

The gender politics phenomenon

After the World Trade Center attack, we Americans seemed to believe that "we're all in this together." Attacks on all Americans rally every American. It's sad that it takes a tragedy to unite us. I'd like to think it's patriotism that makes us react, but I'm more inclined to chalk it up to self-interest and a fear of our own ox being gored. It's becoming apparent to me that something equally self-serving is happening with our gender relations. Kinsey and Masters and Johnson and every behavioral researcher succeeding them may need to review their theses on the relationship of men and women in America, because brother, the times they are changin'.

There have been several iterations or stages of the women's movement, starting with the Suffragettes who marched for universal suffrage (from the Latin: *suffragium* or vote, voting rights or ballot) a century ago. Today, we refer to suffrage as 'the franchise.' Their efforts are now considered feminism's *First Wave*. Apart from calling attention to their demands, they also established marches and protests as the principal tactics women would use to further their cause up until this very day.

Fast forward to the sixties when the *Second Wave* of feminism began. The National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed on June 30, 1966 in Washington, D.C., by people attending the Third National Conference of the Commission on the Status of Women. In addition to working alone, it allied itself and its members with America's civil rights struggle. The pursuit of equal rights and the elimination of victimhood was a principal tenet of their manifestos, and their message gained them millions of active followers. About the same time, the Vietnam War was competing for the public's attention, and women saw an opening to ally themselves with another very powerful group: young women and men who opposed the war.

There were two messages in play at the time. The first was that women were oppressed (and that men were the oppressors) and the second, more positive one was, "We've come a long way, baby" (the slogan for a popular brand of cigarettes, Virginia Slims). Every movement has its heroes and heroines and Betty Friedan (NOW's first President), Gloria Steinem (journalist and co-founder of Ms. magazine) and Bella Abzug (NYC Congressional Representative, attorney and activist) were three prominent ones. All had two things in common apart from their gender - their dedication to their cause and their very assertive style. They were the absolute right role models for the 'new' woman of their time. An interesting intersection was the push for the Equal rights Amendment and the winding down of the Vietnam War. America had reached its saturation point with protests and violent demonstrations. We were dealing with civil rights unrest, women's rights demands, war in Southeast Asia and mounting tension in our major cities. Our economy wasn't so good, either. The year 1972 was an election year when the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was passed by the U.S. Senate and sent on to the states for their ratification. For America, the Vietnam War ended six months later in January, 1973.

By the way, that proposed amendment to the Constitution failed in 1982 when the clock ran out. Fifteen states chose not to ratify it: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah and Virginia. That did not deter the women's movement. NOW gathered strength (it now has over 500 chapters in all fifty states). The movement, itself, spawned a number of woman-centric organizations. A look on NOW's webpage reveals 31 sponsoring organizations, many I had never heard of before. This mitotic division created many new cells in which women could meet and plan their next steps in breaking down the barriers they believe men have erected to stop their progress. One of those is America's abortion laws. Many women in the movement want total freedom to abort their babies at any time during their pregnancies. New York has recently given them that reprehensible right. Another is freedom from unwanted sexual advances. That demand has seen the rise of the #MeToo movement. Women have been vocal about condemning men in high positions for their sexual transgressions and for oppressing them by their membership in the 'old boy network.'

Over the last decade (eight years of the Obama Administration and two years of the Trump Administration), women have focused their efforts on several fronts: recruiting more young women to the Democratic Party; encouraging more females to run for political office; chipping away at younger men's proclivity to remain 'traditional' males and accusing the older ones of 'male toxicity' and gender hegemony.

An underlying theme of many women's organizations is that Republicans/Conservatives are basically anti-woman backward types that believe in keeping their women "pregnant in the summer and barefoot in the winter" as well as isolating them from the power structure and the boardrooms. While some of those attitudes may have applied in generations past, they are not the dominant ones today. Even men of my generation understand that women's successes benefit all of us...men included. It seems obvious that the overarching goal for women is the election of a female president, a majority woman Congress and Senate and Supreme Court so that they control all three branches of government enabling them to re-make our laws into their vision of a *gender positive* society. Their approach is a cellular-level 'survival through strategy' one that combines the biological protective instinct with a plan for major social change. If that succeeds, what will the new 'Amazon-driven' society look like?

Contrary to what many males worry about, the new Amazon-driven society will not be one overtly dominated by women. I believe that it will, instead, be genderless - neutral-appearing through the elimination or minimization of the unique differences between men and women. In a word, boring, but stable. Women will not make the typically male mistake of forcing themselves to the front of the firing line, providing a convenient target for attack. Women are smarter than that. They will be inclusionary and offer men the *honorary woman* card of admission to the new tent of ideas. They will keep their friends in the sisterhood close and their enemies (the alpha males) closer. They know that the greatest challenge is not winning power; it is hanging on to it, which is why they will let men keep their guns and their nights out and their belief that they are actually in control. Women will work their magic in the halls and seats of real power, far from the comfort of the Barcalounger or the inner sanctum of the man cave. Can the art of gender identity politics actually work?

It depends. The practice of gender identity politics is like entering a revolving door - if you're not careful it will smack you from behind - and it has made many Americans downright uncomfortable and others downright angry. Taxonomic hierarchical ranking may be alright for classifying organisms, but it fails to unite groups of people into one. By hyphenating ourselves into smaller more narrowly-defined identity groupings we run the risk of alienating too many of those needed to populate one larger group of voters by making the issues too specific to one smaller group. Women should not forget that their issues are also OUR (men's) issues AND they are America's issues, irrespective of the identity group. There are upsides and downsides to every law, and not every law ensures equal protection or equal benefit to all parties. Somebody's ox will always be gored, and putting the gender thumb on the legislative scale will only result in punishing the other side as in the case of third trimester abortions where potential human lives (many of which would have been females) will be snuffed out.

If you think identity politics is only practiced at the Federal level, you are wrong. Many state legislatures have 'female caucuses.' Some are political party partisan and others claim to be bi-partisan. One thing is for certain; they all are gender partisan instead of being gender-neutral, and that is antithetical to assuring equal treatment for both sexes. These caucuses are gender issue-driven and only serve to segregate women from their male counterparts. They don't actually increase our understanding of each other, but do increase our mistrust of each other.

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