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Flappers, Freudians, and All That Jazz

Suffragists celebrated their great victory in a nation out of war and emerging from a postwar depression to the first flush of newfound power and affluence. In this setting younger women seemed to turn their backs on the achievements of their mothers and grandmothers. Politics bored them. They wanted to have fun. Newspapers, magazines, movies, and novels all told Americans that womanhood had changed, again. Young, hedonistic, sexual, the flapper soon became a symbol of the age with her bobbed hair, powdered nose, rouged cheeks, and shorter skirts. Lively and energetic, she wanted experience for its own sake. She sought out popular amusements in cabarets, dance halls, and movie theaters that no respectable, middle-class woman would have frequented a generation before. She danced, smoked, and flaunted her sexuality to the horror of her elders.

"I like the jazz generation," said Zelda Fitzgerald in 1924, "and I hope my daughter's generation will be jazzier. I want my girl to do as she pleases, be what she pleases regardless of Mrs. Grundy." Zelda, wife of novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, had become a popular symbol of the new female expressiveness; she consciously set herself against the image of generations of feminist reformers and career women. "Mrs. Grundy" represented prudery and sacrifice as opposed to the new standards of pleasure and consumption. As Zelda spelled out the contrast: "I think a woman gets more happiness out of being gay, light-hearted, unconventional, mistress of her own fate, than out of a career that calls for hard work, intellectual pessimism and loneliness. I don't want [my daughter] Pat to be a genius. I want her to be a flapper, because flappers are brave and gay and beautiful."[1]

Movie star Colleen Moore, heroine of the 1923 film *Flaming Youth,* echoed Zelda's rebellious tone. "Don't worry, girls," she reassured her fans. "Long skirts, corsets, and flowing tresses have gone. . . . The American girl will see to this. She is independent, a thinker [who] will not follow slavishly the ordinances of those who in the past have decreed this or that for her to wear."[2]

Yet for all their bravado, the triumph these flappers proclaimed was a complicated and contradictory one. The twenties formed an era when changes long under way emerged into an urban mass culture emphasizing pleasure, consumption, sexuality, and individualism. On virtually every specific, the changes proclaimed as "new" in the twenties can be traced back to the period before World War I. After all, "sex o'clock" had struck in 1913 with dance crazes, rising hemlines and slimmer silhouettes, public amusements, jazz, and bohemian culture. The difference was that activities once on the fringes of society or associated with specific subcultures became normative for white middle-class America in the 1920s. Jazz came out of the black ghetto and into the mainstream. Sexual experimentation and new Freudian ideas spread from Greenwich Village to college campuses. Public amusements frequented by the working class at the turn of the century now attracted middle-class women as well as men. Rouge, powder, and eyeshadow, once the mark of prostitutes, now adorned the most respectable young women.

The Companionate Marriage and the Reemergence of Female Sexuality

The sensuality of the flappers marked a powerful current of behavioral and ideological change in American culture. Youth were a force in American life as never before. Organized into educational institutions (a process enhanced by the passage of child labor laws in the 1910s) such as high schools and colleges, young people found environments in which they could experiment with new norms and challenge tradition with relative freedom. The dramatic growth of coeducational state universities created a setting in which young women and men created new rituals for courtship and new patterns for heterosexual relations. Heady with their newfound freedom, they flaunted new forms of pleasure-seeking such as petting, d
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Yet the college generation of the twenties was not nearly as rebellious as they and their elders believed. The new norms they created reworked the older values with which they had been raised. And the power of peer culture created a degree of conformity in behavior previously unknown. How much individualism is there in a fad?[4] Indeed, the emergence of youth culture, where courtship commonly took place within the youthful institutions of college and high school, dramatically narrowed the age range within which most women and men married, creating far more uniformity than ever before.[5]

To Victorian mothers and fathers, however, the public acceptance of female sexuality was indeed revolutionary. Ideas expounded earlier only by radicals like Emma Goldman or Greenwich Village bohemians were now widely disseminated. An elite of psychologists, particularly the followers of Sigmund Freud, declared war on Victorian ideology, labeling it superstitious, unscientific, and unhealthful. They pronounced sexuality a positive, energy-producing (rather than depleting), and pervasive force in human life, and they redefined "normal" adulthood to include sexual expression. At the same time, they drew careful boundaries around the definition of "normal sex": it must be heterosexual and marital.[6] Indeed, birth control moved into the middle-class mainstream as part of a new ideal of marriage as an emotionally fulfilling companionship. Leaders like Margaret Sanger no longer advocated birth control as a source of female and working-class autonomy, but rather worked for its dissemination under the watchful control of doctors.[7]

If such ideas constituted a revolution for women, it was certainly a complex and restricted one. After a century of denial, middle-class culture acknowledged the existence of female sexuality, and indeed prescribed sexual pleasure separate from procreative intention. At the same time, it reinforced the traditional goal of marriage in the context of an increasingly competitive "marriage market." By emphasizing the emotional centrality of romance and marriage and the competition among women for male attention, the emphasis on female sexuality undermined and called into question some of the powerful bonds among women. Indeed, it stigmatized homosexuality, and by inference most intimate relationships between women, as "deviant."[8]

