

Book Section

Feminism and Individualism

Claire Morgan,

Review: *Reclaiming the Mainstream, Individualist Feminism Rediscovered*, (Prometheus, 1992)

Joan Kennedy Taylor and her sponsors, The Cato Institute, should be commended for broaching the subject of feminism from a libertarian or classical liberal perspective. For those who have little knowledge about the subject and want a practical, issue-based account of the movement, this book may be useful as a preliminary survey of parts of the literature and the major policy issues. However, for those who prefer a more principled approach which focuses less on issues and more on conceptual analysis--specifically a contemporary account which explains how libertarianism applies to women--readers will have to wait since (to my knowledge) that book has yet to be written. Such readers would probably be better served looking at Wendy McElroy's anthology *Freedom, Feminism and the State*. Nevertheless, *Reclaiming the Mainstream* is not without its virtues.

Feminism is regarded by many as little more than a marginal issue, if it is considered at all. One could certainly criticize contemporary classical liberal supporters and theorists for their lack of contribution to the issue of (individualist) feminism. It seems that on the one hand proponents of classical liberalism are quick to dismiss feminism as an hysterical, trivial, and extreme movement. Certainly they do not deem feminism to be worthy of the title of 'discipline': they do not find it deserving of serious attention. On the other hand, there are classical liberal sympathizers such as Christina Hoff Sommers, who confine the majority of their discussion to a harshly negative attack. She focuses on crazy liberal (in the modern sense of the term) and radical feminists who she believes have little to say to reasonable feminists such as herself.

This is mistaken. Instead of dismissing or denigrating feminism classical liberals would do better to treat it seriously. I would argue that part of the success of radical gender feminism may be attributed to the lack of a positive alternative, and because of the tedious whining of its critics. It is true that there are several grassroots organizations such as the Women's Freedom Network, and the Independent Women's Forum which operate to try to change the tide. Nonetheless, libertarians have not made very forceful attempts to explore the relevance of feminism to the broader goal of freedom and individual autonomy that they claim to espouse.

Classical liberals have not seized the initiative in this area via the written word. Libertarians are insufficiently dynamic in their approach to this subject and therefore consistently fail to capture much attention in the public arena. Their "opponents," meanwhile, often captivate the media precisely because they are extreme and provocative; they are exciting, not apologetic or dismissive. Moreover, libertarians have a tendency to complain that relatively few women are attracted to their (apparently) cold rationality,

while dismissing many of the issues women believe to be central to their lives. To the extent that *Reclaiming the Mainstream* attempts to treat the subject of feminism as an area of genuine concern and interest, it should be applauded.

It seems to me that feminism does not logically connote radical or gender feminism. Nor does it necessarily entail separatism or special treatment for women. Rather, it refers to the principle that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men. Intellectually, this type of humanist standard appears hard for any truly committed libertarian to argue with. This is particularly true when it is compared to the victimization and essentialism of much contemporary feminist discourse. Yet, in practice the term "feminism" is routinely derided by many classical liberals precisely because they cannot see beyond its radical versions.

Thus, it strikes me that there are two major points here: one intellectual, and one practical. The first is that as a humanistic type philosophy there is nothing inconsistent about relating feminism to libertarianism. Indeed, construed in the individualist sense, it seems to me that feminism could be regarded as being integral to libertarianism. That is, feminism could be used as a kind of vehicle which helps women achieve individual freedom instrumentally. To do this, all that is necessary is to relate feminism to the ideas of individual rights and the dignity and worth of each person. In practice, this would substitute toleration, diversity, and independence for the determinism, (e.g. the belief in some type of female nature which entails structuring life according to appropriate functions such as mothering and caring,) which is popular among feminist thinkers today. Once society has an adequate set of laws and attitudes, individuals (men and women) will be able to pursue life, liberty and happiness on the basis of what they deem to be appropriate for themselves.

In *Reclaiming the Mainstream* Taylor makes an attempt to cover at least some of the historical intellectual grounding of individualist feminism, (she traces the historical cycles of feminism, starting with Mary Wollstoncraft, Margaret Fuller, and John Stuart Mill,) but it is clear that her focus and abilities lie more with the practical side of feminist issues, (the second half of the book moves on to a variety of policy issues). Taylor is not especially interested in developing a theory grounded in rights, although she raises the connection intuitively. At 12-13 she states explicitly that she will not address the subject of "how libertarianism applies to women, or how all feminists should embrace the libertarian philosophy *in toto*." This is a great shame, since for me, at least, this is precisely where the interest lies, and the battle must be fought. Only in this way will the problem be rooted out at its core--at the university--instead of waiting for the results of academic theorizing to appear in policies.

Instead, Taylor suggests that "since I do not see feminism as a purely political philosophy or movement, my book has to do with the companion tradition of individualism in this country--understood to mean a tradition that holds it important to support the full flowering of the individual life." This is a broader, but much weaker assertion.

