

# Feminism & Thought Control

## [The Education System and Text book Industry]

*“One cannot help wondering why educators, and especially publishers, have been so generous in their help to the feminist cause. One part of the answer has to do with the involvement of the federal government in education” ...*

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When parents object to profanity in schoolbooks, they are invariably met with answering cries of “censorship” or “thought control,” and warned of the dangers of tampering with the First Amendment. Yet while national attention has been focused on the activities of such concerned individuals, one of the most extensive thought-control campaigns in American educational history has gone completely ignored. **I am referring to the transformation, in the name of “sex fairness,” of textbooks and curricula at all educational levels, with the aim of convincing children that boys and girls are the same.** Indeed, the dismantling of “sex roles” has virtually superseded the transmission of information as the aim of the classroom.

The campaign begins with the guidelines issued to authors of textbooks by such major houses as McGraw-Hill, Macmillan, Harper & Row, Lippincott, Rand McNally, Silver Burdett, Scatt-Foresman, Laidlaw Brothers, and South-Western. Oddly similar in substance, wording, and even format, these guidelines are in fact not suggestive but mandatory, as authors who transgress them soon discover. (Some houses, like Harper & Row, have review boards with veto power over prospective books.)

The guidelines’ stated aim is “fair representation of women” (Silver-Burdett) and “the equal treatment of the sexes” (Harper & Row); but the aim is also “improving the image of women” (Scott-Foresman) and “creating positive sexual [and racial] images” (Macmillan). **This points to a basic incoherence of purpose, between showing the world as it is and as ideological feminists believe it ought to be, an incoherence that runs through the guidelines as it does through the feminist movement itself.**<sup>1</sup> Thus, Macmillan advocates acceptance of the deviant—“It is unrealistic and unfair to imply that all one-parent homes are ‘broken’ homes”—but demands falsification of the norm: “[W]e are more interested in emphasizing what can be, rather than the negatives that still exist. . . .” South-Western is as explicit as these

euphemistic documents ever get: “Emphasis is on what can be and should be rather than mirroring what the society is.”

So fully does the spirit of falseness permeate the guidelines that it results finally in a pretense that the lie is really true. **“Textbooks which avoid male and female stereotyping will more accurately represent reality,”** says Silver-Burdett in justification of its demand that “no occupation should be shown as reflecting the masculinity or femininity of people pursuing it.” The question of whether there might be some *truth* to these so-called “stereotypes” is simply dismissed. Harper & Row pontificates: “Economics texts should not always assume that the consumer is a woman . . . it should not be assumed that all women have marriage and motherhood as goals.” (In fact, women in these guidelines never have such goals.) Scott-Foresman asserts that “Because such characteristics [as fear and rudeness] are shared by males and females in reality, textbooks that classify them as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ are misrepresenting reality.”

On the planet Earth, most consumers *are* women and, as any pediatrician will testify, girls are usually more orderly than boys. Macmillan calls such generalizations “tyrannical, irrelevant, inaccurate, and outdated,” but never says why. All that is offered is dogma—“Women and girls should be shown as having the same abilities, interests, and ambitions as men” (McGraw-Hill)—and invention. One of Scott-Foresman’s “stylistic” demands is that a sentence like “An ex-stenographer got a job as a stewardess with an airline” be changed to “the ex-stenographer got a degree in accounting.”

That these guidelines inhabit their own world becomes clear whenever they approach the dirty pronoun “he.” “It may sometimes be best to use the generic *he* frequently,” McGraw-Hill concedes, “but to add, in the preface and as often as necessary in the text, emphatic statements to the effect that the masculine pronouns are being used for succinctness and are intended to refer to both females and males.” Did anyone ever doubt this? Before McGraw-Hill cleared things up, did women really think that “he who hesitates is lost” did not apply to them? Did mothers who read unliberated editions of Dr. Spock ignore advice about what to give a daughter if *he* swallowed poison?

