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REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Randy E.
Barnett:
Our Republican
Constitution

Tiffany Jones
Miller:
FDR's
Revolution

Joseph
Bottum:
The Bible
& Early
America

Carol
Iannone:
Woman's
Work Is
Never Done

James Grant:
Ben Bernanke's
Crisis

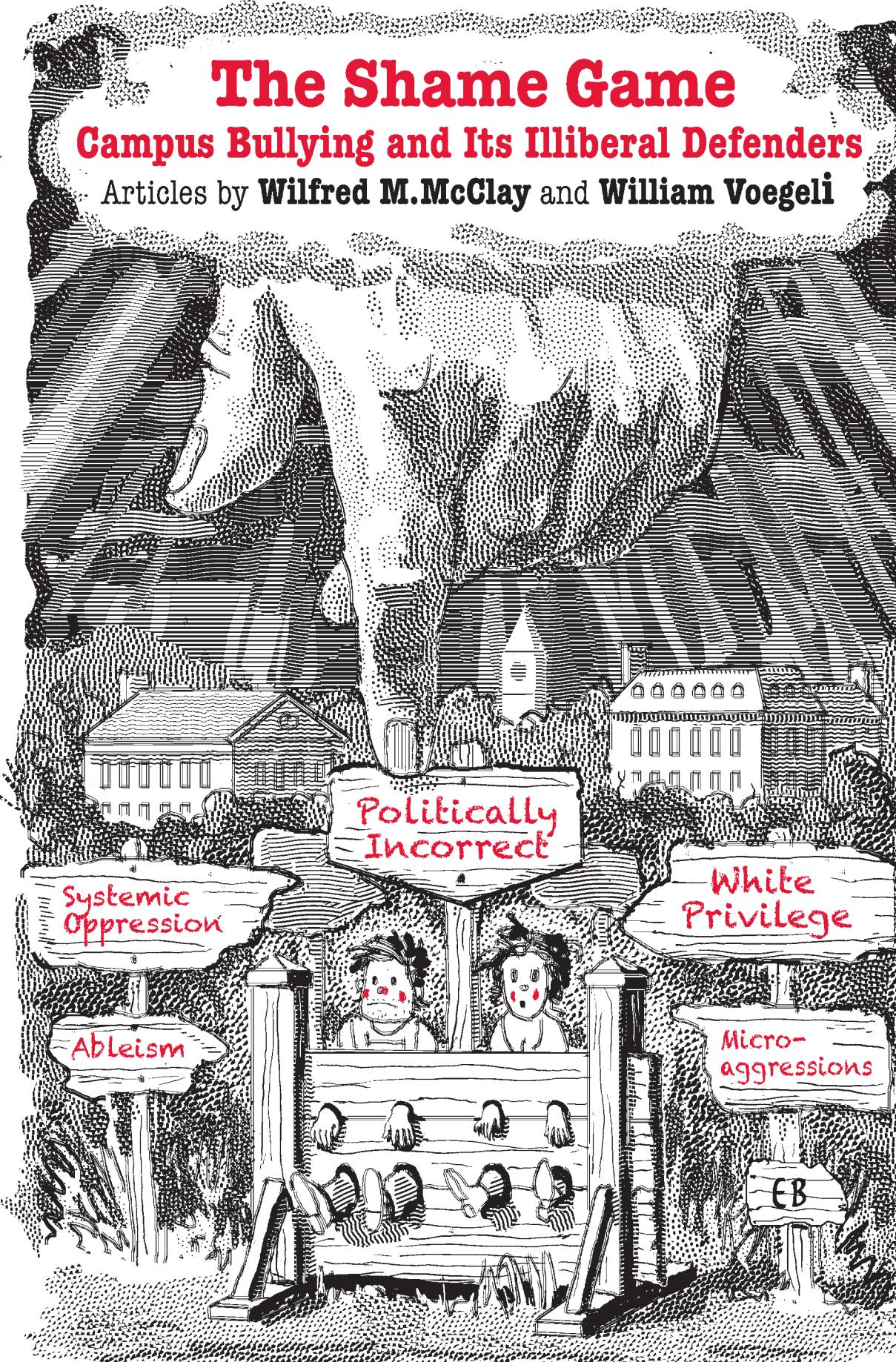
Christopher
Caldwell:
In Praise
of Putin

