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Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World by Linda R. Hirshman

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Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World by Linda R. Hirshman (2006, NY: Viking Penguin Group, 101 pages, \$19.95) Reviewed by Stephanie Shanks-Meile, Indiana University Northwest, Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the Women's Studies Program.

Hirshman's "manifesto" is reminiscent of a number of feminist critiques of the conservative backlash (See Faludi, 1991) articulated by Schlafly and others in opposition to earlier waves of feminism. The backlash, "choice" or "opt-out" conservative response to feminism was operating "full throttle" by the 1980s. Hirshman suggests that "choice feminism" bears only "the shadowy remnant of the original movement, tells women that their choices, everyone's choices, the incredibly constrained 'choices' they made, are good choices" (pp. 1-2). While some claim that feminism "failed" because it was too radical, Hirshman argues that the feminist movement was not radical enough. "A movement that stands for everything, ultimately stands for nothing" (p.2).

After this bold beginning, I expected a critique of feminism and the development of a platform that could become the rallying cry for the next wave of the movement for women's liberation. Hirshman sees Friedan's classic, *The Feminist Mystique*, as radical man-hating that easily lost its focus in favor of "the confrontation-averse Gloria Steinem" whose "uncritically accepting eye" led to consensus building with feminism expanding to "embrace every oppressed group" (pp.18-19).

The author views women working outside of the home as the major route to liberation, suggesting that we must dare to achieve a "full human life" through the "love of work" (p. 3). I was immediately discouraged upon examining her "Strategic Plan to Get to Work." First, "strategic plans" abound in contemporary American discourse as the corporate model permeates ever-increasing areas of social life, both public and private. Secondly, the planks do not move much beyond tired analyses from the business-oriented literature of Kanter (1977) on career building and more contemporary "women's speak" of breaking through the "glass ceiling." Hirshman, a philosopher and law professor who argued several cases before the United States Supreme Court, suggests the following:

1. Don't study art. Use your education to prepare for a lifetime of work.

2. Never quit a job until you have another one. Take work seriously.
3. Never know when you're out of milk. Bargain relentlessly for a just household.
4. Consider a reproductive strike.
5. Get a government you deserve. Stop electing governments that punish women's work. (p. 4)

While she considers herself revolutionary, her platform does not seriously question the current political and economic system. The closest that she comes to structural change is proposing tax reform that would stop punishing working-women and dual income families. If I had seen Suze Orman cited as an insightful contributor, I would not have been terribly surprised.

Feminists have advocated women's development in careers and the importance of mentors in the work environment to assist in climbing ladders and breaking through barriers to upward mobility. The Women's Movement has always advocated educating women and decreasing family size, with the relationship between education and reproductive rights, accepted as a given by feminist scholars and demographers. The liberal feminist movement exemplified by the writings of Freidan and Steinem has considered androgyny, shared childrearing between the sexes, and breaking down the gender stereotypes in the world of work as primary for women's liberation. Liberal feminists have also advocated placing women in positions of power in government from the Supreme Court bench to the halls of Congress, assuming that women will make different gender-based decisions than their male counterparts. They predict that more powerful women in key positions would lead to shifts in family policy to the advantage of women and children. While Hirshman is critical of the failings of liberal feminism, she has not moved beyond that position herself.

The most powerful commentary in the "manifesto" lies in the critique of the "opt-out revolution." Hirshman argues that failure to analyze the conservative "choice" position "deludes women into thinking that they are choosing from a complete set of options, when there's a powerful social system in place directing them homeward" (p. 26). Working mothers were censured by the conservative backlash while "stay-at-home moms grabbed the moral high ground and now they want to pull the ladder up and stop the discussion" (p. 26). She heralds the importance of feminism to provide the much needed "analysis of the value of the choices that women make" so that women will understand the connection between all areas of our lives, from legal cases and voting behaviors to gossip, as central to "making moral decisions about their lives and the lives of their society" (pp. 26-27).