New courtship patterns presumed a new kind of marriage in which romantic love, sexual pleasure, and companionship were central. Responsibility for such relationships, however, rested primarily on the shoulders of women, who had the most to lose. Male identity and economic security still rested primarily on work, whereas women understood that their economic security, emotional fulfillment, and social status all depended on a successful marriage. If they failed to marry, they risked becoming "dried-up old maids." The very epithets used insinuated a new valuation of the single and presumably celibate life as unfulfilled, worthless, deviant.[9]

Anxieties about marital success curbed some of the flappers' new physical freedoms. If a young woman hoped to find a mate, she could not put all her energies into other pursuits such as sports and careers. Female athletics had grown dramatically in the twenties, providing new heroines such as tennis star Helen Wills and Gertrude Ederle, who swam the English Channel in 1928 breaking previous world records set by men. As the decade wore on, many expressed fears that competitive athletics could make young women too masculine to be acceptable wives and, perhaps, even uninterested in marriage. As a result many colleges abandoned intercollegiate competition for "play days" in which there would be no "stars" and no unwomanly behavior.[10]

Womanliness, in turn, had a growing commercial dimension. By the 1920s, Americans were aware of themselves as consumers and of consumption as a central facet of American life. Marketing experts used sexuality, especially female sexuality, to sell all manner of products. In this sexualized consumer economy young women learned to market themselves as products. Sales of cosmetics skyrocketed. Magazines tutored women on the ingredients of an attractive "personality." Social sororities flourished on campuses where they coached their select few in the social skills, proper appearance, and behavioral boundaries of the future wife-companion.[11] Beginning in 1921 the Miss America Beauty Pageant in Atlantic City emphasized the competitive display of female beauty, cloaked in rhetoric about wholesome femininity. Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor described the first

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Miss America for the *New York Times:* "She represents the type of womanhood America needs—strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of home-making and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country resides."[12]

As advice books urged married couples to "be friends," advertisements and movies warned women that the task of remaining an attractive and interesting wife required constant vigilance. According to Penrhyn Stanlaws, costume designer for the movie industry, "a woman who is properly gowned can rule nations, while a misplaced hairpin has caused more tragic mistakes than a misplaced commandment!"[13] And movie star Dorothy Phillips announced that "Women are matrimonial ostriches. They . . . refuse to admit that marriage is a competitive game in which *getting* a husband is merely the first trick."[14]

Advertisements played on anxieties, warning women of failure due to "housewife hands," "halitosis," or body odor and offering products to ward off the dangers. Movies, in turn, demonstrated the proper use of new products and clothes with models like the "it" girl, Clara Bow. Or Gloria Swanson, the dowdy housewife who lost her husband and then, transformed into a flapper, won him back again. Zelda Fitzgerald summarized the calculated marketing of self when she praised "flapperdom" for "teaching [young women] to capitalize their natural resources and get their money's worth. They are merely applying business methods to being young."[15] Gloria Swanson hinted at contempt for the objects of all this manipulation when she said, in *Why Change Your Wife?*, "The more I see of men, the more I like dogs."[16]

Companionate marriage was supposed to supply the emotional support and companionship which women and men had previously found most often with members of their own sex. As women broke out of the strictures of Victorian morality, their experience of female community diminished and they lost the conviction of a common female mission. At work, in the home, or in politics women were on their own, individuals yet still defined and limited by their gender.

The emphasis on heterosexual companionship and the stigmatizing of female community forced lesbians to recognize themselves as a distinct group. In a previous era, women who chose to spend their lives with other women and whose affections for each other found sexual expression did not consider themselves particularly "different." In a culture that denied female sexuality of all sorts, they remained invisible and, therefore, unthreatening. Within the subculture built on women's domestic identities, powerful emotional and sensual relationships among women were the rule rather than the exception. That some of these were lifelong, committed, and passionate attachments went largely unremarked. Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith, for example, shared their lives for forty years during which time Addams became one of the most famous, idealized, and beloved women in the United States.

Freudian ideas labeled homosexuality "deviant" and emphasized intense and privatized heterosexual relations with men. In this context, a lesbian identity began to form among women who knew their sexuality did not fit the norms delineated by the "experts," and who needed new and discreet ways to find each other in a hostile world. Some of them found community in the worlds of single professional women and female athletes. Others began to articulate in literature the lonely search for self-affirmation. Novels such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and the powerful writings of Gertrude Stein from her self-imposed exile in Paris initiated an expression of a new identity in formation.[17]

The isolation of lesbians from a broader community of women rooted in female reform and women's colleges mirrored the growing isolation of the housewife within the companionate marriage. The image of the ideal wife-companion presumed an intense focus on private life and specifically on the marital relationship. Emotionally centered as much on her husband as on her children, the "modern" housewife presided over a shrinking household in which modern technology replaced domestic servants and consumption itself had become a major task.[18]

Housework had always been labor-intensive, harsh work. From the colonial goodwife to the rural farm woman to the domestic servant in the middle-class home, women had produced food and clothing with calloused hands and sweated brows. As electricity and indoor plumbing reached the majority of homes (and over two-thirds of nonfarm homes) in the 1920s, however, the nature and organization of that work changed.

