

# ***"Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life"***

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## **Rescuing Feminism from the Feminists**

**Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life": How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch with the Real Concerns of Women.** By Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. Doubleday. 288 pp. \$23.95.

*Reviewed by Mary Ann Glendon*

This timely and well-documented book addresses the puzzle of why nearly two-thirds of American women embrace many of the goals of the feminist movement, yet say that they do not consider themselves feminists. What does it mean when a woman says, "I am not a feminist, but . . ."?

The short answer, according to historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (who describes herself as a feminist), is that most women perceive "official" feminism as indifferent to their deepest concerns. In particular, they are put off by the movement's negative attitude toward marriage and motherhood, its intolerance for dissent from its most controversial positions, its attacks on men, and its inattention to the practical problems of balancing work and family on a day-to-day basis. Hence the title, echoing a refrain running through the author's conversations with a diverse sample of women: "Feminism is not the story of my life."

Fox-Genovese is quick to point out that today's women have equal difficulty locating themselves in traditional narratives of domesticity. Women of the nineties value their increased independence and opportunities. Though many work out of necessity, that has not prevented employment from becoming an important part of the way they think about who they are and who they wish to be. Thus, "neither polarized story will fit the rich and messy complexities of the lives we actually live."

Bringing familiar demographic data to life through personal interviews, the author paints a vivid portrait of that complexity. She lets us hear the voices of women whose lives are defined by the competing pulls of work and family; women who hold fast to an ideal of companionable marriage, but insist that their daughters should be able to support themselves (in case marriage fails or never occurs); women who are living through the breakdown of community at a time when they and their families need surrounding support structures more than ever; women whose expanded opportunities for personal freedom have been accompanied by diminished prospects for stable family life; women who were swept up in the sexual revolution, and who have begun to count the casualties.

The wide variety of women's voices represented, together with the author's hard-headed analysis of economic data, highlight the dimensions of race and class so often ignored by feminist writers. It is striking, therefore, that she finds so much commonality in the midst of diversity. That commonality, arising chiefly from the experience of motherhood, is central to her thesis. Though far from aligning herself with "difference" feminists who treat men and women as virtually separate species, she does insist that women's concerns are bound up with children to a much greater extent than men's. "Motherhood," she says, "changes women's sense of who they are."

That proposition leads her to be sharply critical of organized feminism's response to our historically unprecedented situation in which most women (five out of six) still become mothers, but the majority of mothers of young children work outside the home and a record proportion are raising children alone. The new working woman, she points out, was not created by feminism, but by an economic revolution. The rise of the global economy has made it difficult for most families to get by without a second wage earner. The "big winners" have been "upscale young women who are pursuing careers in business and the professions-the women for whom the official feminist lobby, despite pretensions, actually speaks."

The problem with the lobby, according to Fox-Genovese, is that it focuses more on what the "feminist elite" believes women should want rather than on what most women actually do want. What is notably lacking in organized feminism, she charges, is support for women who wish to give priority, at least temporarily, to family over work. "Feminists expect children to fit into the nooks and crannies of women's lives the way women have traditionally fitted into the nooks and crannies of men's. But when motherhood is demoted from the center of women's lives to a parenthesis, children are demoted as well." Under current social and economic conditions, she insists: "The real struggle is not between women and men, but between children and work. The real losers in these conflicts are children."

In an important sense, children and motherhood are the real subjects of Fox-Genovese's book. And her main complaint is at least as much about our society's unresponsiveness to child-raising families as it is about the indifference of organized feminism to mothers. Accordingly, she endorses a range of European-style tax reforms and workplace policies, including the "mommy track," designed to facilitate the choices of parents who wish to be at home with their young children. Yet she admits none of these measures can be the cure-alls their proponents sometimes claim. The fact is that no one really knows "how to combine opportunity for women, economic stability for families, and the crying needs of children."

And there's the rub. For what is usually missing from the kinds of stories we Americans like to tell is the tragic sense of life. After critiquing feminist and domesticity narratives, the author says, "We want pieces of each story: a successful career and a happy marriage; equal pay for equal work and conditions that allow us to care for our children; freedom from sexual harassment and discrimination and a measure of sexual freedom." Well, yes. But Fox-Genovese is too canny to suggest that we can have it all. There are costs and

limits to be reckoned with. Thus, her sober, realistic book will be unpopular, not only with die-hard feminists, but with cockeyed optimists.

The question might be raised whether Fox-Genovese is beating a dead horse. After all, the great majority of American women decline to call themselves feminists, and young women are even more alienated from the label than older ones (only one college woman in five accepts it). Most women have clearly repudiated the peculiar type of feminism that appeared in the 1970s-distinguished by its negative attitude toward family life, its loyalty tests on gay rights and abortion, and its puzzling combination of sexual anger and sexual aggressiveness.

There are a number of factors, however, that preserve that old-line, hard-line feminism as a vital force in the realm of public policy. As Fox-Genovese points out, the high-earning women who do benefit from the careerist emphasis of 1970s feminism are highly effective in keeping its ideology alive. Many men in positions of power appease their lobby in the manner of the lazy judge in Luke's Gospel who decided a case in favor of a persistent petitioner just to keep her from pestering him. "I care little for God or man," he said, "but this widow is wearing me out." Feminist rhetoric has also become a cover story for various special interests. Chief among these is the population control lobby, which has seen abortion evolve from the scourge of nineteenth-century feminists to a full-blown woman's right. Most importantly, perhaps, the women who are most neglected by the feminist movement are the least able to organize into an effective political force. They are too busy running from home to job and back again. Thus, like rays from a dead star, the emanations of seventies feminism live on.

Nevertheless, a new, more responsive feminism does seem to be gaining ground. Unlike its predecessor, the emerging feminism of the nineties attends to the real-life needs and aspirations of a wide range of women. It wrestles with harmonizing family life and employment in world where a balance struck either way is risky. It sees women and men as partners rather than antagonists in the quest for better ways to love and work. The new feminism is inclusive rather than polarizing; open-minded rather than dogmatic. It recognizes that the fates of men, women, and children, privileged and poor alike, are inextricably intertwined. On the basis of her current book, it seems safe to say that Fox-Genovese will be one of the most important architects of that new feminism.

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