Andrew
Roberts:
Arnn on
Churchill

Hadley
Arkes &
Robert R.
Reilly:
How Not
to Defend
Marriage

James
Bowman:
Alfred
Hitchcock

Bruce S.
Thornton:
The
Founding's
Common
Sense



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WHAT WOMEN WANT

Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements, by Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry. W.W. Norton & Company, 265 pages, \$25.95



ACCORDING TO THE STANDARD FEMINIST narrative, victimization by men has defined women's lives throughout history. Before feminism emerged to fight this oppression, even privileged women in the modern West, the core feminist constituency, endured not just ordinary unhappiness but disadvantage and discrimination. The structures that supposedly diminished women had everything to do with deliberate, systemic injustice and exclusion, and were unrelated to men and women's age-old efforts to find love, raise families, and build lives of purpose and dignity. Those women who took pride and satisfaction in making a home and caring for their children were benighted victims of patriarchy and false consciousness.

In this reading, America is exceptional only as a bastion of male supremacy, an abyss of deprivation and denial, where any advance was wrested from a power structure created to subjugate women. That women in the United States have enjoyed circumstances among the most favorable in human history counts for nothing. Neither does the fact that America's political and cultural order formed the basis upon which political and civil rights for wom-

en could be realized. Advances in technology, increased prosperity, greater safety in childbirth, and a vast reduction in infant mortality all benefited women enormously—and are all dismissed by feminists as epiphenomena.

In demanding "fuller, more satisfying lives" for women, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements* assumes the truth of this narrative. That is, the great adventure of civilization is largely separate from the history of women, whom feminism comprehends as a "minority" united by aggrievement. As promised by their subtitle, however, co-authors Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry also make some surprising revisions of their own, ones that challenge feminist "myths."

TO BEGIN WITH, THEY BROADEN FEMINISM'S scope, thereby reducing the focus on privileged career women. This change requires discarding the framework of feminism's stages: the first culminating in the 19th Amendment in 1920; the second bound up with the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s; and a possible third stage elaborated by Generation X and Millennial women. Instead,

they place feminism in the context of modern leftist politics. "Feminism was integral to larger progressive changes, with the result that it has sometimes blended so entirely into larger movements that historians have not noticed it." These causes include the socialist-inspired labor and reform movements that began early in the 20th century, the New Deal and Great Society, the sexual revolution and the movement opposing the Vietnam war, and such recent preoccupations as environmentalism and income redistribution

It follows, the book argues, that feminism's concerns are more encompassing than usually thought. They include poor and minority women, children, and even men, especially those part of some demographic minority. When the authors dispute yet another "myth," that "the achievements of individual women are advances for women in general," they make clear that the real "feminist agenda" is collective and egalitarian. Feminism is "about changing the social conditions for all women," not merely "individual women's choices."

As Harvard's Harvey Mansfield has pointed out, progressives' goals are open-ended. They never actually explain what sufficient



equality means in theory or requires in practice, short of outright socially engineered outcomes. *Feminism Unfinished* sounds triumphant—"The women's movement we trace in this book has transformed the world we all live in, transformed it utterly"—and yet the work is "unfinished." Its continuation requires addressing "America's widening economic inequality" and the plight of women in poorer countries.

IN THE BOOK'S CHAPTERS NOT WRITTEN collectively, Dorothy Sue Cobble, a labor historian, argues that women active in the labor movement were actually "social justice feminists," who "sought women's rights as part of a broad agenda concerned with economic fairness and civil rights." According to historian Linda Gordon, second-stage feminism "emphasized sexual and reproductive freedom, economic opportunity and challenging gender altogether" in a "new gender order." Finally, women's studies scholar Astrid Henry examines the recent complications born of earlier progress, "the feminism developed by generations who grew up taking for granted the opportunities newly opened for women."

Cobble's discussion of the conflict over competing understandings of women's rights is especially interesting. To illuminate the division between "social justice feminists" and "equal rights feminists" she examines the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), first proposed in 1923 by the National Women's Party (NWP). It stated: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

The NWP sought a strictly "gender-blind" Constitution: men and women would have equal, identical legal and political rights, extending to laws governing workforce participation, marriage, divorce, and child custody. Social justice feminists, whose adherents eventually included Eleanor Roosevelt, opposed this approach, believing that women needed special legal protections, especially in the workplace and most urgently in low-wage service, industrial, and agricultural jobs.

