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Women Against Women's Rights: Anti-Feminism, Reproductive Politics, and the Battle for the ERA

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Historians are notorious for describing the women's rights movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries using the metaphor of waves. While waves are useful for picturing the significant moments when women were unified in a massive upheaval of the status quo, this theory ignores the struggles and organization that took place between the sets, as well as the antifeminist activism that occurred at the height of feminist lobbying. It is better to think of the two waves as events occurring on a vast ocean of activism, individualism, and intersectional identities over the course of sixty-plus years. By expanding our understanding of the waves, we can then see that they often converged with riptides that disrupted women's liberation movements especially in the 1960s and 1970s. In this case, the riptide was one of conservative reaction led by Phyllis Schlafly who represented a forceful antifeminist current. Her activism against the ERA cut through feminist struggles for emancipation and equality to usher in a new era of patriarchal gender hierarchy.

It is this conservative antifeminist movement that must be investigated and understood because, despite the vibrancy of second wave of feminism, their opposition to the ERA was the reason why Congress failed to ratify the ERA by 1982. The ideology of Phyllis Schlafly in particular was integral to this crusade. Her *Eagle Forum* newsletters and STOP-ERA campaign had widespread influence within the conservative movement. Schlafly successfully galvanized women to join her on an anti-feminist platform because she boiled multiple ideologies down into a cohesive worldview. She fused the conservative values of free-market economics with anticommunist foreign policy. Then she successfully repackaged nineteenth-century gender constructs in a way that made feminists appear as a threat to the nuclear family, and thus a threat

to the stability of the society at large. The anti-ERA and the anti-abortion campaigns were closely intertwined and heavily influenced by the ideology of Phyllis Schlafly. In the face of reform she was able to mobilize an incredibly powerful and reactionary movement.

Situating Schlafly: An Old Ideology

Schlafly's public organizing and battle against the ERA made her a polarizing person. Journalist Carol Felsenthal believed that "Phyllis Schlafly's fans love her with an intensity, a spirit, a loyalty" regarding her as "a heroine... a sort of sex symbol of the right wing... as an authority- on the ERA... [and] on Medicare funding of abortions."¹ Schlafly quickly became a figurehead for antifeminism and the resurgence of the conservative party in the arena of social issues. She believed that the women's liberation movement was comprised of "bitter... [and] unpleasant women."² As such her book *The Power of the Positive Woman* was a reactionary response and a synthesis of ideologies about gender hierarchy, women's roles, and the family which attempted to win over women still sitting on the fence as to whether to support or sink ERA.

Schlafly argued against the feminist idea that inequality between men and women was a social construct, but rather believed that gender differences were biologically reinforced. Male and female spheres were articulated in a binary where "man is discursive, logical, abstract, or philosophical, [and] woman tends to be emotional, personal, practical, or mystical."³ These qualities served as compliments to each other but a woman could not possess the same capabilities that a man had any more than a man could attempt to fulfill the roles of a woman. She argued that motherhood was "woman's natural... [and] functional role" and that "the

1 Felsenthal, 2

2 (Schlafly, February 21 2011)

3 Phyllis Schlafly , *The Power of the Positive Woman*, (New Rochelle: Arlington House Publishers, 1977), 20

Positive Woman looks upon her femaleness and her fertility as part of her purpose, her potential, and her power.”⁴ Motherhood and femininity belonged to a sphere that was relegated to raising children as an essential asset to society.

The antifeminist conservative right articulated that motherhood was under attack by the feminists in the 1970s because reproductive politics were deeply imbedded into the struggle for gender equality. It was birth control and abortions that separated women from their societal roles and lessened women’s ability to wield reproduction as a tool to separate them from men.

Women’s liberation was a danger to women and a threat to society according to Schlafly’s worldview. She believed that “the ultimate goal of women’s liberation is independence from men and the avoidance of pregnancy and its consequences... [so] lesbianism is logically the highest form of ritual of women’s liberation.”⁵ Thus abortion was linked to lesbianism and gay rights because abortion allowed women to become lesbians in Schlafly’s interpretation. She even argued that the ERA would legalize gay marriage because “a state now denies a marriage license to a man and a man, or a woman and a woman,” because of sex discrimination which the ERA would overturn if passed.⁶ For Schlafly, the ERA was the federal sanctioning of the end of the nuclear family, and it signified government tyranny through the funding of abortions.