So practiced are these guidelines in doublethink that they do acknowledge gender differences, but only to attribute them wholly to “socialization” or to the effect of discrimination. “Where representation in proportion to share of population would be contrived or a distortion of history, notice may be made that the imbalance results from suppression or exclusion of a group’s contributions. . . .” (Rand-McNally). Macmillan, illiterately but urgently, asks, “*What about real-life events where women really were in a passive role?* History is replete with instances where women were

treated as second-class citizens; current events, too, reflect this lingering bias. We want to depict these facts clearly in our illustrations.” The treatment of science is especially tortured, since Macmillan cannot quite bring itself to admit that most scientific discoveries were actually made by men: “Because of the societal roles that have been traditionally assigned in our culture to women and minority people, white males are *credited with* most of the significant achievements in science” (emphasis added). Even so, scientific artwork “should depict women and minority people at least 50 percent of the time, avoiding sexual and racial stereotypes.”

Any thought that these guidelines merely suggest a general direction for authors to follow is quickly dispelled by their demand for strict score-keeping. On one page Macmillan says, “Equal treatment in classroom materials is not a ‘numbers game’ ” but on another it tells illustrators to “*Maintain a 50-50 balance between the sexes—numerically and in terms of the significance and prominence of the activity illustrated.*” The guidelines put their stamp on every inch of text, and on every representable human activity. **The colors blue and pink are taboo; girls must not be shown “mostly indoors or hovering near doorways, sheltered from the elements, carrying umbrellas when boys are not.”** The requirements imposed by this strict and specific unisexuality go all the way to Macmillan’s advice that “Cosmetics, hair coloring, and other artifices can be discussed for both sexes.”

**For all the pretense of “balance,” however, the one activity never depicted favorably in these guidelines is motherhood.** Some grudgingly allow it as “one option” for women, but ban the words “mother” and “housewife” (“homemaker” is permitted). Scott-Foresman decrees that “Showing some women in traditional roles is not sexist if women are shown in other roles as well.” But it is never suggested that “non-traditional” depictions need to be balanced in the same way. Officially, the guidelines declare themselves opposed to “patronizing” the traditional role of women, but they manage somehow to patronize it nonetheless: thus, the very draughtsmanship in Lippincott’s examples of “bad” illustrations—a family at the zoo, mommy at the grocer’s—is grotesque, while its “good” pictures—white father beaming at son, who raises his arms in adoration toward a black woman behind a large desk—are rendered with meticulous clarity.

In their quest for equality, these guidelines for writers also consistently wind up advocating an awkward prose style. Aversion to the word “he” moves South-Western to recommend the passive voice over the active, so that the phrase “why he should feature the merchandise,” for example, is to be replaced by “why the merchandise should be featured.” Another way to outwit English pro-nominalization is by repeating nouns obsessively. A sample “bad” paragraph runs:

A farmer may have harvested 10,000 bushels of wheat. If the price of wheat is \$3 a bushel, *he* may sell all his wheat; but if it is only \$2 a bushel, *he* may sell only enough to supply *himself* with sufficient cash until *he* can dispose of the rest at a better price.

The approved paraphrase runs:

A farmer may have harvested 10,000 bushels of wheat. If the price of wheat is \$3 a bushel, the **farmer** may sell all the wheat; but if it is only \$2 a bushel, the farmer may sell only enough to provide sufficient cash until the rest can be sold at a better price.

This is not only stupefying, it is inaccurate. “To provide sufficient cash” does not say the same thing as “to supply himself with sufficient cash.” The usual aim of writing instruction is to foster the exact use of words; the approved prose here is not only clumsy and turgid in its own right, but sets up clumsiness and turgidity as standards to emulate.

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What of the books that emerge from the feminist die? More than just compilations of girl truckdrivers and boy babysitters, they are also endless sermons on the feminist millennium. In *People Need People*, a Holt, Rinehart second-grade reader, the story “Wet Albert” typifies the treatment of males, even six-year-old males, in this new millennium. **Hapless, dopey-looking Albert** is followed everywhere by a rain cloud until one day there is a drought and by chance he becomes useful. Contrast this with the portrayal of girls in the Holt third-grade reader, *Never Give Up*, A story called “Do You Have Time, Lydia?” described in the teacher’s guide as a “realistic story about a **busy, creative girl**,” **concerns** a heroine—she lives with her father and seems to have no mother—who takes on too many obligations. The story ends when, after many achievements, Lydia also manages to build a go-cart for her helpless younger brother. Another story, “The Hole in the Tree,” praises birth, but dutifully stresses that brother Scott is just as enamored of baby animals as is sister Paula. Similarly dutiful are the practice sentences which follow the lesson: “Jill seems very grown up,” “Judy doesn’t like to set the table,” “Mother and Daddy like to kiss the baby,” and—lest the other half of the lesson be forgotten—“Bobby has chocolate on his face.”<sup>2</sup>