In 1948 NWP representatives and social justice feminists made their cases before House Judiciary Committee hearings. New York Republican congresswoman and ERA supporter Katharine St. George declared that women "want to be free to work as equals asking for no special privileges." Frieda Miller, economist, labor activist, and former head of the United States Women's Bureau (created in 1920), insisted to the contrary that "'identity of treatment' is not the same as equality." In Cobble's summary, "Sometimes it was necessary to treat men and women differently

in order to advance women's equality." (It's worth observing that many of these feminists, in both camps, were amazingly well educated in an era when university doors were, supposedly, closed to the female sex.)

BY THE 1970S THE ERA HAD BEEN PASSED by the House and Senate and ratified by a majority of the states but short of the three fourths required for adoption. Most feminists had come to support it, but the two sides were still discernable. One social justice feminist declared, "Anyone who tries to repeal women's protective legislation is doing the bosses' work," while feminist leader Betty Friedan joined the NWP in testifying for it. Ultimately, Phyllis Schlafly and a nationwide network of anti-feminists sunk the ERA. They opposed a constitutionally and legally enforced equality of the sexes as detrimental to women, but in a different, broader sense than the social justice feminists preoccupied with workplace and labor issues. Proclaiming a thoroughly traditional view of women's role in society, Schlafly's legions thwarted what had looked like the ERA's inevitable ratification and adoption into the Constitution.

That defeat, however, came nearly two decades after a feminist victory. Following a great deal of lobbying and maneuvering, Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion... and sex. Policy consequences aside, the law's political message was that the circumstances and history of women in America were more like than unlike those of blacks. The mission necessitated by the posited history of brutal oppression was to build a future beyond sexism, one where the detail of being a man or a woman would affect the course of one's life as trivially as would the detail of being left- or right-handed. It's odd to have to say it, but the female sex is not just another interest group demanding redress, a truth continually negated by the country's perpetual apologies for women's "under-representation" in the ranks of firefighters, warriors, scientists, engineers, mathematical geniuses, heart surgeons, and CEOs.

Cobble's argument has an interesting parallel, one she might not welcome. In *Who Stole Feminism* (1994), Christina Hoff Sommers distinguishes between "equity feminists," who want status and rights equal to men's, and "gender feminists," who seek a broader remaking of society, emphasizing group identity, challenging "androcentric" institutions, and resisting the infringements of a patriarchal culture. In contrast to *Feminism Unfinished*, Sommers connects equity feminism to

classical liberalism, not the progressive Left. It is true, after all, that the equal rights feminists enjoyed the support of business interests, and the GOP platform endorsed the ERA in 1940, four years before the Democrats did. For Sommers, equity feminism was grounded "on Enlightenment principles of individual justice." The newer cohort of gender feminists, on the other hand, "have little faith in the Enlightenment principles that influenced the founders of America's political order and that inspired the great classical feminists to wage their fight for women's rights." Instead, they demand collective, egalitarian solutions.

BUT IT MAY NOT BE THAT SIMPLE. THE two types of feminism agree more than disagree, cooperate more than compete. Both are premised to one degree or another on the feminist narrative: there was something vastly wrong in the culture's treatment of women prior to feminist agitation. No previous arrangement can be justified as appropriate or reasonable for the time and circumstances, capable of correction and adaptation to new situations and changes in society. Rather, all were unfair—either deliberately and systematically, or because of men's complacent indifference to woman's plight. In short, what once seemed acceptable to a majority of women was suddenly seen as unconscionable deprivation.

The feminist denunciation of the American Founding for denying women political rights, for example, removes women from the context of civilization and culture, seeing them solely as rights-bearing neuters. There was a cultural basis to the founding, however, and women's historic connection to family, children, and home was one of its central components. The complementarity of men and women, understood in the 18th century much as it had been throughout history, formed the basis on which republicanism was established and equality was made more widely applicable. Representative self-government does not arise where women are truly subjugated.

This problem with the feminist framework becomes clearer in its treatment of more recent events. Cobble deplores the "postwar conservative backlash" in which "certain ideals of womanhood kept women tethered to the home and created unachievable and undesirable expectations for them as mothers and wives," but admits that most feminists of this era accepted gender differences. "Unlike 1970s feminists, [social justice feminists] did not view gender as a social construct," she writes. "For the postwar feminists, sex differences were real, in part biological and unchangeable, and perhaps even desirable."



