

Vive la Difference Feminism

With or without a crisis, the movement's second wave is still here.

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Revolutionaries are unreliable recorders of their own legacies. Hindsight usually renders them excessively bitter or boastful, or both. The children whom the revolution hasn't already devoured are often less doctrinally pure than their ideological parents and thus a source of great annoyance. Score-settling is a common occurrence, and preening self-regard a frequent vice.

But for the feminist theorist Carol Gilligan, doyenne of “difference” feminism, the occasion for revisiting the revolution she helped make was more prosaic. The muse descended after she watched Barack Obama win the presidency. “Exhilaration filled the streets of New York on the night of his election, suggesting the release of energy that accompanies the move out of dissociation,” Gilligan writes in her new memoir, *[Joining the Resistance](#)* (Polity, 140 pages). “The shift from the patriarchal manhood of George W. Bush (‘the decider’) to the more democratic manhood of Barack Obama was palpable.”

Carol Gilligan all but created what has come to be known as the “second wave” of the American feminist movement with a deceptively simple idea: Because of their collective experience of oppression, women have different conceptions of morality, justice, and politics. More compassionate than men, women embrace sisterhood and community and a morality based on an “ethic of care” rather than competition. *In a Different Voice*, her 1982 book outlining this theory of women’s moral development, became a central text. It encouraged the feminist movement to move away from a radical egalitarianism that claimed women wanted the same things as men and toward a quasi-essentialist view that women’s innate differences from men are the very things that make them truly powerful. *More* powerful.

Gilligan's theory was appealing for several reasons. Her amorphous, abstract villain—the “patriarchy”—was the perfect target for academic hyperbole at a time when women's studies departments were proliferating. (One of Gilligan's later works, the portentously titled *The Deepening Darkness*, claimed to see patriarchy's repressive hand in every nook and cranny of contemporary life.) At the same time, “difference” allowed the feminist movement to soft-pedal its frequent demonization of men, a view that suited feminists at a time when women were trying to gain a foothold in the workplace and in elective politics. And with its specious claims that women were the more collaborative and ethical sex, difference theory allowed feminism to put a kinder, gentler face on its efforts to punish dissenters.

Gilligan's difference theory did not suggest that women enveloped each other in an unconditional love provided by the family; no, their ethical collaboration was more along the lines of membership in a sorority house. It required pledges. Women were called upon to demonstrate their loyalty to their sex by acknowledging that the central fact of their lives was patriarchal oppression in both the public and private spheres. Gilligan universalized the feminist struggle; women were not to be defined by family or faith or race or class. They were to be defined by their common victimization at the hands of the patriarchy.

Perhaps most important, Gilligan's difference feminism gave philosophical heft to the notion of false consciousness, which offered a convenient explanation for the fact—undeniable by 1982—that many women didn't want to break through the glass ceiling, or compel the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, or pursue other feminist goals. According to Gilligan, such women weren't making a rational decision; they were the victims of a patriarchal society that fostered false consciousness by silencing women's voices.

Gilligan's research has always hinged on the interviews she has conducted with young women over the years. As their self-appointed amanuensis, she interpreted their statements about themselves through the lens of difference feminism and found in their expressions of adolescent awkwardness and discomfort something far more sinister: “self-silencing” and “dissociation,” made all the more dangerous because they could only be seen by the trained eye of feminists such as Gilligan. **“The structures of domination become invisible because they have been internalized,” she writes in her memoir.**

The problem, then, wasn't that women were sleeping with the enemy; they were blind to the fact that there **even was an enemy.**

As *Joining the Resistance* demonstrates, Gilligan remains firm in her commitment to the idea that patriarchy's victims are unaware of their own victimization. “The

initiation into patriarchy is driven by gender and enforced by shaming and exclusion. Its telltale signs are a loss of voice and memory, an inability to tell one's story accurately," she writes. "Thus the initiation of children into a patriarchal order leaves a legacy of loss and some of the scars we have come to associate with trauma." This is trauma of the moistened-eye-in-the-seminar-room variety, not the battlefield, but no matter.

For those of us who lived through the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, there is a bit of fun to be had in revisiting the clichés of second-wave feminism, with which Gilligan's memoir is overstuffed. There are remonstrances about resisting "false authority" and "gender binaries and hierarchies" and breathless statements about how "the seeds of transformation lie within ourselves" that seem better suited to the corporate-inspirational rhetoric of a Successories poster than a rigorous theory of ethics. Readers are treated to anecdotes about students who, upon confronting patriarchy in the classroom "registered their distress in their bodies"; one woman, "a Native American lesbian (called by the Cree 'two-spirited') went home and threw up."