Like Naomi Wolf in her latest book *Fire With Fire*, Taylor begins the book with a brief foray into the current intellectual climate, citing the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas

affair as illustrative of the current rift and confusion in male/female relations. Unlike Wolf, she claims full commitment to individualism both as a fact of life and as an ideal. Taylor states her argument in this way:

The thesis of this book is that what we now call "feminism" began early in the nineteenth century as an individualist movement, and further, that it is this individualism that has been the defining characteristic of the mainstream of that movement ever since. This does not mean that individualism has always predominated. Since the early days of the movement, there have been two philosophical strands of thought within it: individualism and collectivism, and from time to time one or the other strand has become dominant. When collectivists predominate, the individualists become less active and return to cultivating their gardens. (p10)

Frankly, I'm not convinced. I was not convinced before I read the book, nor do I feel compelled to concede the point after having read it. Initially, after considering her statement I was intrigued to read on, since it struck me as plainly false. Anyone who has even a superficial knowledge of the history of ideas surrounding the development of the feminist movement would recognize, I thought, that since the eighteenth century there has been a steady trend towards greater communitarianism and determinism, which has culminated in much of the radical/gender/marxist tradition which pervades women's studies today. (This is a point which Taylor notes, but believes she can accommodate.) However, faced with this knowledge, it seemed astonishing that anyone should assert a theory which appears to contradict such conventional wisdom. Even the relatively innocuous Ms. Friedan--who is cited favorably by Taylor--bases her account of the *Feminine Mystique* on an assertion about the structural determinism which turned intelligent college graduates into mindless housewives. It is difficult to see how this connects to individualist feminism. Where is individualism to be found in the feminism on college campuses today? But then it occurred to me that this book is not concerned so much with academic feminism, although it is mentioned at times throughout the book. Rather, for the most part, this is a book about populist trends and policy initiatives which would probably appeal most to activists and policy analysts. Hence, the kinds of concern mentioned above would be of secondary interest. In any case, it would have been useful if Taylor could have been more explicit about her intended audience from the outset.

The second half of the book provides further evidence that Taylor is much more at ease discussing policy rather than theory. Throughout the first section she provides extensive quotations from the persons she highlights, preferring someone else's description of their own ideas, to her own commentary and analysis. I would have liked to have seen more analysis from Taylor. After all, in her thesis statement she claims to be doing more than providing an historical summary. Indeed, if one is going to introduce a thesis, then one should expect to defend it oneself. This is especially so if the thesis is controversial, as Taylor's appears to be. Moreover, perhaps then she would have convinced me that there was a vital point that I had missed. Worse still, many of the conceptual ideas are muddled with irrelevant biographical details, indicating little if any allusion to her central thesis. Consequently, the first half of the book is not at all convincing.

However, the second half of the book is written much more self confidently. It turns out that what Taylor offers here is a journalistic tour through some of the literature, instead

of an analytic analysis of the fundamental justifications for feminism. This should not be surprising. After all, as someone who has edited a magazine, written numerous articles, and been National Coordinator of the Association of Libertarian Feminists since the early 1970s, Joan Kennedy Taylor has plenty of practical experience to draw upon. On balance, it seems to me that the book would have been vastly improved if she had omitted the first half of the book (the section on the Equal Rights Amendment was rather dull), and expanded the second. She should have discarded the thesis and concentrated upon writing an historical account about the grassroots individualist feminist movements, which is what the book is essentially about.

The second half of the book which covers issues including sexual harassment, abortion, pornography, and social feminism is much better. Thus, it is on the practical, rather than intellectual side of feminism that Taylor is able to offer some useful contributions to the subject. In the end, it is evident where her interest lies. What preoccupies Taylor is that feminism is something which attracts the interest of many women (and, indeed, men) and as part of human life it is a subject which is important. Taylor's project is to reclaim the term, and illustrate the sheer common sense notions which may be attached to it. Using a backdrop of various intuitive ideas which roughly conform to the basic tenets of classical liberalism--"individualism and individual rights...entrepreneurship and free enterprise, civil liberties and minimal government" (p10), Taylor suggests that many classical liberals are, in fact, feminists-- they simply aren't aware of the fact. If this is indeed the case, a definition of what she considers the term to consist of would have been helpful from the start, rather than vague references to some overarching commitment to women and liberty.

The recognition of feminism in terms of individualism and individual rights is critically important, especially for policy makers and activists: If libertarians are serious about attracting a larger and more diverse base of support they would do better if they recognized the potential that exists in "real issues" such as those feminism deals with, instead of debating the relative merits of *The Fountainhead* or *Atlas Shrugged*. Of course, on the face of it, feminism and Randianism (for example) are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I single out Randianism only because Taylor raises it as an issue herself, but it provokes another question regarding one of Taylor's points. That is, during the introduction Taylor suggests that classical liberals should consider Ayn Rand as a feminist role model, on the basis of her having created her own philosophy. Certainly I do not possess the background knowledge of Taylor in this regard, however the notion of Rand as a feminist icon struck me as almost fantastic--a women who glorified rape in one novel, and suggested that Dagny should put on an apron to serve John Galt in another--a feminist role model? Surely, a true role model would have written about a Joan Galt instead.

Stylistically, this is an extremely accessible book. Taylor's approach is chatty not didactic, frequently alluding to personal anecdotes about her own experiences within the libertarian movement. In fact, at times, one has the impression that she would like to convey the impression that she is curled up for a cozy chat in front of the fire with her reader, rather than leading a revolution. She is fond of the New York Times, (probably 80% of the newer material derives from either the New York Times or The New York

Times Magazine) which would also tend to cause academics to relegate the book strictly to the policy category.

While her defence of voluntary communities (against the attacks of critics who charge libertarians with egoism) for the purpose of advancing individual aims together is well taken, I remain skeptical about the viability and desirability of reviving consciousness raising as a tool for furthering independence in women (and men). In this respect, Taylor's prescriptions for reclaiming feminism strike me as rather outmoded. Few of the women I know are interested in the type of victim mentality that seems to accompany consciousness raising. In addition, I was disappointed to note the absence of any of the more recent theorists who may have something useful to contribute. There is, for instance, a complete absence of any mention of Camille Paglia or Naomi Wolf. Nevertheless, the broad tone of the book, which I would characterize as cautiously optimistic, is encouraging. During the times when Taylor does enter into critical analysis, she seems able to make her case without confining her commentary to baleful moans.