“Christina Katerina and the Box” is an even purer example of the feminist paradigm. Christina has a mother (oddly enough), but one so shadowy as to be absent from the “Teacher’s Overview”:

Christina Katerina is a little girl who uses her imagination to convert a big box into several creative playthings in her front yard. With her father’s help, she changes a TV box into a castle. When the castle collapses, Christina makes a clubhouse of what is left of the box. [More examples of her ingenuity follow.] Watson, the boy next door,

is at first jealous of Christina's imaginative resourcefulness and destroys her creations. Later, he tries to help but ends up inadvertently destroying more of her creations. In the course of the story, Christina's imagination overcomes each obstacle, and in the end, Watson shows that he has entered into the fun. . . .

The curious emphasis on father-daughter relations in books like *Never Give Up*—it is hammered home yet again in the story “Elizabeth, the Bird Watcher”—would not be quite so objectionable were it not freighted with ideology, in **this case the feminist myth that mothers cripple daughters by transmitting “passive” values**. In the service of this myth children are told over and over, but not told they are being told, that **“single-parent” families are numerous and happy**.

The ideological barrage does not end with elementary school. A good example of feminist high-school pedagogy is *Viewpoints*, a ninth-grade literature reader from Houghton-Mifflin. A poem by Marge Piercy about her love of hard work and hard workers is followed by “The Perfect Shot,” an autobiographical essay by Billie Jean King. “I expect to win every time,” says our aggressive, achieving heroine, “I still want to be number one.”

Another story in *Viewpoints* sounds a related message, but this time with a male role-model as protagonist. Teruo, the hero of “Say It with Flowers,” works in Mr. Sasaki's flower shop; his problem is Mr. Sasaki's insistence that he lie to customers about the quality of the flowers being sold. Teruo is so upright and appreciative of beauty that, in the end, he gives away some choice roses to a girl who likes them, and leaves happily when Mr. Sasaki fires him. This particular story is a marvel of compression, offering in brief compass a minority group, an exquisitely **sensitive male, and a businessman who routinely resorts to fraud**. In short, the America of feminist imagining.

As to future plans, a recent curriculum report of the National Association of Secondary School Principals suggests that forthcoming high-school texts will be even worse than present ones. Under the heading “back to basics” (a current shibboleth, since even the most obtuse educators have noticed that American parents are becoming restive), the report discloses that there is to be a “new emphasis on traditional themes” in high-school curricula. One example of this “new emphasis”: “U.S. history texts that emphasize the World War II home front more than its battlefields.” One cannot help suspecting that this will translate into a lot of Rosie the Riveters at the expense of other significant actors and events of the period.

Even in higher education, where the autonomy of college students and faculty makes control more difficult, feminism has secured a firm beachhead. College texts, of course, follow standard guidelines. It is no longer “all men” but “all humans” who are mortal in logic books. The cover of A.C.C. MacKenzie’s *The Major Achievements of Science* (Simon & Schuster) features a **small picture of Newton, a small picture of Einstein, and a big picture of**—presumably the greatest physicist of the three—Madame Curie.

But it is in the area of “Women’s Studies” that feminists have left their stamp most clearly in the academy. Typically, they want it both ways: to win the game while playing by their own rules. They complain that discrimination has barred them from the rigorous, prestigious disciplines, yet, given a free hand and lavish funds by cooperative administrators, they have so far produced mainly a lot of consciousness-raising and pep talks for personal growth.

