

Reinterpreting the History of Women

At Odds. Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present. CARL N. DEGLER. Oxford University Press, New York, 1980. xvi, 528 pp. \$19.95.

In *At Odds* Carl N. Degler attempts to narrow the gap between the issues that concern social historians and those that have traditionally occupied historians. For the last 15 years social history has been among the liveliest fields of research. Although difficult to define, it concerns itself with such matters as the history of slaves, the poor, the family, and women. Modern historians have not exactly ignored these groups, but before the 1960's those who wrote about them usually did so as an offshoot of a more basic interest in the history of public movements and public policy, specifically, the history of emancipation, the welfare state, and feminism. An obvious limitation of this approach was its focus on the leaders of protest movements and the related view of the realm of private experience and everyday occurrence as lacking in historical significance and best left to antiquarians and genealogists.

In contrast to historians, sociologists have long had a keen interest in the everyday experiences of such groups as women and children. Lacking detailed historical studies, they have tended to contemplate the forest (or what they have taken to have been the forest) rather than the trees. Borrowing concepts from anthropology and classical sociology, they have developed hypotheses that postulate vast changes from extended to nuclear families or from the simplicity and stability of traditional societies to the complexity and vulnerability of modern societies.

Historical research during the 1960's and 1970's undermined these concepts by showing, *inter alia*, that the nuclear rather than the extended family predominated in the past and that so-called traditional societies were neither simple nor stable. This process of historical revision has continued at an intense rate in recent years, and social historians of the 1970's became more specialized, more concerned with refinements of technique, and increasingly preoccupied with assessing the relative impact on family

structure at different times and places of such forces as social class, urbanization, and ethnicity. The developments have not destroyed the impulse to synthesize, but they have confronted any would-be synthesizer with the task of mastering a very large and sophisticated body of monographic literature.

Sensing the tenor of the times, Degler describes his book as an "exercise in foolhardiness." *At Odds* is a history of women in America that seeks to integrate their private experiences with their public behavior. That is, Degler begins with an analysis of changes in the position of women in the family and proceeds to the broader field of feminism. Along the way he provides lively reinterpretations of both aspects of the history of women.

With respect to the family, Degler's starting point is what Barbara Welter once described as the 19th century's "cult of true womanhood," the view that developed during the 1820's and 1830's that women were ethically superior to men, more chaste, more refined, and more suited to be the guardians of the home, children, and education. Most historians who sympathized with feminism initially viewed this cult as a drag force on the movement for female equality and as another manifestation of the repressiveness of Victorian society. Many argued that the cult was no more than a rationalization for the declining economic importance of women. As household industries disappeared and as men discovered increasing commercial opportunities outside the home, women were left with an ideology that told them that they were superior if only they stayed at home. Yet there were some obvious problems with this interpretation. Many of the principal architects of the cult were women, indeed women who used the ideology of true womanhood as a justification for engaging in a host of moral reforms that took them outside the home. During the 1970's historians such as Nancy Cott and Katherine Sklar suggested that the cult of true womanhood might have performed positive functions for women by facilitating the emergence of a unique (although scarcely radical) consciousness.

Degler carries the revision one step further by arguing that the ideal of true womanhood was descriptive of a configuration of social changes that saw women gain increasing power over such vital matters as family finance, family size, and the control of children. These factors were related, but the most important was restriction of family size. For Degler such restriction was among the greatest achievements of 19th-century women in America. Between 1800 and 1900 the fertility of white women fell 50 percent. This slump in fertility becomes even more remarkable when one considers that America experienced wave upon wave of immigrants, many of whom had little interest in family limitation. In addition, the decline occurred despite the fact that contraception, although available in the form of a variety of techniques, was disparaged by conservative and radical feminists alike. Many believed that general employment of contraceptive techniques would stimulate indulgence and lasciviousness throughout the society and thus jeopardize other important objectives of Victorian women. They wanted to raise their children in a "pure" environment and to put limits on the frequency of sexual intercourse with their husbands. Degler follows Linda Gordon in distinguishing contraception and birth control and concludes that women, particularly those of the native-born middle class, succeeded in carrying out a delicate balancing act. Without encouraging the spread of contraception, they restricted the size of their families by limiting intercourse and by persuading husbands (who may not have needed much persuading) that fewer children would produce a happier companionship.

Even this partial listing of changes within Victorian families suggests why recent feminists have had a hard time either understanding or identifying with their Victorian predecessors, but it also helps to explain why so many women intent on securing new rights for their sex joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union or organizations to suppress prostitution and contraception. Although these crusades appear in retrospect to have been conservative, they sought to widen the sphere of female autonomy and, it should be added, employed tactics that were often socially disruptive.

Organizations that, like the WCTU, aimed at protection of woman's position in the home attracted more support than did the National American Woman Suffrage Association. As late as 1915 NAWSA had only half the membership of the WCTU, which by that date had

passed the peak of its influence. Although an organized campaign for female suffrage had emerged during the 1840's, by 1910 the only states in which women enjoyed full suffrage were Idaho, Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. In contrast to the many successes achieved by organized women's groups during the 19th century, the struggle for the vote was extraordinarily prolonged.

