? To the choice between smothering our children or abandoning them? Is the final equality of the sexes to be the equity of mutual infantilism?

If narcissism has nourished anxieties about the ambivalent rewards of maturation and responsibility, leisure has exacerbated them unmercifully. At no time in history have so many people in a society enjoyed so much abundance—sufficient abundance to transform leisure from an unattainable luxury into an unavoidable burden. The larger world still staggers under the yoke of economic scarcity, our own society flourishes only by maintaining structural poverty, a growing flock of new Malthusians prophesy an ecological Armageddon; yet the middle class in America is for the first time in history experiencing on behalf of the human race some of the costs of winning the struggle with nature for survival: endless days no amount of play can shorten, interminable weeks with less and less work to fill them, yawning months whose emptiness only underscores the meaninglessness of the "good life" that has been won.

Women—more particularly, educated, middle-class, suburban women—find themselves at the very front of this historical tide, drowning in leisure. While their husbands absorb themselves in work, competition, fiscal responsibilities and hobbies—in trivia made significant by desperation—women sit restlessly at home among the gadgets that have stolen from them what little meaning was to be found in homemaking, burdened with the existential dilemmas of the whole race: who, why, what for, am I? For decades the only available answers seemed to be daytime television, alcohol, adultery, divorce and suicide. Feminism rightly condemns the self-destructive escapism of such responses, yet some of its own strategies—flight into the labor market, for example—miss entirely the real nature of the problem. For a

few lucky men, and for far fewer women, work has been a source of meaning and creativity. But for most of the race it remains even now forced drudgery in front of ploughs, machines, words or numbers—pushing products, pushing switches, pushing papers to eke out the wherewithal of material existence. Yet feminists treat work as if it held all the secrets of meaning and happiness, as if it were a coveted Hobby of the Elect, greedily monopolized by the oppressors.

It is somehow forgotten that oppressors are people who live off other people's labor, not people who insist on doing all the work themselves. Certainly an ideal society should provide opportunity to work for all who choose to work. But most who work, work because they must, frequently in jobs that are dehumanizing. Even the most debasing sort of menial labor can, it is true, be perceived as an escape from the pointed dilemmas of leisure, providing it is not compulsory (to be able to work and to have to work are two very different matters). We may even decide that as a race we are better off under the tyranny of economic necessity and shake off our anxieties by reassuming our chains. Work nevertheless remains work, and though it may serve to remedy boredom of one kind by replacing it with boredom of another kind, it is at best a reactionary and regressive solution to the problem of leisure.

The problem cannot then be regarded as a result of sexism or repressive marriage; it is a condition that attends the coming of post-industrial society and post-labor man and woman. The paralysis it can induce is no more the invention of men than it is the sectarian problem of women, albeit middle-class women are presently compelled by circumstances to experience it with an unwonted vengeance. It therefore seems improbable that a narcissistic escape from family, flight into a romanticized world of work, will any more serve to liberate women than war serves to redress the insufficiencies of peace.

Robin Morgan wisely says "we are moving beyond all known standards"; but this will be a boastful war cry only among the arrogant and the blind. As we feel more and more driven to extremes—to escapism, infantilism, narcissism and despair—by dilemmas that seem neither tractable nor tolerable, the case for prudence increases. Understandably, tragically, feminism moves instead toward escalation and extremism. It speaks the uncompromising language of eradication, elimination and revolution. As its own uncertainty about the future increases, its tolerance for ambivalence diminishes. This does not mean it is incapable of producing needed reforms. As Edmund Burke noted several centuries ago, those who destroy everything are certain to remedy some grievance. But to redress by eradication is to eliminate the present without creating a future.

To abdicate the family at the very moment when work ceases to provide us with answers to the meaning of our lives, to abdicate the family without any clear notion of the form or efficacy of alternatives, is either an act of cosmic impudence or of appalling ignorance. The splendid isolation of pure independence, when it is not anomic solitude or lonely hermitage, is, as Aristotle understood a long time ago, beyond the reach of humankind. It is for beasts or for gods, not for women and men.

Emptiness is not, in Erik Erikson's phrase, "the female form of perdition." It is the human form of perdition. The French anarchist Proudhon, hardly a stranger to arguments about independence, acknowledged that "fatherhood has filled an enormous emptiness in my life." Insufficiency and the dependency that ensues from it are inseparable from the human condition, and though they may invite abuse and foster emotional usury, they are implacable realities. Liberation is possible only within their confines. That is why marriage and the family remain crucial vehicles of liberation; they can provide the setting for healthy dependency, for a comforting interdependency that gives sanctuary to men, women and their children in facing the encroaching void.

The tenor of these remarks is, however, primarily psychological and philosophical. Some feminists may respond that it is less the interpersonal and existential status of the family than the economic and political status that is at issue. Whatever abstract, anthropological potential marriage may have, it has functioned historically, they argue, as an instrument of exploitative capitalism. The pursuit of this argument requires a somewhat different line of reasoning.

(This is the first of a two-part article.)