Schlafly went to extreme lengths to vilify the feminist desire to choose pregnancy. She commented that abortion was the:

“Destruction of somebody else’s body- which is living within the life-support system of the mother, as the astronauts lived within their life-support systems on the moon. The abortionists argue that unwanted babies should be eliminated. There are no unwanted babies in the United States. The demand for babies exceed the supply...there has been an ominous acceptance of the idea of

4 (Schlafly 1977), 13

5 (Schlafly 1977), 12

6 (Schlafly 1977), 90

terminating... lives... because they are useless or unwanted. This is the same as Hitler's philosophy of eliminating people whom he judged unwanted or mentally or physically defective... Positive Women should renew their efforts for a constitutional amendment to protect our very young and our very old from the Supreme Court and from Hitler's philosophy."⁷

Thus, Schlafly assisted in politicizing the fetus by terming it as a body and not as a dependent zygote. Her assumptions about pregnancy and the desire to have children fit perfectly into a free-market ideology where babies existed because the market demanded them. However, the ideology of the free-market also fueled Schlafly's anti-tax funded daycare position because individuals should support themselves rather than find relief from government. The ERA would also increase the presence of the two-earner family which would take mothers away from their duties at home. According to Schlafly, this change in breadwinning meant that "the Federal Government must provide comprehensive government child-care" if the ERA passed.⁸

Even though single-issue groups like STOP-ERA may seemed to indicate a social conservative wing that only cared about single-issue politics, economic conservatism was still integral to Schlafly's and this group's interpretations of social reform. According to Schlafly, women were not liberated by feminism but rather "the free enterprise system, which has produced remarkable inventors who have lifted the drudgery of housekeeping from women's shoulders."⁹ The free market benefited women by opening a space for inventions that were themselves liberating for women's time and freed them to enjoy chores quickly, both as consumers and as a mothers. In fact, the ERA was a hindrance to the free market. Schlafly

7 (Schlafly 1977), 162-163

8 Phyllis Schlafly Report 2

9 (Schlafly 1977), 30

writes, that “the Federal Government [would be] breathing down the necks of industry and [force] discrimination in the hiring of less qualified women instead of men.”¹⁰

Why Did Schlafly Win?

Phyllis Schlafly excelled at articulating a clear world view that saliently showed, however irrationally, that the ERA would rip society apart. One reporter commented that part of the success of the Right was “through Eagle Forum [where Schlafly] has expanded her political range and following.”¹¹ Her *Eagle Forum* in some ways acted as a conservative bastion of antifeminism to combat organizations like NOW. Another reporter in 1977 credited Schlafly with amazing skill at building coalitions. The coalitions that she was involved with turned “conferences into battlegrounds in which the opportunity for dialogue and temperate compromises has been muted.”¹²

Schlafly and her followers created “a counterrevolution within the women’s revolution.”¹³ In this way antifeminism and conservatism were just as modern as women’s liberation. Feminists and antifeminists were fighting over two distinct and opposite world views that continually came to ideological blows since the first women’s movement during the Progressive Era. But in the 1970s, the context of this battle between privilege and equality was

10 Document 9: Excerpt from Carolyn Kortage, “Schlafly Says Women’s Movement is Dying in Anti-Feminist Surge,” *Eagle and Beacon*, 3 August 1977. Reprinted in *National Women’s Conference Official Briefing Book*: Houston, Texas, November 18 to 21, 1977 (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year, 1977) p 228. Included in [How Did the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977 Shape a Feminist Agenda for the Future?](#), Documents selected and interpreted by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin with research assistance by Sandra Henderson, 228

11 Document 9, Kortage, 228

12 Document 11: Dick Behn, “Antifeminism: New Conservative Force,” *Ripon Forum*, 1 September 1977. *National Women’s Conference Official Briefing Book*: Houston, Texas, November 18 to 21, 1977 (Washington D.C.: National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year, 1977) pp241-43. Included in [How Did the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977 Shape a Feminist Agenda for the Future?](#), Documents selected and interpreted by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin with research assistance by Sandra Henderson.243