Degler finds irony in the slow progress of the suffrage movement. Although winning the right to vote did not significantly change the position of women in American society, the widespread belief that woman suffrage would profoundly alter social relations accounted, Degler argues, for the delayed success of the drive for suffrage. "To many men and women the suffrage *appeared* radical because, unlike all other activities in which women engaged outside the home, . . . it would not be accommodated to the idea of the separate spheres" (p. 341). The doctrine of separate spheres and the reality it reflected had given women greater autonomy within the home, substantial influence over their husbands, and some access to political and social movements outside the home (such as temperance). Radical innovations such as the vote seemed to threaten these gains, Degler argues, and hence were resisted.

The converse of Degler's emphasis on the satisfaction of 19th-century women within the family is his de-emphasis of the importance of increasing access to the labor market by women. Although the intensification of the drive for suffrage during the early 1900's coincided with an increase in the proportion of women working outside of the home, Degler argues that this influx of female workers did little to alter traditional conceptions of the appropriate role of women. As late as 1940 most working women were single and only temporarily in the work force prior to marriage. Most working women were still engaged in unskilled factory, sales, and clerical work. Some married women worked, but many of them were black women performing poorly paid work. Degler is convinced that the revival of feminism during the 1960's reflected changes in the economic position of women (the growing pursuit of careers by well-educated, married women), but these changes developed only after 1950.

Like any book that seeks to describe and to interpret the experiences of half of the population during two centuries, *At Odds* is open to attack from a variety of directions. Degler's conclusions at times conflict with his evidence. For example, he argues that suffrage was delayed because even progressively minded women

saw it as a serious challenge to the doctrine of separate spheres and hence as a threat to the genuine advantages within the family that they had gained. But much of his evidence indicates that throughout the 19th century women had used the doctrine of separate spheres to secure greater autonomy outside as well as within the family. They had repeatedly argued that the true interests of the home demanded that they be allowed to lecture in public, to smash saloons, and, ultimately, to vote. It is difficult to see how the demand for suffrage posed a uniquely radical challenge.

Why, then, was suffrage delayed? Why did more women join the WCTU than NAWSA? There are various answers, among them the fact that during the late 19th century neither party could see a clear partisan advantage in suffrage. When after 1900 women won the right to vote in states like Utah and Wyoming, the result did not upset existing political balances and hence served to disarm politicians' fear of the unpredictable. The fact that the WCTU attracted greater support than NAWSA can be explained in a number of ways without postulating, as Degler does, that suffrage was uniquely radical. Throughout the late 19th century many middle-class women viewed politics as corrupt (rather than radical) and preferred the purity and piety of the WCTU to the secular atmosphere of NAWSA. It was not accidental that the successful drive for suffrage coincided with the rise of the Progressive reform movement after 1900, for Progressives sought through such agencies as government by commission and by experts to purify politics and thus to render political involvement more attractive to women.

At times Degler's argument is overstated rather than fundamentally misleading. For example, he is right in arguing that there has not been an inseparable linkage between changes in the occupational experiences of women and changes in prevailing conceptions of their place in society. But it is worth remembering that the performance of even subordinate and gender-typed work outside the home made it easier for women to remain unmarried and thus contributed significantly to social change and, ultimately, to change in attitudes.

Despite my reservation about aspects of his argument, I am strongly impressed by Degler's book. Degler does more than merely summarize existing research. He has the ability to find implications in monographic research that were missed even by the authors and to construct a coherent overview of a vast scholarly

landscape. Although his argument about suffrage is unconvincing, his belief that the public activities of women can be better understood as related to changes in the family than to changes in the workplace is both original and persuasively argued.

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Northern Peoples

The Human Biology of Circumpolar Populations. F. A. MILAN, Ed. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1980. xvi, 382 pp., illus. \$75. International Biological Programme 21.

Between 1967 and 1974, aboriginal inhabitants of the circumpolar region were studied as part of the International Biological Programme's research on human adaptation. This volume reporting the results contains contributions by 19 authors. Groups of Lapps, Ainu, and Eskimos are assessed for the existence of biological and behavioral processes resulting from adaptation to low temperatures and seasonal variation in the photic period and food resources.

Sporadic, but long-standing, contacts with cultures to the south preclude the study of peoples practicing traditional lifestyles. The geographic isolation of northern peoples has been disrupted by increasing interaction with other cultures resulting from recent exploration for natural resources, extension of government programs, and modern communication systems. The organizers of the Human Adaptability Section of the IBP had the foresight to record the human biology of groups last to participate in this culture transition. Although the data collected do not reflect aboriginal patterns, they provide a base line from which future investigators may evaluate the changes brought about by further acculturation. Aspects found to have possible adaptive significance in the northern environment include the frequency of certain blood polymorphisms, a mechanism for glucose homeostasis in the absence of dietary carbohydrates, early onset of cold-induced vasodilation, and a high concentration of active sweat glands around the face.

A multidisciplinary approach to the study of human biology has been followed. Research within the fields of demography, genetics, odontology, ophthalmology, growth, nutrition, physiology, and behavior is synthesized in