

ANALYSIS

Sexual Politics (1970)

Kate Millett

(1934-)

Irving Howe

“Good causes attract poor advocates....Miss [Kate] Millett [in her book *Sexual Politics*] flattens out all history into a tapestry of ‘sexual dominion,’ not only paints a picture of the past and present depriving women of any initiative, will, or capacity, but...systematically ignores those crucial factors of class position which have the most far-reaching impact on the life of women. Most of the time, when she speaks of women she really has in mind middle-class American women during the last thirty years. About the experience of working-class women she knows next to nothing, as in this comic-pathetic remark: ‘The invention of labor-saving devices has had no appreciable effect on the duration, even if it has affected the quality, of their drudgery.’ Only a Columbia Ph.D. who has never had to learn the difference between scrubbing the family laundry on a washboard and putting it into an electric washing machine can write such nonsense. As with most New Left ideologues...

These sentences indicate that Miss Millett is at heart an old-fashioned bourgeois feminist who supposes the height of satisfaction is to work in an office or factory and not be burdened with those brutes called men and those slops called children. For one must ask: Why is the male’s enforced labor at some mindless task in a factory ‘distinctly human,’ while the woman bringing up her child is reduced to an ‘animal’ level? Isn’t the husband a ‘chattel’ too? Hasn’t Miss Millett ever been told about the alienation of labor in an exploitive society? And is the poor bastard writing soap jingles in an ad agency performing a ‘human’ task morally or psychologically superior to what his wife does at home, where she can at least reach toward an uncontaminated relationship with her own child?...

For what seems to trouble Miss Millett isn’t merely the injustice women have suffered or the discriminations to which they continue to be subject. What troubles her perhaps most of all—so one is inclined to say after immersing oneself in her book—is the sheer existence of women. Miss Millett dislikes the psychological distinctiveness of women, and she will go no further than to recognize—what choice is there, alas?—the inescapable differences of anatomy. She hates the perverse refusal of most women to recognize the magnitude of their humiliation, the shameful dependence they show in regard to (not very independent) men, the maddening pleasures they even take in cooking dinners for ‘the master group’ and wiping the noses of their snotty brats...The dominating obsession of Miss Millett’s book—which is to insist that all but rudimentary sexual differences are cultural rather than biological in origin—is a token of her lack of intellectual sophistication.”

Irving Howe

“On *Sexual Politics*: The Middle-Class Mind of Kate Millett”

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