As in much feminist theory, politics is ever present, with Gilligan warning that people must "free themselves from psychological as well as political colonization." Not surprisingly, it is conservative colonization she fears. In her seminar at New York University on "resisting injustice," Gilligan requires students to work collaboratively on a play. Gilligan writes glowingly of a recent klatch of students who performed a contemporary version of *Oresteia* they called *Oresta Palin*, with the former Alaska governor and her family as the murderous "21st-century's house of Atreus" and a beloved feminist theorist as Cassandra, "speaking the truth but not heard or believed by the Fox News Anchor."

Gilligan's predictable politics aside, she has never confronted the most glaring contradiction in her work. And that is this: In arguing that women's different ways of viewing morality offered a challenge to male morality and politics (and, she hinted, a superior example of both) she refused to embrace the implications of that claim when it came to women's experience in the real world. When women failed to reach the upper echelons of the professional or political world, it wasn't their supposed differences (and the choices that grew out of them) that explained it. It was men. Always men.

Today Gilligan's legacy can be seen in everything from pop-psychology books touting our "emotional intelligence" to claims by female Supreme Court justices that they are more empathetic than their male colleagues. Within feminism, that many-headed hydra, the "do-me" feminism of the 1990s (I can wear lipstick and

stilettos and still be empowered!), has become the in-your-face feminism of Slut Walks (I can dress like a transvestite hooker and you can't stop me!).

But the head that has been rearing most forcefully of late attests to the continuing influence of Gilligan's misguided ideas. A recent spate of books and essays about the decline of men notes that in measures of educational achievement women are outperforming men, and in the workplace they are poised to dominate in the fields that are the most likely to succeed in the new global economy. Popular culture serves up images of slacker men tethered to their video-game consoles and bumbling fathers dominated by hyper-efficient über-women who regularly berate them for their incompetence, adding to the overall picture of male failure.

As Kay S. Hymowitz points out in her insightful book, *Manning Up*, we live in a "pre-adult, post-feminist" age whose popular culture endorses the idea of men enjoying an extended adolescence and delaying marriage, child-rearing, and adult responsibility well into their 20s. And so we are beginning to ask about men the same questions second-wave feminists used to ask about women: Why are they behind in measures of educational achievement? Why have they borne the brunt of the recent economic downturn? What does this mean for the future of manhood?

It depends on whom you ask. Conservatives who have long warned about the war against boys have been vindicated. And yet we see no corresponding hand-wringing from feminists who spent a good part of the late 20th century mentoring and girl-powering a generation of young women who, they claimed, were in crisis. **No, they are positively thrilled. Men are failing, they say, because the jobs of the future favor "women's skills,"** such as empathy, cooperation, and social intelligence.

The same contradictory logic that bedeviled Gilligan's second-wave feminism is wholly in evidence here. When women fail to achieve equality, it is the system, or "patriarchy," that is keeping them down. But when women succeed, it is because they are innately superior to men in certain "skill sets" that justify their achievement. They deserve their success. But when men succeed, it is because they are agents of a repressive patriarchal order who are abusing their power. And when men fail, it is their own fault for being unable to "adapt" to the demands of the new global economy. Either way, men lose.

Within the feminist movement, Gilligan succeeded in **transforming the notion that the personal is political into the idea that women's personal experiences of oppression make them better suited for political (and social) leadership.** Her conversations with girls and women led her to believe that women enjoy an innate talent for cooperation and compassion (and suggest that she has never watched an episode of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*). But because her worldview remains

mired in abstract essentialism, her practical solutions read more like affirmations from women's self-help literature than ethical precepts. "We have within ourselves the potential to free our humanity from a false story," she writes. "Within ourselves we know a path of resistance leading to love and freedom. And although we may not know that we know this path, it is part of our cultural heritage." Here are the makings of a new rallying cry: Feminism—when you don't know what you know but want to find out. We've traded *The Second Sex* for *The Secret*.

A similar weakness plagues the new post-feminist triumphalists. As they itemize the failures of men, they gloss over the problems this failure will produce for women. **How will this triumphalist feminism react when men begin using the same blunt instruments feminists used to rely on, such as affirmative action to attract less-qualified male students to colleges that** want to keep their sex ratio in an agreeable balance? How will they deal with the rise of women politicians such as Sarah Palin or Michelle Bachmann who embody their hopes for female power but utterly reject their politics? (So far, not well.) And how will the new triumphalists grapple with some less appealing realities, such as the fact that during the same historical moment when middle- and upper- class women supposedly triumphed over men, the feminization of poverty deepened?

Today the personal isn't political. It's performance. And it's everywhere. Those languishing pre-teens over whom Gilligan once fretted can now tweet and blog their woes to the world. **The challenge isn't that there are too few opportunities for young women to express themselves, but too many, and with too little guidance about their long-term effect on the formation of a healthy sense of self.** This challenge is as acute for boys as it is for girls, and we should take the needs of both seriously. Anyone who thinks otherwise should spend a few days following pop crooner Justin Bieber's Twitter feed. At last count he had more than 13 million followers. I wonder how many of them are girls.