

Educating American Women for the Leisure Class

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SEVENTY-TWO years ago Thorstein Veblen described the American wife's economic function as conspicuous consumer in leisure class marriage. In his definition, "leisure" was the conspicuous consumption of time in nonproductive activities—the appearance of leisure skillfully created by women through busywork activities unrelated to producing the economic necessities of life (for example, ornamental embroidery as opposed to making winter underwear). The purpose was to benefit not the wife but her husband, by defining his high economic status through her "leisure."

To the Victorians, a college education was certainly not considered a necessary item of womanly equipment for marriage. It was, in fact, generally thought a liability: In 1888, *Popular Science Monthly* averred that educating a woman to be anything other than a lady, wife, and mother led to "symptoms of nervousness, hysteria, hypochondriasis, and insanity . . . emaciation and other diseases, the offspring of an exhausted constitution."¹

Today the middle class housewife's economic function is the same as Veblen described, but with this change: American women are taught the required leisure class skills for their wifely roles by their college education, and that education is itself a highly noticeable item of conspicuous consumption.

At today's prices, a college degree costs anywhere from \$10,000 on up. Admittedly in the present tight money and job market, the B.A. is not worth much for anyone, but

¹ Quoted in: Andrew Sinclair. *The Better Half*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965. p. 124.

even in the best of times it has been, for women, a poor investment. In 1968 the average salary for a woman with a B.A. was about the same as for a man with an eighth grade education. Today it is probably lower. And yet, in spite of the institutionalized discouragement and the discrimination they know they will face, women are exploding into the job market—30 million today, 37 million by 1980. This is a fact universities have refused to recognize; as a result they are simply not doing their job for women.

A Class Education

What the universities are offering is an education designed to turn out efficient little suburban housewives with a minor marketable skill so they can be secondary earners until the babies come, with enough liberal arts so they can "enrich" their children's lives and not disgrace themselves in front of the husband's business associates, so they can read Book-of-the-Month, listen to Walter Cronkite, and participate with other housewives in a little steam-cleaned, organized, community Good Works.

Above all, it is a class education, designed to perpetuate the woman's economically parasitic role by which the middle class still defines her status. It is designed to keep her forever overcleaning her house and family and safely out of the career market, forever underproducing anything but babies

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while forever overconsuming the gross national product—the last great leisure class in the world.

We can perhaps understand, though we cannot condone, academic perpetuation of such crippling assumptions as the incompatibility of marriage and achievements outside marriage for women. Such attitudes are as old as our history; and institutions, as well as people, are prisoners of the past. What we cannot do is allow it to continue, because the world can no longer afford to support a vast leisure class, or the population oversupply it inevitably produces. Social problems are too desperately in need of immediate attention not to demand the concentrated efforts of every available human resource. Thus colleges must stop trying to turn out informed breeding cooks and housemaids in yesterday's cultural mold, and they must stop *now*.

A Kissing Cousin

It will not be easy. From her first day in kindergarten all the way to her doctoral degree, the woman finds that American education is the major social instrument pushing her into that role choice. A woman, the schools tell us in a thousand subtle ways, is just a kissing cousin of the human family—go play with your dolls. Her role is determined by the fact of her sex—don't achieve anything but marriage and motherhood. According to the books she reads, all history is made by men: one high school textbook in California actually shows a drawing of Marie Curie looking over Pierre's shoulder while *he* discovers radium.

She is counseled for jobs, not a career—a job that can be interrupted, so it provides low-paid, high turnover employment but not advancement or security—nurse, secretary, teacher. Her opportunities to enroll in schools or courses are limited at all levels. The best public high school in Buffalo, New York, is for boys only. College admissions are frequently sexually gerrymandered to keep a 50-50 balance, even though women consistently score higher than men on entrance exams. Many schools and departments, even

tax-supported, have quotas for women, give them fewer scholarships, especially at graduate levels.

How can this be? In the enlightened 1970's, surely women must be guaranteed equal educational opportunity by the Fourteenth Amendment, by federal and state civil rights legislation, by some Supreme Court decisions, especially when they and their parents pay the taxes that support the universities. Tax dollars certainly cannot be used to discriminate against the people who pay them.

Shockingly, such indeed is the case. No legal mandate anywhere in the country requires any educational system to offer equal educational opportunity to all regardless of sex.² So profound is the disregard for women's rights that no official, no professional lobbyist for universities, and virtually no legislator or civil rights organizer I have ever talked with has been aware of this fact.

What can be done about both this ignorance and the situation? Clearly the women's rights movement will not allow women's needs to be overlooked as in the past. Yet I am not addressing the movement here—I am addressing the academic industry. The issue is what it will do, and will it assume leadership, or will it have to be forced?

First, obviously, each university will have to clean its own Augean stable, and must consult its women faculty and students on how to muck out its discriminatory practices, provide new opportunities for women, provide child care and women's studies, and so forth. Much has been written on this, so I shall go on to the more unusual steps I wish to propose.

For Women To Survive . . .

First, the university must rethink what its obligations are and to whom they apply. To whom is the university really indebted—

² The Supreme Court, in fact, has consistently found *against* this position, as recently as March 1971, in *Williams v. McNair*, in which it affirmed a lower court decision to the effect that separate legislative classification on the basis of sex is reasonable in education.