A typical selection of Women’s Studies textbooks used in New York colleges includes the best-selling manual, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, put out by the Boston Women’s Health Collective; a sprinkling of novels like Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (about the author’s dissatisfaction with male love-making); **Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (an older novel on a similar theme)**; Alix Kate Shulman’s *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (about a girl seduced by her philosophy professor); and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The second Sex*. Courses in Women’s Studies are easy in a way that standard college courses—in chemistry, or Shakespeare—are not. Occasionally, a book will appear on the reading list that has the trappings of academic respectability—Sheila Ruth’s anthology, *Issues in Feminism*, for example. This actually looks like a book, is smartly produced, and has its share of charts and graphs, but on closer inspection it too proves to be non-business as usual: Betty Friedan, Virginia Woolf, Engels, and broadsides for the ERA.

There is of course an unresolved tension in the very concept of Women’s Studies. If the sexes do experience the world differently, perhaps some disciplines *are* “masculine,” and perhaps there is some justice in thinking that mathematics, say, is a male province and literature a female one. If, however, there are no such cognitive differences, what is the justification for courses in “women’s history” in the first place? Miss Ruth senses this difficulty, and explains that feminist pedagogy is “unorthodox”: its teachers “frequently come from counterculture organizations, from consciousness-raising groups and feminist organizations, from political parties and equal-rights agencies. . . . One is apt to find group projects, credit for social-change activities or for life experience, contracts or self-grading, diaries and journals, even meditation or ritual.” More depressing even than this drivel is the indulgence of academic officers who grant it college credits.<sup>3</sup>

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**The long-term effects of feminist ideology in education are yet to be measured.**

**Social scientists**, so quick to study all sorts of other cultural phenomena, have ignored the impact of feminist censorship on children. Still, a few observations are in order.

The gap between the way boys and girls actually behave in the world and the way they behave in these books is bound to be deeply disconcerting to children. Are they supposed to notice the message, or ingest it subliminally, or what? Perhaps the cause might be served by having books in which pictures of a unisex world were explicitly marked “the ideal,” while pictures of the actual world were marked “the real.”

Carried to its logical conclusion, feminism would seem to demand books showing neuters going about erstwhile human activities, and perhaps this too will come to pass. In the meantime, however, boys and girls must somehow be distinguished from one another, even if the purpose is to demonstrate that they are alike. Thus, even the most dedicated feminist texts call on the usual signs of gender: long hair dutifully pokes out of one-third of all baseball caps. However, since *feminine* girls are forbidden, the uneasy compromise is a creature doing things that children almost never see females do. One such creature, in one of Lippincott’s “good” drawings, swings a bat with a form that Hank Aaron would envy.

What do children derive from this faith in the power of image over reality, this preoccupation with the atypical? At best, one would guess, confusion, at worst scorn for the mendacity of their elders. And these are the children whose exposure to such texts is supposed to help turn them into “autonomous” adults.

Beyond the moral and psychological consequences, there is the pedagogical effect of systematic distortions of reality. Feminist pedagogy creates a curious discord.

**Alongside the nominal subjects of these new texts, another lesson is running relentlessly—the feminist world view. When the child is trying to learn spelling, he is also being taught that women are (can be? should be? have been prevented from being?) firemen.** Children are now being asked, indeed being required, to learn two things at once, and the hidden lesson has nothing to do with the overt lesson. Worse, the instructor cannot even be frank about the existence of a hidden lesson. The net effect must be distraction, and an impairment in concentration.

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One cannot help wondering why educators, and especially publishers, have been so generous in their help to the feminist cause. One part of the answer has to do with the involvement of the federal government in education. The Women’s Education Equity

Act Program (WEEAP), Title IX of the 1972 amendments to the Civil Rights Act, and Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 have thrown the full weight of Washington on the feminists' side. For example, under Title IV of the ESEA, the federal government endorses certain "exemplary" experimental programs that have the stated intention of "changing the values" of schools and students, and disseminating these programs through federal channels. No publisher is likely to bring out a book that will get his firm censured for being insufficiently "exemplary" or "experimental."