13 Dick Behn, Doc 11, 243

heightened because “for the first time, militancy on the left [was] encountering militancy on the right... the Phyllis Schlafly’s [were] venturing out of their kitchens.”¹⁴

Schlafly did not see herself as leading a counterrevolution, or instigating a resurgence of nineteenth-century gender relations. Rather, she took time away from foreign policy advocacy to prevent the passage of an amendment that she believed would wrongly empower the federal government without helping women. She was sure that the ERA would actually harm women, motherhood, the family, and society. Schlafly was convinced that the feminists lost the battle for the ERA because their “fight [was] with human nature,” not with institutions.¹⁵ She also thought that the “feminists [were] never able to show the benefits ERA would give to women but [she] could give disadvantages.”¹⁶ Part of the problem in the feminist debates with Schlafly was that no one really knew what the ERA would or would not do once it passed. She believed that the ERA took “the right to determine the family residence... away from the husband,” and that it also ended the practice of taking the “husband's name.”¹⁷ Within the context of coverture and reproductive politics the ramifications seemed more tangible and threatening to the stability of society than the potential possibilities that passing the ERA could actually achieve for women’s equality. Thus feminists found themselves debating old ideologies when confronting Schlafly, and while they saw her as anti-woman and outdated, she saw them as “bitter women” trying to devalue hard working mothers.¹⁸

Conclusion

14 Dick Behn, Doc 11, 243

15 (Schlafly, February 22 2011)

16 (Schlafly, February 21 2011)

17 Phyllis Schlafly Report, 2

18 (Schlafly, February 21 2011)

Phyllis Schlafly defies the claims that social and economic conservatives champion separate policies, and forces scholars to rethink the characterization of the New Right. Her objections to the ERA were influenced by a larger conservative ideology of the free-market, small government, and religiously ordained gender hierarchy. But the ERA aside, she was an avid commentator on foreign affairs, a lobbyist, and strategist for women's involvement within the conservative machine. Her fight against the ERA, nevertheless, synthesized the right-wing's economic and social control agendas. Article two of the ERA provided the greatest fuel for her antifeminist crusade. It read, "Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article."¹⁹ Schlafly firmly and sincerely believed that the passage of the amendment would have grave implications for the nation. The ERA would do nothing for women's equality and she asserted that the laws of nature could not be changed or circumvented by changing government policies. Because of article two she insisted that the feminist agenda, if implemented into law, would cause a tyranny of government.

Schlafly's immense ability to shape the public conversation points to the problems inherent in the wave's theory. Antifeminists are auspiciously rendered invisible. What this means is that the conservative female counter-points of the sixties and seventies are made inert and powerless, even though they have had a broad impact on feminist activism. The ocean of women's history and gender analysis must be opened up for a broader reach which includes the emancipatory moments that we like to celebrate as well as the moments of defeat.

By labeling women's liberation as the modern women's movement we lose sight of the fact that Schlafly led a modern movement that championed separate spheres, republican motherhood, and domesticity. Now that the idea of the second wave is part of the lexicon it is difficult to push against that image with an equally powerful antifeminist wave crashing against

¹⁹ ERA, ("Dimensions of Citizenship III: Documents" 1982), 719

it. But we must face the reality that in a number of important ways Schlafly and her followers won. The term “feminist” still carries all of the negative connotations that Schlafly successfully propagandized. Worse yet, it is becoming increasingly hard to obtain an abortion in the United States. Furthermore shows like *The Real Housewives* which glorify housewifery are now a multi-million dollar industry. Equal pay for women is still far from achieved and the category of sex is not yet subject to strict scrutiny by the courts. We can no longer gloss over the presence of antifeminism as a single-issue nuisance but instead must accept the movement as a significant force to contend with on the way to gaining equality. Nor can we pretend that the second wave was a homogenizing feminist force that united women under the big umbrella of womanhood when the competing ideology of antifeminism operated alongside as an equally modern, equally galvanizing, and equally attractive form of activism.

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