Perhaps it changed so rapidly because the expanding middle classes could no longer find servants to do the work except in the south where black women had few other job options.[19] Young white women flocked to new jobs in sales and clerical work and there were few new immigrants to replace them. Ads after World

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The urban housewife no longer produced, or supervised production. Rather, purchasing and using the new technologies became a form of personal expression and an opportunity for guarding the health and welfare of her family. Vigilantly she attended to family nutrition with new canned and packaged products, cleaned the new bathroom to guard against germs, and decorated to enhance the cheer of her home. If she followed the advice of home economists she could become an expert at her main job, consumption, and ensure that her family had the best possible within her budget. In 1928 the *Ladies Home Journal* depicted the happy housewife who showed her commitment and creativity in her bright, gay kitchen decor: "It is a rainbow, in which the cook sings at her work and never thinks of household tasks as drudgery."[21] With science at her side she could remain interesting, slender, and elegant.

Motherhood itself became a job to be scientifically managed. It elicited a flood of advice from experts. Do it yourself, mother; don't allow anyone else (i.e., servants) to raise your children, they urged. At the same time they rushed in to teach her how to carry out responsibilities for which, they presumed, she was ill-equipped. For example, researchers Robert and Helen Lynd described mothers in Muncie, Indiana, who devoted their lives to their children, giving up church and club work and social activities.[22] The experts in scientific child rearing warned against too much emotional involvement and prescribed scheduled feedings and other methods of regulating what had previously been seen as a "natural" relationship. No longer could a "good mother" simply feed and clothe her little ones and send them off to school on time. Now she weighed her babies and visited doctors on a regular schedule, oversaw children's clubs and music lessons, studied nutrition, and participated in the PTA.[23]

The Secretary as Single Girl

While preparing herself for a companionate marriage, the young woman in the 1920s who was not in college was likely to be working. Between 1920 and 1930 the proportion of women in the labor force remained stationary at about one in four. The most dramatic gains had been in the two previous decades. Yet the twenties glamorized and enshrined the working girl, consolidating a new ideology about the proper public places for women. The growth in the female labor force before World War I had been viewed largely as an unfortunate and certainly unwomanly activity on the part of women outside the white middle-class mainstream. Women's participation in the war effort had broken a few barriers and certainly earned some public approval, but factory workers and domestics remained marginal and negative figures in popular culture. Nevertheless, with one in four women over sixteen in the labor force, some accommodation was in order. The changes in the working woman's locations offered an opportunity to reweave the working girl back into the fabric of socially approved womanhood. By 1920, 30 percent of women workers were in clerical and sales work. Clerical work—white collar, respectable, and available primarily to white, native-born women—provided the opportunity for a new ideology that recognized a period of work outside the home in many women's lives but separated that work from the idea of career so valued by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century new women seeking economic independence.[24]

The image of the secretary as the quintessential modern working girl joined the youthful independence and consumer orientation of the flapper to the wife-companion ideology. Magazines portrayed her as glamorous and offered her advice on how to get ahead. They also prescribed in both fiction and features her ultimate goal: marriage. Like the college girl, she needed "personality" to get ahead. And indeed, the office, like the university, represented a marriage market rife with opportunities. Floyd Dell, a prominent exponent of the new sexuality, argued that "The idea of work as a *goal* would be repudiated by working women; to them it is a *means to an end,* and the end is love, marriage, children, and homemaking."[25] Movies about working girls emphasized romance at the expense of sisterly bonds. Common scenes included the roommate left alone on Saturday night while her companions

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The glamor of the working girl lay in her proximity to men in the office context. Indeed, the secretary worked so closely with her boss that their relationship could be described in familiar, domestic terms. At the turn of the century when secretaries still were most commonly male, they were apprentices preparing for a long climb into managerial ranks. The boss was a mentor, a father figure. By 1930 the metaphor had changed from father/son to husband/wife, and, as the title of one popular film proclaimed, *The Office Wife* was at the top, not the bottom, of her professional possibilities.[27] *Fortune* magazine described the needs of the businessman in these terms:

> What he wanted in the office was something as much like the vanished wife of his father's generation as could be arranged—someone to balance his checkbook, buy his railroad tickets, check his baggage, get him seats in the fourth row, take his daughter to the dentist, listen to his side of the story, give him a courageous look when things were the blackest, and generally know all, understand all.[28]

Clerical work thus redefined offered an excellent vehicle for the new image of the young working women. It solved the growing needs of corporate bureaucracies while offering women jobs with limited possibilities for ambitions or careers. The office was no longer a male preserve but a public environment in which males and females were accorded separate and unequal roles analogous to their traditional roles in the home.[29]

