

**Feminism without Illusions:
A Critique of Individualism**
By Elizabeth Fox-Genovese
University of North Carolina Press
347 pp., \$12.95

By Allan Kulikoff

Is individualism the wrong way to go?

WITH THE COLLAPSE OF centrally planned socialist economies and the failure of market-driven fiscal policies in the U.S., renewed examination of the ideological grounds of social policy has become an urgent task. During the '80s, libertarians, who (in the name of conservatism) argued that our prob-

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lems would disappear if the individual citizen was liberated from the fetters of state intervention, have only succeeded in crippling the banking system, beggaring millions of people and bringing the government to the brink of bankruptcy.

Yet these same right-wingers now claim that world events have proven the superiority of free-market capitalism—and, judging by the mainstream media's accounts, a startling number of people agree with them. The popularity of libertarians' positions points to the political effectiveness of their ideology, which, however flawed, has at least a coherent foundation in individualism, an ideal to which a great majority of Americans unquestioningly adhere.

If democrats and socialists are to counter this ideology successfully, we must move beyond ad hoc solutions to economic problems and toward a coherent ideology—one that justifies social policy as a whole and reflects the aspirations of our citizens. *Feminism without Illusions*, a new book of essays by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, goes far beyond women's issues to suggest a new basis for social policy. It is essential reading for anyone seeking new ways to revitalize democratic socialism.

Me first: Fox-Genovese begins with a critique of individualism. She defines individualism as "the theory of human nature and rights, according to which, rights, including political sovereignty, are grounded in the individual and can only be infringed upon by the state in extraordinary circumstances." In a society in which individualism predominates, communities grow out of individual needs and individual self-interest, as citizens form voluntary associations or contract with each other to sustain themselves and their families.

Individualism was essential in the spread of equal rights to the dispossessed. Feminism, for example, began with an assertion that women, too, were created equal and deserved all the civil and political rights granted to men. As old hierarchies dissolved in the 18th and 19th centuries, this individualist ideology and language provided women (and workers and blacks) with their best opportunity to achieve full citizenship. Individualism continues to dominate con-



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temporary feminism, justifying affirmative action, abortion rights and many other issues on the feminist agenda.

Individualism, however, has outlived its usefulness, Fox-Genovese contends. With logic equal to that of feminists, those opposed to feminism use individualist language to buttress their positions. Working from individualist assumptions leads feminists to expect that women will freely come together, forming themselves into a discrete class, at once equal to men but profoundly different in culture from them. To presume that all women share a common economic identity, however, is simply wrong. Women define themselves in many ways—forming, for instance, anti-feminist organizations as readily as feminist ones.

Affirmative action and the battle over abortion show, Fox-Genovese argues, how individualism obstructs policies the left supports. Rather than arguing that groups deserve equitable representation within the

workplace, many feminists have insisted that individual members of groups should have equal access to jobs. Under current law, plaintiffs usually sustain class-action suits only by proving discrimination against particular women. In successful discrimination cases, the work tends to require very specific credentials. Upper-middle-class professional women can meet this standard. But working-class women have less recourse—as the government's failure to prove that Sears discriminated against women in general for high-paying commission sales positions attests. No wonder working-class women (the majority, if one includes clerical and sales workers) have historically resented ideologies favoring the individual needs of their wealthier counterparts.

While Fox-Genovese supports abortion rights (for the first trimester, when the vast majority of abortions occur), she regrets both the individualistic rhetoric of the abor-

tion-rights movement and the overwhelming emphasis placed upon this issue, at the expense of other parts of the feminist agenda. Both pro- and anti-abortion ideologies draw on individualism, disagreeing only upon whether to consider the woman or the fetus as the individual worthy of protection.

Fox-Genovese urges that reproductive rights be derived instead from community needs. Using individualist premises, many reproductive-rights advocates argue that it is unfair to force a woman to bear children against her will, especially if she has no access to contraceptive devices. But a more community-minded pro-choice stance would insist that the future of the society would be damaged by leaving a woman alone with a child for 18 years without medical care, day care, safe housing and a clean environment.

A new corporatism: We might overcome some of the problems inherent in individualism, Fox-Geno-

In *Feminism without Illusions*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that, while individualism helped the spread of rights for the dispossessed, it has outlived its usefulness.

vese contends, if we imagine "the claims of society—the collectivity—as prior to the rights of the individual, ... protecting the rights of the individual as social, not private, rights." Before the transition from feudalism to capitalism was complete, rights did flow from social need. She calls these older forms of community life corporatism—the belief that individuals gain political identity and political rights from the community. This belief sustained medieval guilds, feudal manors, the universal Catholic Church and big slave plantations, until capitalism destroyed all forms of corporatism. Fox-Genovese seeks the creation of corporatist societies that are organized democratically rather than hierarchically, with the authority to enforce laws made for the public good.