**WEEAP subsidizes feminist control even more blatantly by giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to feminist organizations for the express purpose of tracking down "sexism" in schoolbooks and bringing it to the attention of local authorities.** In the last two years WEEAP has given \$244,000 to the Council on Interracial Books for Children to prepare a handbook entitled "Equity Models for Basal Readers," which provides detailed algorithms for detecting sexism (and "ageism" and "handicapism") in schoolbooks—"sexism" being construed here to include the failure to advocate role-changing. WEEAP has also given over \$300,000 to the NOW Legal Defense Fund for its "National Title IX Grass-Roots Action Campaign." (Imagine the furor if public money were to finance a Moral Majority expedition in search of anti-American sentiments in school-books.) Indeed, should the feminist imagination flag, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is right there to prod it with such inspirational articles as "Twelve Ways to Avoid the Sexist Singular."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the notion that feminists are offering their goods in the free marketplace of ideas is entirely erroneous. Curiously, the reverse misapprehension has come to surround the Family Protection Act, which, it is said (by the *Detroit Free Press*, among others), would lure localities back to "traditional" books with the carrot of federal funds. In point of fact, the key language of FPA—that federal funds shall not be used "to promote educational material that denigrates the role of women as it has been historically understood"—is explicitly designed to curb the excesses of none other than WEEAP, which has resisted absorption into any bloc grants.

Legally, the federal government is committed to neutrality, since the General Education Provision Act expressly forbids the "direction, supervision, or control" of curricula by any grantee, contractor, or employee of the U.S. government. However, as the 1980 report of the President's Advisory Committee for Women notes, WEEAP was created "to improve instructional materials and approaches." And the National Endowment for the Humanities must have been ignorant of this statute when it gave **funds to the American Historical Association for training 200 teachers to "integrate women's history into high-school curricula" and to "revise curricula in women's history."**



Yet even these hidden and overt governmental pressures on publishers cannot account for the speed and alacrity with which the industry has jumped on the feminist bandwagon. As I have learned from discussing these matters with senior editors (and educators) who are sincerely contemptuous of anyone questioning feminist pedagogy, the publishing industry is itself made up of many True Believers, eager to promote anything labeled “progressive” and fearful above all of not being in tune with the times.

Saying this, of course, raises more questions than it answers. **It leaves unexplained the appeal of feminism to intellectuals, and the passivity with which so many parents—who may assent to feminist slogans but are anything but militant feminists themselves—accept feminism as the wave of the future.** These questions must await the sociology of the far future. But part of the answer, at least, lies in the distorting effect of feminist ideology itself on the debate between advocates and opponents of feminist indoctrination.

Feminist doctrine holds that all education manipulates. For a feminist, a book about trucks written in 1940 is as much an instrument of social control, a tool for fixing a child’s sexual perceptions, as her own minutely calibrated counter-primer. **Feminists follow Marx in stressing what they like to call the “objective” function of social objects.** Even if traditional schoolbooks were interested only in informing, and happened to show decorous little girls because that is what their authors saw in the world around them, these books were nonetheless “objective” instruments of patriarchal brainwashing.

Given this view of society, it is no wonder that feminists and their allies denounce the idea that authors be judged on purely educational grounds as itself censorial, as an effort to “put women in their place.” The media have perpetuated this absurdity by casting worried parents in the role of so many Grand Inquisitors, but its real source is the feminist conviction that true objectivity is impossible. **In the Orwellian world of contemporary feminism, objectivity is “sexism by omission.”**

<sup>1</sup> See ray “The Feminist Mystique,” COMMENTARY, December 1980.

<sup>2</sup> The Laidlaw Brothers *Good English* program features such sample sentences as; “Mrs. Ito was the referee”; “She and José shared an adventure with a bear”; and “Meg was practicing karate.” To “show that males can be passive,” it offers, “The boys have lain in hammocks all afternoon.”

<sup>3</sup> Some of the academic “research” in this field defies summary. The Stony Brook College Society for Women in Philosophy, for instance, recently presented a lecture on “Images of Lesbian Sexuality in the Fine Arts,” a program of “images of women

loving women.” The lecturer was one Tee Corinne, described as the illustrator of such books as *I Am My Lover* and *The Cunt Coloring Book*.

<sup>4</sup> In *Perspectives: The Civil Rights Quarterly*, published by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Spring 1981.