At the same time the office was critically and fundamentally different precisely because the environment itself was public. Rife with potentially disruptive romantic opportunities, offices were redesigned to control this sexualization. Clerical workers operated in separate rooms, often adorning reception and information desks at the entrance. Many employers complained that young women dressed too frivolously for the serious business of the office. Indeed, given their low horizons of opportunity at work and popular culture's encouragement to find meaning in romance and leisure activities, they were expressing in their dress a very different sense of priorities. They were dressed for a party because that is where they wanted to go.[30]

Some writers at the time compared the beauty of women in the office to other aspects of the environment, to be controlled and used productively. An article in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1924 remarked that "consciously and at a cue beauty has entered into the world of business. . . . Not mere casual, sporadic beauty, blond or brunette, but the selected kind, chosen for type, stature, manner and personality and arranged in patterns about the establishment from the information desk to the offices at the back, as harmonious a whole as one might find on the stage." To the skeptical the author said "it pays dividends in morale and in salesmanship and in prestige." Somewhat tongue-in-cheek the author then discussed the process of matching employees to office decor and personalities to company image.[31]

The office worker, like the college girl, fit the image of the flapper. Flirtatious, fun-loving, the flapper had resources; she was middle- or even upper-class. Her working-class sister, however, also experienced some of these changes. Decades before it was respectable she danced in public halls. As working girls became acceptable, more and more of them lived separately from their families of origin and retained a growing proportion of their earnings to spend as they pleased.[32]

In Elizabethton, Tennessee, for example, the opening of two large rayon plants in 1925 and 1926 attracted a predominantly female labor force of nearly five thousand. Teenage girls and young women in their twenties represented the first generation in their Appalachian families to enter the cash economy. There is evidence, however, that even in this relatively isolated mountain community, working girls kept a portion of their earnings for personal expenditures on clothes and cosmetics. In 1929 five hundred young women led a walkout that became the first of a series of massive textile strikes in the south. The company brought in guards, machine guns, and ultimately the force of the state to quell the strike. They also recorded the strike on film. Pictures of the strikers clearly demonstrate the transmission of cultural artifacts through mass marketing: for all the world they look just like flappers with bobbed hair, close-fitting hats, and fur-trimmed coats. Newspaper stories described the celebratory mood after the first walkout as young women tootled around the town in automobiles, honking and yelling out the windows.[33]

The flamboyant and striking solidarity of Elizabethton women was the exception. Generally, the atmosphere of consumerism and optimism obscured continuing realities of economic hardship for rural women and working-class families. Income was rising,

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as were expectations, but hunger and hardship remained the lot of many. Salesgirls found it difficult to maintain the required ingratiating friendliness as they sold wealthy women goods that they themselves could never afford to buy. Racist hiring policies prevented black women who joined the great migration out of the rural south from experiencing the economic fruits of an expanding service sector. After a brief experience of enhanced opportunity during World War I, they found themselves forced into a very narrow range of job possibilities: the least desirable factory jobs and domestic service. Racist and anti-immigrant attitudes also underlay immigration restriction, the virtual exclusion of black women and men from political participation in southern states, and the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in northern cities. Although immigration from overseas virtually stopped, a new immigration from Mexico developed in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, fueled by the demand for labor in the United States during World War I.

Recruited by agricultural businesses like the Great Western Sugar Company, most Mexicans came in family groups, and like other immigrants, familial and ethnic patterns insulated them from the individualism so prevalent in popular culture. Women in such families labored not only in the fields but also to bring forth large numbers of children to join them and their husbands there. Their traditional subordination within the family was reinforced by the agribusinesses' practice of paying women's wages to their husbands. Economist Ruth Allen observed in 1924 that "She does not collect her own money; she does not know how much is paid for her services; she seldom knows how much cotton she picks a day or how many acres she chops. The wage paid is a family wage, and the family is distinctly patriarchal. . . ."[34]

Though the cash economy had been primarily the province of men, a community of women, in fact, had been the core of Mexican village life as they ministered to spiritual needs, produced a substantial portion of the diet in their gardens, plastered homes, and participated in an active barter economy. Migrant women in communities of farm laborers often found their traditional sources of autonomy, power, and authority undermined. But in the older Hispanic communities in southwestern cities, younger women experienced new possibilities.[35]

Like black women, Mexicans found severely limited options in the realm of wage work because they faced the dual obstacles of racial and sexual discrimination. Most of them worked in domestic and personal service (44.3 percent in 1930) or agriculture (21.2 percent). A growing proportion found low-skilled jobs in industries such as sewing garments or pecan-shelling (19.3 percent in 1930). On the whole, despite desperately poor living conditions, cultural preferences meant that Mexican-American women were far less likely to work outside the home than either black or white women. Yet the powerful currents of individualism in American culture affected them as well. Interviewers in the 1920s received frequent complaints from Mexican men about women who had lived and worked in the United States. They were too independent, "like American women," no longer content with subservient domesticity.[36] That new independence would encourage the transfer of the strength Mexican women traditionally exerted within the family and the church to more public and visible roles. One result was important female leadership in labor struggles such as the Texas pecan strike in 1927 and later in the massive farm strikes of the thirties.