Although *Feminism without Illusions* suggests a new foundation for social policy, it does not specify a political program based upon the theory it presents. One wishes that Fox-Genovese had sketched such an agenda, for policies that might build democratic communities are hardly self-evident. Fox-Genovese does insist, however, that one critical goal of corporatist communities should be to sustain families in nurturing children. Individual rights in the marketplace mean nothing if families remain ill-housed, ill-fed and unable

to pay for medical care. Free, universal medical care, communally financed day-care centers and family allowances would obviously be part of any family-based social policy. Moreover, affirmative action, which is subject to attack by individualists, can be fully justified as a means of sustaining families. Since families require an income adequate to raise children, all groups, however defined (by gender, ethnicity, race, social class), should have equal access to all kinds of employment as groups.

In Fox-Genovese's ideal society, family needs would limit individual rights but at the same time sustain them. Fox-Genovese does not lay out family policy, but one can guess that such a policy might include censorship of pornography, regulation of overly sexual advertising and dissemination of birth-control information in schools. By allowing children (and adults) to explore Western (and Third World) cultures in an environment safe from violence and sexual coercion, such a structured community of families would provide an ideal environment to nurture art, music and literature.

Tough questions: It is, however, difficult to find communities in which individual rights grow out of communal needs anywhere in the Western world. Coercion would pose a continual threat to any such community. Who in the society decides public policies? What prevents the wealthy or those with greatest access to public media from setting the agenda? Given great differences between social classes (and between women of different classes), how can community members reach a consensus sufficient to allow democratic decision-making? How can such rights as free speech be transferred from individuals to communities or social classes? How are minority rights protected?

Fox-Genovese has in other places recounted the sorry behavior of great slaveholders who justified hierarchy as communal paternalism, but abandoned their social responsibilities in practice whenever the welfare of their own families was at risk. Contemporary history is full of examples from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China of the suppression of individual rights in the name of the society, the state or the party.

Individualism, moreover, has been central to our entire political history. Its images and words are so pervasive and so unconsciously repeated—that we must incorporate them into any new social contract. Only by reshaping the language of individualism, sustaining individuality within communities, can we begin to build a new society from the rubble of selfishness and greed. Fox-Genovese has not considered, much less resolved, these intractable issues. But she has given us tools with which to begin. ■

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New York Times—the newspaper of abysmal record on feminism

The Girls in the Balcony: Women, Men, and The New York Times

By Nan Robertson
Random House, 274 pp., \$22.00

By Eleanor J. Bader

SURPRISE: THE NEWSPAPER THAT publishes "all the news that's fit to print" is run by chauvinistic white men. That's right, the guys who run the *New York Times* are sexist.

While the premise of *The Girls in the Balcony* is hardly earth-shattering, this is an insider's report, journalism of the best name-naming and finger-pointing tradition. Nan Robertson, a longtime reporter for the *Times*, has written an engaging, engaging and inspiring book on the time-honored misogyny and patronizing attitudes that permeate the newspaper of record. From Adolph Ochs, the first man in a family dynasty that has controlled the paper for nearly a century, to Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr., the current

publisher, the men in charge are exposed, denounced and occasionally praised.

But it is the women who are trumpeted—from Anne McCormick, the first female to win a Pulitzer Prize for the paper, to Betsy Wade Boylan, the named-plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit that challenged the paper's sexism-as-usual.

A spirit for suffragism: In language resembling a chatty conver-

Times reporter Nan Robertson explores time-honored misogyny at a place where women are still referred to as "adornments."

sation, Robertson introduces the reader to a plethora of spunky women, including a six-foot-two-

inch "apparition garbed in rough Irish tweeds and shod in thick-soled brogues." Using a liberal dose of writer's license, Robertson invents the scene in which this "apparition" entered the *Times*' inner sanctum. "A whiff of the stables perfumed the air. A deep, melodious voice with an Irish lilt said, 'I am Maria Morgan. I want a job.'"

In 1869, Morgan, known as Midy, became the first woman reporter in the city room. Unfortunately, she was seen as an anomaly—a physically imposing, tough-as-nails reporter who thought and wrote "like a man." Nonetheless, her presence rankled more than a few of the good old boys, including Adolph Ochs, the patriarch who would in 1896 become the paper's publisher.