Hirshman fears that we are returning to the days of the MRS degree as most of the women she interviewed "revealed a covert, but long-standing life plan to quit work and devote themselves to future husbands and children, regardless of dependency and other issues that were waiting" (p. 27). Publications like Santorum's *It Takes a Family* give conservatives the "moral ink" as religious fundamentalism has become invisible in our culture. *BloggngBaby.com* is examined at length as an example of the way that women's choices have shifted from the public to private sphere. Hirshman

quoted the example of a woman who wrote:

After my first child was born I realized that I would soon be faced with sending my children to school. Public school is not for my family. Private school cannot be afforded on my husband's salary. So I have chosen to home school. Now I feel that my 'giving back to society,' my 'mark on the world,' is my choice...to home school our children (p. 15).

Hirshman is critical of this mentality as limited “only to her two children and no one else” rather than channeling her knowledge and energy toward making changes in the public schools to better suit our communities. She suggests that the “hyperdomesticated family” is a response to pressures from the left and right. From the left, there is the wish to be unleashed from the exploitation of labor market participation, however, “just because work isn't as wonderful as people fantasized does not mean it isn't usually the best alternative available” (p.15). On the “downside of domesticity,” she quoted Perfect Madness which depicted women as surrendering “their better selves—and their sanity—to motherhood...pulled all nighters hand-painting paper plates for a class party...obsessed over the most minute details of playground politics...They dressed in kid's clothes—overall shorts and go-anywhere sandals. They ate kid's foods. They were so depleted by the affection and care they lavished upon their small children that they had no energy left, not just for sex, but for feeling like a sexual being” (p. 15). Ultimately, the “modern” woman has bought arguments that make her think that she has listened to wellreasoned arguments about the importance stay-at-home moms, making it all the more difficult to confront. Herman and Chomsky (1988) would have added that such propaganda disseminated by cultural institutions, like churches, is much more difficult to dismantle than governmental dictums that create more visible structures of social control. However, Hirshman does not dare to step outside of the liberal paradigm to have that more “revolutionary” conversation, despite her claims that she has assumed a more progressive attitude.

In the final analysis, Hirshman suggests that:

...organized feminism should say: We think adult women deserve to work as well as love. We think the educated middle-class women who were always the core of the feminist movement should seek and keep the interesting, well-paid jobs that middle-class men have. We think that they should not marry and have babies unless they have a clear bargain with the men involved that the men will pull half the weight of the household all the time. We think that there should be job fairs for female college freshman... (p.88-89).

As I read this, I thought, “Now wait a minute!” These ideas are not new, nor do they advocate a revolutionary approach to feminism. While she is critical of conservatives presenting a narrow range of choices for women, Hirshman falls victim to the same theoretical shortcoming by limiting her view of feminism to liberalism rather than exploring the full range of “feminist frameworks.” She does not fault misdirected social programs that do not confront structures of inequality. Instead, she says, “the

problem with today's feminist agenda is just that—a bunch of programs unmoored from the values that started them in the first place” (p.88). From her perspective, it is not a problem that only liberal feminism was considered “legitimate” discourse by middle class women who were unconcerned with the plight of all types of women, to include the poor and women of color. It also is not a problem that affirmative action, day care, and child support laws were designed to help primarily white middle class women.

From the title and introduction, I expected a “manifesto” of liberation, not a re-packaging of old ideas that would not address the issues of the majority of women in ways that would change social structures that create inequality in the public and private spheres. While Hirshman is critical of “liberal” feminism as being not radical or revolutionary enough, she has fallen victim to the same problem. Her ideas do not address deep patterns of inequality perpetuated by the culture of patriarchy and the economics of capitalism. She does not recognize the varieties of feminism that make its history far more rich and hopeful than the discourse she chose to legitimate. Indeed, feminism has been in crisis for quite some time and liberal feminist solutions have not unraveled major structures of oppression and domination. This reviewer finds the writings of Suzanne Pharr (1988) much more hopeful toward finding solutions to the problems that still mystify centrists. Hirshman reminds us how far to the right our society has shifted that, once liberal solutions, are now termed radical and revolutionary with the same writer delegitimizing arguments that diverge radically from mainstream ideologies and structures. If we take Hirshman's analysis as the final word, it is clear that the feminist movement has not only failed to make progress, but has actually lost ground, waltzing back to re-visit a marginally productive and politically restrictive past. Yes, there is much more work to be done, starting now, without embracing tired, worn out solutions.

References

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