The Decline of Female Reform

The cultural emphasis on surface appearances, on competition, and on consumption helped to undermine the prewar reform agenda developed by a broad range of women's organizations and premised on female sensibility and the collective strength of women. As urban life triumphed over rural, automobiles, movies, and radio brought urban mass culture even into the countryside. Urban culture eroded the traditional dependence on and authority of the family and facilitated youthful self-expression and individualism. Yet as the internal strictures of Victorian repression lifted, external forces of governmental repression and conservatism grew, and an era of Progressive reform came to a sudden end. Red scares jailed and deported thousands. Race riots in places like Chicago brought crowds of whites into black neighborhoods shooting and beating the new migrants in random violence. The Ku Klux Klan revived in northern cities to promote "100% Americanism" and hostility to immigrants, Jews, and Catholics. In 1924 the National Origins Act stemmed the flow of immigration from Eastern Europe and Asia. Republicans brought business leaders back to the center of government, proclaiming "the chief business of America is business."[37]

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Suffragists seemed to recognize the changed context when they transformed the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1920 into the League of Women Voters (LWV). They presumed that enfranchised women should be understood as individuals, citizens with a direct relationship to the state via the franchise. Their duty was to train women to be good citizens. The training they provided, rather like earlier work of groups such as the National Consumers' League, emphasized an issue-oriented politics based on thorough research and effective public education.

The National Woman's Party (NWP), by contrast, announced that its commitment to "the removal of all forms of the subjection of women" required a renewed commitment to end legal discriminations against women. The NWP claimed the banner of prewar feminists, to win "the final release of woman from the class of a dependent, subservient being to which early civilization committed her."[38] In practice, however, the single-minded focus on legal discrimination narrowed the meaning of feminism. In 1921 the NWP began a state-by-state campaign for Equal Rights Bills and in 1923 secured the first congressional hearings on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which stated that "men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction."[39]

In an important sense the ERA represented another version of female individualism. Its premise was equal treatment of the individual before the law so that working women could have "an equal chance with men to compete in the labor market for their livelihood."[40] NWP supporters tended to be professional women for whom the barriers to individual success and advancement in the public arena were most onerous. Their campaign effectively narrowed the feminist vision, rejecting links to other reform issues. When black women, for example, demanded that the National Woman's Party protest the systematic denial of voting rights to black women in southern states, Alice Paul asserted that this was a "race issue" not a "woman's issue."[41] Although their former allies in the suffrage movement were almost as reluctant as the National Woman's Party to deal with the oppression of black women, NWP's restricted version of women's rights clashed sharply on other issues with the continuing drive for female progressive reform.

Former suffragists like Carrie Chapman Catt in the League of Women Voters believed there was no more need for an organization specifically concerned with women's rights, but they also assumed that women would bring a nurturing sensibility and reforming vision into the political arena. Most of them continued to work within a very wide range of reform organizations to better the conditions of working women, to curb child labor, to investigate and humanize prison systems, and to provide services to the urban poor.[42] Their reform vision remained rooted in politicized domesticity, and they focused on cross-class alliances in which middle-class women fought for the "protection" of their poor and working-class sisters by a nurturing feminized state. As a result, they could not imagine women as simply another selfish "interest group." The conflict between these two very different visions of female solidarity was deep and bitter. It permeated the continuing activities of feminists even as their base eroded among the broader female population.[43]

The female reform impulse, nourished especially in the intensely female environments of settlement houses and in the activities of religious women's organizations, the YWCA, women's clubs, the National Women's Trade Union League and the National Consumers' League, continued to spark social and political innovations in spite of the increasingly hostile environment. Communities of women proved strong enough to sustain such organizations though they could no longer provide a broad, unified vision like the nurturant cooperation of maternal commonwealth to counterpose to the rising power and diminished civic participation of the bureaucratic state. These organizations, in turn, trained a new generation of leaders who were ready to seize the new opportunities that emerged in the 1930s.

For the first time since abolition, black and white women began to make tentative steps toward interracial cooperation around a common agenda. Pressure from black women struggling against segregation within the YWCA and from white women in the Southern Methodist Women's Missionary Council forced the Council for Interracial Cooperation (CIC), founded in 1920, to set up a women's committee. These early contacts between southern white women and black activists remained tense and difficult. White women failed to acknowledge black women's broad claim for "all the privileges and rights granted to American womanhood." In a series of emotion-charged meetings black leaders such as Charlotte Hawkins Brown told southern whites that "the Negro women of the South lay everything that happens to the members of her race at the door of the South
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race at the door of the Southern white woman." Calling on their shared religious heritage, she reminded them that at the final judgment white Christians would reach a hand out to God in the same way that she would, adding "I know that the dear Lord will not receive it if you are crushing me beneath your feet." Contact with middle-class blacks, singing hymns and praying with them, led white leaders such as Carrie Parks Johnson to recognize in "the hearts of those Negro women . . . all the aspirations for their homes and their children that I have for mine." The CIC Women's committee achieved little that was concrete in the 1920s, but it initiated a new alliance of middle-class black and white women in the south. Black women continued to work separately on the issues of education, working conditions of domestics, child welfare, public segregation, suffrage, and lynching. By the 1930s their agenda began to have a greater impact on the work of whites as well.[44]

A more visible political victory for women reformers was the Sheppard-Towner bill for maternal and infant health education passed by Congress in 1921. Proponents argued that high infant mortality rates could be lowered by educating mothers in prenatal and early childhood nutrition, sanitation, and child care practices. Careful to avoid encroaching on the growing professional power of physicians, they proposed that public health nurses under the supervision of the Children's Bureau provide education but no direct medical services.