"Heterosexual family roles," as Cobble calls them, "remained central to most women's identity and were the source of some of women's greatest pleasures."

Similarly, Gordon declares that some of the greatest obstacles to women's advance were...women, those who were "unconscious of their own oppression and limited opportunities," not realizing the extent of their subordination. Thus the need for "consciousness raising," in which feminists gathered in small groups to become more aware of "the hidden injuries of gender," of their oppression, neglect, and mistreatment at the hands of men. "Bitch sisters bitch" became the war cry as women unleashed decades, if not centuries, of repressed anger. (One of the main places feminists witnessed beastly male behavior, as Gordon notes, was from their male New Left comrades. One thinks of the anti-war organizer who slaps around Forrest Gump's beloved Jenny until Forrest clocks him.)

THAT A LIBERATION MOVEMENT'S FIRST order of business was to convince its putative constituents that they were miserable without knowing it might have occasioned a stern reexamination of its central thesis. Instead, feminist cultural theory held that "structural sexism" matched structural racism. "[D]iscrimination against women did not necessarily arise from sexist or misogynist attitudes but from structures," Gordon explains, from "the most basic organization and institutions of the economy, society, and culture." Happily, all that had been marred by cruel, archaic structures could be redeemed by kinder, gentler, more open arrangements. Stipulating that there was no human nature, just culture all the way down, "gender theory" challenged "practices once believed to be natural." Roles could be unlearned since culturally constructed.

This later iteration of feminism launched an attack on many of society's basic institutions, interpreting marriage, in particular, in terms of cold economic calculation that re-

vealed it to be an instrument of oppression. Wives were "servants and maids" who "provided sex and housekeeping services." What had been thought to be a cooperative partnership now stood revealed as an exploitative arrangement where men derived benefits from women's subordination. The personal became political. Marital sex was a form of rape, resisting it a form of revolution. Gordon claims that "women's liberation's rejection of the alleged naturalness of heterosexual marriage and 'missionary position' sex...opened up the common imagination to accept nonstandard sexual acts and romantic relationships."

With such ideas, feminists began to dismantle those very cultural aspects of femininity that had made up the larger, pre-political fabric of a successful society and self-governing polity. "Young feminists concluded that women could function well and happily without marriage," Gordon remarks, since they came to believe "that women friends might be at least as important a source of support and contentment as a husband, that loving sexual partnerships need not be legalized by the state or the church."