The leisure rendered by the wife . . . is . . . not a simple manifestation of idleness or indolence. It almost invariably occurs disguised under some form of work or household duties or social amenities, which prove on analysis to serve little or no ulterior end beyond showing that she does not and need not occupy herself with anything that is gainful or that is of substantial use. . . . The wife, who was at the outset the drudge and chattel of the man . . . the producer of goods for him to consume, has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory, for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the un-free servant.

. . . She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength.

Propriety requires respectable women to abstain more consistently from useful effort and to make more of a show of leisure than men of the same social classes. It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well bred woman's earning a livelihood by useful work. . . . Her sphere is within the household, which she should "beautify," and of which she should be the "chief ornament."

—Thorstein Veblen. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899. Reprinted by Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers, New York, 1965.

to the state and federal governments which pay the bills and award the lucrative contracts, or to the taxpayers who furnish that money in return for the right to be educated? Are the university's educational obligations to perpetuate women's middle class privilege, or should it prepare women to change those outmoded patterns?

I believe that a university must equip women to survive in our world of the overpowering institutions which have historically excluded them (including the university itself). It can do this through adopting a variety of intervention techniques designed for enabling women to intervene for themselves, through using its own resources to

intervene for them, and through using its own structure as an arena for training in intervention. I propose the following four-part program:

● *Gathering information for intervention programs*

Legislation begins with information. At present, no federal body is authorized to collect data, hold hearings, act as a clearing-house, or advise on the problems of sex discrimination in education.³ This lack of information is the most serious immediate handicap for women; as a public service institution, the university must seize this opportunity to remedy the government's failure.

With the help of women students and faculty, each university must develop a detailed report on its own discriminatory practices against women, and make that report public. The report should include recommendations for legislative and executive action by both state and federal governments, and should be submitted to its state education department and to the U.S. Office of Education.

● *Training women politically for intervention*

Because women as a class have the fewest affirmatively legislated civil rights, and certainly the worst enforced,⁴ the university must institute credit courses in developing the political expertise to secure and protect those rights. Including field action projects, the courses would encompass finding what legislation is needed or needs amendment; how to force hearings and to present effective testimony; how to follow up with letters, demonstrations, confrontations,

³ This should properly be the job of the Civil Rights Commission, but its mandate does not include sex discrimination.

⁴ It is still perfectly legal on the basis of their sex to refuse to sell or rent women housing; refuse service in public places; refuse equal education for their tax dollar; refuse equal employment opportunity to women teachers, civil servants, employees of small businesses; take away a woman's right to vote or run for public office under state domiciliary laws; or under state domestic laws deny women the right to sign for a loan or mortgage, or to start a business. In many states, women are mandatorily condemned to longer sentences than men for the same crime.

creative disruption techniques; how to use the media; how to form effective coalitions on specific issues.

The courses would also teach how to pressure the Executive branch for effective enforcement through getting congressional hearings; how to get representatives not to ratify the appointments of nominees with questionable records or commitment (for example, Carswell); how to make enforcement agencies include women in their rule-making and enforcement routines; how to make sure the agencies contain personnel sensitive to the problems of sex discrimination; how to expose agencies which do a bad job or none at all (most of them).

● *Using university resources to intervene*

Most large universities maintain their own professional lobbying staffs in Washington; most small ones are represented through associations that lobby. None of them that I can discover has taken the slightest interest in lobbying for women's civil rights.

To serve their women students, the universities must use those resources to pressure for equal educational rights for women. They must demand sex discrimination prohibitions in all state and federal educational appropriations bills and tie them to effective enforcement; they must lobby in all 50 state legislatures to make law where there is none, or to amend existing laws to prohibit sex discrimination as laws now prohibit discrimination by race and national origin; they must pressure to include sex in Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act,⁵ and in the mandate of the Civil Rights Commission, to empower the U.S. Office of Education to conduct a survey on educational discrimination against women.

● *Establishing the means for intervention within the university*

To survive, any system or institution must build into itself the means by which it can be changed, but it must not itself control

⁵ Title VI prevents discrimination in federally assisted programs and grants-in-aid (largely to education), but not on the basis of sex.

those means or be the final arbiter. In the American system, this is theoretically the judiciary's function, but in practice the individual who tries to confront the resources and expertise of an institution in court is severely disadvantaged economically. Last year the federal government moved to even things up by allowing tax deductible status to public interest law firms so that they can sue the government on behalf of the public at what, then, is ultimately the government's expense.

The university must recognize its own institutional potential for providing for the individual rights of women to equal education, and must accept an obligation to have such questions settled not by its unilateral decision, but publicly in the courts. Therefore each university must establish a women's advocacy office which will have actual powers (finances and trained personnel) to submit disputes to outside impartial decision. It must do this by underwriting the costs of cases against itself and providing the plaintiff with counsel of her choice, by underwriting the costs for a woman to sue the state or federal government for equal educational opportunity or to legally petition the Executive for changes in discriminatory rulings.

No university can honestly define itself as acting in the interest of the public that pays its bills if it winks at any conditions whatsoever that deny anyone equal educational opportunity. If a university is serious about "relevant" education, it will adopt the proposals I have outlined, which seem to me a minimal evidence of commitment to the humanist principles that are so prominent a feature of academic rhetoric.

However, as I consider the extreme conservatism of the academic industry, and its disposition to seize and consolidate power over students and faculty within its own administrative clutches, I am not, as the saying goes, holding my breath.

Meanwhile, deprived of full human status, American women continue to march out of a thousand academic halls clutching \$10,000 diplomas—on and on into the great leisure class. □

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