Nevertheless, the program met sustained opposition from those opposed to state-supported health and welfare activity. The opposition to Sheppard-Towner marked yet another area within which female collective concerns and capacities gave way to a more individualized, scientific, and male-dominated profession. The most vociferous opposition came from physicians who were in the process of consolidating their newly won hegemony over medical practice. They did not want nurses to function in an autonomous way, outside their direction and direct supervision, nor did they want government-sponsored programs that might compete with their own practices. Sheppard-Towner, they implied, was a Bolshevik plot. By the end of the decade the funds for Sheppard-Towner had been cut entirely and doctors took over the preventive health care practices such as physical examinations and well-baby clinics pioneered by women.[45]

Similarly in the 1920s, the emerging specialty of obstetrics finally eradicated the work of midwifery. Accused of being dirty, uneducated, and responsible for maternal and child mortality, midwives—most of whom were blacks or immigrants—were driven out of business except in remote, rural areas. As a result, the experience of giving birth moved from the home to scientifically controlled urban hospitals. In that transfer the woman giving birth was further isolated from the support and proximity of other women who traditionally attended the birthing mother at home. Although the practices of experienced midwives, particularly those who trained in Europe, resulted in far lower maternal and infant mortality than most hospitals could report, the hospital birth became the acceptable form.[46]

In a context of growing political conservatism, most female reformers ran into right-wing smear campaigns labeling their efforts alien and subversive. Peace, for example, had been a central issue for many women's organizations. Though peace activists disagreed in their degree of opposition to the world war, they shared a view emphasizing the perspective of motherhood as an essential point of view on world affairs. Women's consciousness of the value of life, they believed, must be brought to bear in the international arena where men too easily turn to militarism and war when disputes arise. After the war the Woman's Peace Party changed its name to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and began to work in coalition with the LWV, the Women's Joint Congressional Committee, and even the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) to oppose militarism and to abolish the National Defense Act of 1920.

This activity aroused the opposition of the War Department which began a campaign against the WILPF in 1922. In 1923 the office of Brigadier General Amos A. Fries, head of the Chemical Warfare Service, mailed out a "spider web" chart to patriotic groups throughout the country. This chart purported to show that "the activities of all women's societies and many church groups may be regarded with suspicion." It named twenty-one women and seventeen organizations, linking them to radical groups and implying communist control. Interestingly, the DAR, which later circulated the chart widely, was named in the original version.

The consequence of this red-baiting was that many organizations and individuals drew back from coalitions and work with WILPF. In 1925 Carrie Chapman Catt guided the formation of a broad peace coalition excluding WILPF. Meeting as the first National

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Conference on the Cause and Cure of War, the coalition included the LWV, the American Association of University Women, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the YWCA, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. WILPF purged its own radical leadership, including women such as Crystal Eastman, and shifted its focus from militarism to the economic causes of war. In spite of these attacks, however, the women's peace movement retained a visible presence on the American political scene. It was a major force behind the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, a multinational agreement renouncing the use of force in international relations, and it gained new strength in the 1930s.[47]

The work of middle-class reformers in alliance with working-class women came under similar suspicion by conservative antilabor forces. But it was also undergoing internal changes which transformed the relationships of middle- and working-class women. Settlement houses, which had been free spaces where women lived together, explored new ideas, and developed reform programs, were slowly becoming more structured, routinized, and professionalized. Directors and workers were more likely to be trained social workers pursuing professional agendas and less likely to live in and become part of the settlement house itself. Lines of responsibility became more formal and hierarchical as proliferating agencies expanded administrative responsibilities thereby diminishing the informal bonds of mutual dependence and cooperation. And, increasingly, men were likely to move into the upper echelons of social welfare bureaucracies, a trend which became far more pronounced in the 1930s.[48]

Women's alliances with unions, already badly eroded due to labor's disinterest in organizing women, virtually disappeared during the twenties. Union women and their allies continued to build communities on the edges of the union movement in women's locals, the Women's Trade Union League, the Women's Bureau, and summer schools for women workers. The most innovative of these were the Summer Schools for Women Workers initiated by trade union women together with M. Carey Thomas, the president of Bryn Mawr College, and Hilda Smith, an instructor there. The summer schools began at Bryn Mawr College in 1921 and continued in several places until the mid-1930s. This worker education movement brought hundreds of young women from their homes and factories to a two-month experience that changed many of their lives. They took courses in history and economics as well as labor law and the skills of organizing and negotiating. Though the union movement remained inhospitable to women and was generally experiencing hard times in the 1920s, the summer schools trained many women who assumed leadership in later labor struggles.[49]

Worker education was one of several alternative strategies developed in response to the hostility of the union movement and the low level of unionization among working women. The most important of these, however, was protective legislation, which generated the most direct conflict between feminists.