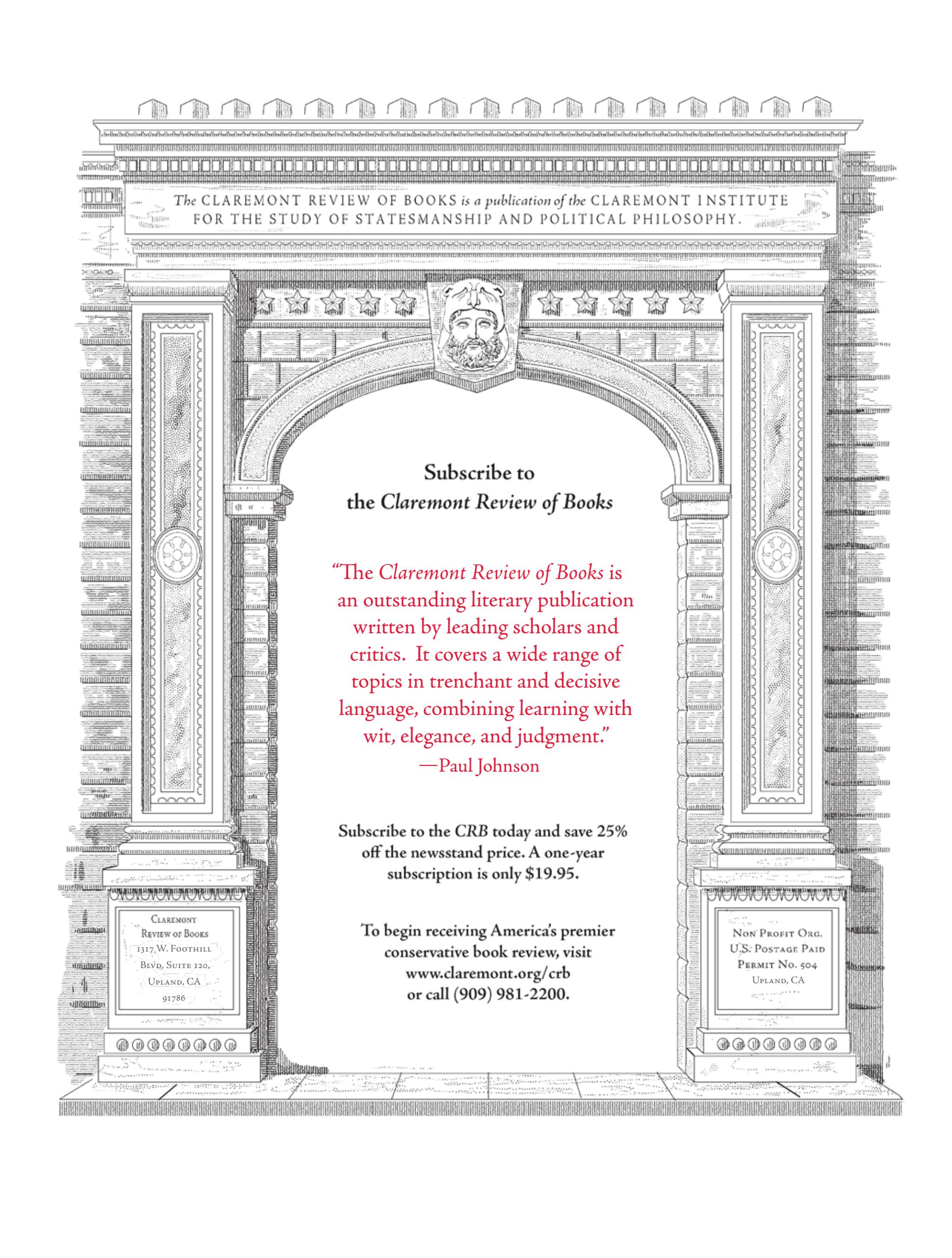
ODDLY ENOUGH, WITH ALL THIS ATTACK ON MARRIAGE, the authors insist that "respect for women's work in the home" has been one of the major goals of feminism. Whether this is meant to be one of the book's "surprises" is not clear, but it certainly comes as one to those who recall Friedan lamenting housewives' stunted, zombie-like existence in postwar suburbia, or feminism's relentless mockery of the "dogwork" that goes into housekeeping. Gordon admits that the thrust of feminism at this point was to push women into the workplace, and to demand government-sponsored childcare to facilitate that shift. But she also notes how "many poor lone mothers wanted to be able to care for young children themselves as prosperous mothers could." (Indeed, many poor women must have wondered what the prosperous zombie housewives were complaining

about.) Some feminists joined the efforts of such organizations as the National Welfare Rights Organization and Mothers for Adequate Welfare to help make this possible, "to make the point that domestic labor was an honorable vocation."

Nowadays, Gordon asserts, most mothers have to work out of sheer economic necessity. The authors deplore "praise for mothers who choose to leave employment, even as the vast majority of mothers cannot afford to do that." The postwar model of the '50s, '60s, and early '70s, however, where more women than ever before or since were full-time wives and mothers, produced widespread equality among women. A broad range of women, from working class to upper class, shared its benefits, since supporting women in a domestic role was a social priority before feminism helped destroy it. Day in and out, whole working-class neighborhoods were full of the wives of machinists, plumbers, cops, firemen, salesmen, clerks, accountants, storekeepers, and realtors. For many baby boomers, coming home from school to mom is among the happiest memories of their lives.

It turns out that the women most enhanced by feminism are the privileged, educated career women that *Feminism Unfinished* sought to remove as the centerpiece of feminist success, women who knew enough not to dispense with marriage. Meanwhile the poorer and minority women, whom it wants to enlist in the feminist project, find forming a stable family life within marriage increasingly difficult. They make up the cohort of single mothers struggling to raise children alone through low-wage employment, government support, or some precarious combination of the two. In liberating women from men, feminism has also liberated men from women, reducing their family role and responsibilities, to the detriment of men, women, and especially children.

Carol Iannone is editor-at-large of Academic Questions and writes on literature, education, and culture.



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