Ochs' takeover, says Robertson, ushered in a "Dark Age for women," since he believed "women belonged at home and certainly not on a newspaper; he fought personally and in his editorials against women's right to vote. ... During the four decades that Adolph Ochs held sway, only

four women worked as reporters in the *Times* city room. The first two specialized in women's news, such as conventions, society, clubs and fashion shows." The other two started off covering the suffrage movement—"until the movement became front-page material and male reporters were assigned to write the stories."

Even during World War II, a period in which most newspapers hired dozens of "Rosie reporters," the *Times* held fast. "Nobody who entered the city room of the *Times* during the war years could doubt for a second that it was a man's world," Robertson writes. "There were spittoons everywhere on the floor in a filthy litter of cigars and cigarettes and crumpled papers."

The boys' club: Robertson's own tenure at the *Times*, beginning in the mid-'50s, is presented in detail. James "Scotty" Reston, Daniel Clifton and Gay Talese become more than names in a history text; they are presented through wonderful anecdotes as the charming, complicated and sexist men they were. Perhaps most astounding, however, are Robertson's recollections of events at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Despite the fact that the club was the site of countless addresses by presidents and prime ministers, women reporters were "not allowed even to set foot inside. The women protested that they didn't want to be members—all they wanted was equal access to the news. They were not believed. The State Department colluded in the arrangement. It continued to route foreign chiefs of state and other high government officials to the club. And then, in 1955, after years of pressure from the Women's National Press Club, the men thought of a solution. They would put the women reporters in the balcony of the ballroom. Of course, they would get nothing to eat during the speeches, which were usually delivered at lunch. And there would be no place to sit up there—it was too narrow for chairs if there was any kind of a crowd. But, by God, no woman would be able to say that the club didn't let her in to cover the assignment."

Robertson's descriptions of the club's "cattle car" atmosphere are shocking, infuriating. But the focus of the book, despite forays into such places, is on the *Times* alone. She traces shifts in attitudes and policies, including those brought about by movements for social change in the '60s and '70s that resulted in the hiring of a small number of visibly powerful women including Charlotte Curtis, the first woman to be listed on the *Times*' masthead—Robertson calls her "the bride of the *New York Times*... She was never off duty"—and Ada Louise Huxtable, the first full-time architecture critic on an American newspaper.

Taking action: By the early '70s, however, the "chicks from the newsroom" discovered that there were only 500 to 600 women working at

the paper out of a total workforce of 6,000, including cleaning people, secretaries, classified ad takers and reporters. Furthermore, they learned that the "average salary of male *Times* reporters was \$59 a week higher than the average salary of women reporters. They also found that 23 percent of the women were working at the minimum union salary for reporters, while only 6.8 percent of the men were working for the minimum salary."

A five-page letter was sent by the Women's Caucus to Abe Rosenthal, then managing editor. His response: "a wounded 'How could you do this to me?' He said, 'Why didn't you tell me you felt this way? The men come to me and tell me everything.'" Discussion followed discussion. Flora Lewis was hired to head the Paris bureau. Still, nothing changed for the majority of women at the *Times*.

By early 1973, the caucus decided to hire a lawyer and fight back in earnest. *Boylan vs. the New York Times* was filed and charged the paper with systematic and pervasive discrimination against women. Finally, in 1978, without ever going to trial, the lawsuit was settled. The *Times* agreed to pay the 550 women involved in the "class" a piddling \$233,500 in back pay (women with more than 20 years at the paper got the most—\$1,000 each), and put in place an affirmative action plan that promised to place significant numbers of women in every level of every department, including one woman for every four male executive and managing editors, and on the foreign, national and metropolitan desks.

By 1991, one-third of the copy editors were women, as were 27 percent of the photographers and photo editors, 30 percent of the graphic arts and layout staff, and 23 percent of the reporters and critics. Still, Robertson reports that when Carolyn Lee, the first woman assignment managing editor, was introduced at a staff retreat by Executive Editor Max Frankel, she was called "the latest adornment to the paper's masthead."

Shocking? Obnoxious? Grotesque? All of the above? Or, perhaps, exactly what one would expect?

While Robertson gives the *Times* a thorough drubbing for its continuing mistreatment of women, she casts a far less scrutinizing net over the other "isms" in which the paper is mired: racism, classism and heterosexism.

This makes *The Girls in the Balcony* less exacting and probing than it might have been, perpetuating a mainstream movement tendency to push the case for white, middle-class women's "equal opportunity" at the expense of a more inclusive politics. Nevertheless, Robertson has unmasked a variety of evils and evil-doers. In so doing, she has written an explosive, colorful and pointed exposé that cuts to the bone of media mythology.

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