Protective legislation had been achieved beginning early in the twentieth century largely as an alternative to unionization. If women could not protect themselves through organization, society could establish maximum hours, minimum wages, regulations against night work, and limitations on the weights they could lift. Furthermore, when the courts made it clear that they would not permit such legislation for all workers, reformers prevailed with the argument that women, like children, needed special protections because of their physical weakness as well as the social necessity of protecting future motherhood.

Though unions increasingly supported protective legislation for women and children, female unionists were reluctant to embrace this strategy because it diverted energy and resources away from organizing. Indeed, for many women in organizations like the WTUL, protective legislation was a last resort to which they turned in despair after other alternatives failed. Unions in the twenties protected their members' interests in part by excluding groups, like women, who might undermine their unity and discipline.[50] Union leaders used the rhetoric of the difference between women and men to keep women relegated to the sidelines, protected not by unions but by legislation. Thus unions turned against women workers using the very ideas underlying the militant and successful union drives of the 1910s, especially among garment workers. Such organizing had drawn on the sense of honor and dignity imbedded in female culture, its moral appeal reaching across class boundaries to a broader sisterhood. In the twenties, union women and men spoke different languages, but the men controlled the institution.[51] Women clung to protective legislation in part because they had so little else.

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collect information and advocate government action in the interests of wage-earning women. This victory created an important institutional niche for advocates of working women and a constant source of data and new policy proposals addressing the needs of women in the labor force. Yet, on the heels of the creation of the Women's Bureau, the body of protective legislation so painstakingly won in the Progressive era and defended in the courts came under attack both from the political right and from feminists in the National Woman's Party.

When the NWP proposed an Equal Rights Amendment they pointed to the continued existence of discriminatory legislation in every state. For instance, remnants of the old common law tradition gave husbands in some states control over the earnings of their wives and minor children; denied women the right to serve on juries; allowed husbands to determine their wives' legal residence; placed the burden of responsibility for illegitimate children on the mother; limited women's inheritance from a husband without a will to one-third of his property while granting widowers complete control over a deceased wife's real estate. The NWP catalogued continuing discrimination against women professionals who were barred from many of the finest schools and relegated to subordinate roles within their professions. And they charged that protective legislation simply placed women in an inferior position and deprived them of their rights.[52] For their opponents who believed in protective legislation they had only scorn: "They are trying to make our legislators believe that we women in industry are a class of weaklings, a special class of creatures devoid of both moral strength and physical stamina, totally unfit, mentally, morally and physically, to decide for ourselves, to judge between right and wrong, good and bad."[53]

Progressive women reformers responded with horror and anger at this threat to decades of reform activity. They charged that the NWP consisted of professional women who wanted all doors open for their own advancement but who had neither sympathy nor understanding for working-class women trapped in sweatshops and factories. What, they argued, does equality mean when women are disadvantaged to begin with?

This battle over means and ends poisoned the international women's movement as well as the domestic one and it persisted until the 1960s.[54] Clearly protective legislation provided needed improvements for many women. Particularly in female-dominated jobs, hours became more reasonable, wages rose, and working conditions improved. At the same time, protective legislation made women less able to compete for traditional male jobs requiring overtime, nightwork, or heavy lifting. Thus, it may have contributed to the continuing sex segregation of the labor force and encouraged women to seek work in newer areas of the economy such as clerical and service work where they would not face as much competition. Once feminized, those jobs reflected the same characteristics associated with other "female jobs," namely low pay, little job mobility, and low status.[55]

While the Progressive reformers won their battle to defeat the ERA in the twenties, their vision of a politicized domesticity allowing women to enact publically the values of the home brought responses as hostile as those experienced by their opponents in the National Woman's Party. They could defeat the ERA in part because the spectre of the independent woman evoked increasing hostility as the decade wore on. And yet, female reformers themselves frequently pursued public roles as unmarried social workers, nurses, or teachers whose status was more and more precarious. Opponents of the Sheppard-Towner bill like Senator James Reed of Missouri ridiculed as "unnatural" the unmarried, professional women employees of the Children's Bureau. "Female celibates," he sneered, "women too refined to have a husband. . . . It seems to be the established doctrine of the bureau that the only people capable of caring for babies and mothers of babies are ladies who have never had babies." Waxing eloquent about the natural delights of "mother love," he attacked the "bespectacled lady, nose sharpened by curiosity, official chin pointed and keen . . . [who] sails majestically and authoritatively to the home of the prospective mother and demands admission in the name of the law." While his colleagues chortled, he proposed that a better plan would be to set up a mothers' committee "to take charge of the old maids and teach them how to acquire a husband and have babies of their own."[56]

This reemergence of the domestic ideal in its more privatized form occurred, ironically, as younger women announced their intention of pursuing a new style of feminism including both a career and marriage. In many ways they shared Senator Reed's denigration of the suffragist generation. In 1927 Dorothy Dunbar Bromley wrote in *Harper's Magazine:*

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> "Feminism" has become a term of opprobrium to the modern young woman. For the word suggests either the old school of fighting feminists who wore flat heels and had very little feminine charm, or the current species who antagonize men with their constant clamor about maiden names, equal rights, woman's place in the world, and many another cause . . . *ad infinitum.*[57]

Yet she claimed for "modern young women" the right to economic independence, individual choice, and the combination of marriage and career. Popular magazines contained numerous feature stories about this new breed and their optimistic claim that they could "have it all." Their individualism left them painfully alone in a world that continued to discriminate against women. Naively they thought they could have it all without the social support of organized women. Yet the cultural gap between themselves and their more Victorian predecessors left a gulf of misunderstanding and a dearth of generosity on both sides. If they sniffed at "the old school of fighting feminists," women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in turn, criticized their "selfish and fruitless indulgence" in romantic sexuality displaying "an unmistakable tendency to imitate the vices of men."[58] Clearly the space for collective female action had eroded but not disappeared.

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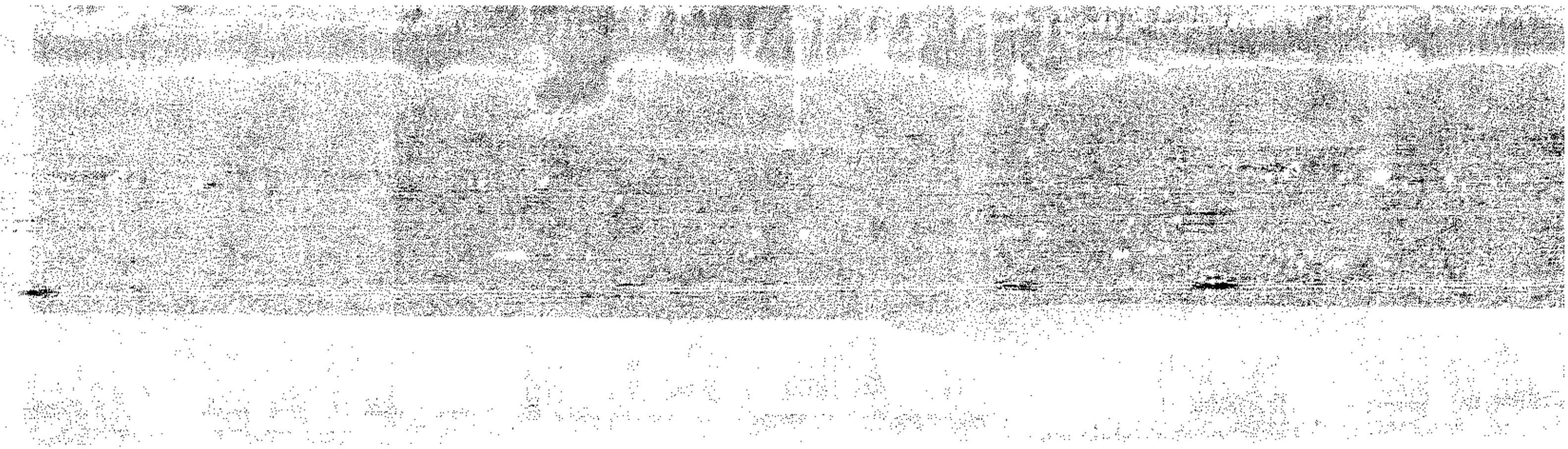
Perhaps the new freedoms and new attitudes of the twenties represented a necessary experimentation with individualism especially on the part of young women.[59] Yet they were shaped and bounded by economic and cultural forces to such a degree that in retrospect some of these freedoms seem illusory. Changes in public life in the twenties accompanied the disintegration of the Victorian female community and the incorporation of women into the individualistic ethos of a consumer economy. The "separate spheres" of public and private were no longer so separate as women visibly worked and played in public places and as they refashioned domesticity into the "public" roles of professionalized social work, nursing, teaching, and white collar clerical work. The separation of home and work, the structural basis for the traditional middle-class gender ideology, had changed almost beyond recognition. Indeed, consumerism, together with growing corporate and governmental bureaucracies, inverted the meanings of these categories. Consumer culture defined public spaces—depart-



ment stores or popular entertainment centers—in terms of purchases meeting privatized, individualized needs. And politics increasingly moved away from the daily life of communities to become the arena of experts, specialists, and hidden interests. Indeed, instead of the emergence of a "mother state" as female reformers had hoped, the domestic realm itself became increasingly contingent on a technical, corporate, and professionalized state. Yet female reform had in many ways reshaped the political landscape—laying the groundwork for what would be called, in the 1930s, the "welfare state."

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