The Revolution and Women's Rights

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Like all revolutions, the American Revolution had a double agenda. Patriots sought to exclude the British from power: this task was essentially physical and military. Patriots also sought to accomplish a radical and intellectual transformation: “Our principles, opinions, and manners,” Benjamin Rush argued, would need to change to be congruent with “the forms of government we have adopted.” As Cynthia Enloe has remarked, a successful revolutionary movement establishes new definitions of “what is valued, what is scorned, what is feared, and what is believed to enhance safety and security.”

In America this transformation involved a sharp attack on social hierarchies and a reconstruction of family relationships, especially between husbands and wives and between parents and children. Military resistance was enough for rebellion; it was the transformation of values—which received classic expression in Thomas Paine’s Common Sense—that defined the Revolution. Both tasks were intertwined, and both tasks—resistance and redefinition—involved women as supporters and as adversaries far more than we have understood.

If the army is described and analyzed solely from the vantage point of central command, the women and children will be invisible. To view it from the vantage point of the foot soldier and the thousands of women who followed the troops is to emphasize the marginality of support services for both armies, and the penetrability of the armies by civilians, especially women and children. From the women’s perspective, the American army looks far less professional, far more disorganized, than it appears to be in most scholarly studies of the war of the Revolution.

Women were drawn into the task of direct military resistance to a far greater extent than we have appreciated. Along with the French Revolution, the American Revolution was the last of the early modern wars. As they had since the sixteenth century, thousands of women and children traveled with the armies, functioning as nurses, laundresses, and cooks. Like the emblematic Molly Pitcher, they made themselves useful where they could—hauling water for teams that fired cannon, bringing food to men under fire. In British practice, with which the colonists had become familiar during the Seven Years’ War, each company had its own allocation of women, usually but not always soldiers’ wives and occasionally mothers; when the British sailed, their women sailed with them. ... In the original complement of eight regiments that the British sent to put down the American rebellion, each regiment had 677 men and 60 women, a ratio of approximately 10 to 1. ... Burgoyne’s army of 7,200 troops was followed by 2,000 women. American women attached themselves to the troops and followed the armies because they feared to lose track of men with whom they had developed relationships or by whom they were pregnant, or because they feared to stay on in a loyalist area after it had returned to patriot control.

Patriots were skeptical about giving women official status in the army; Washington objected to a fixed quota of women. But the women followed nevertheless, apparently for much the same reasons as the British and German women did. By the end of the war, Washington’s General Orders established a ratio of one woman for every fifteen men in a regiment. ... Extrapolating from this figure, Linda Grant De Pauw offers the high estimate that in the course of the war some “20,000 individual women served as women of the army on the American side.” ... Most women who followed the armies were impoverished. Wives and children who had no means of support when their husbands and fathers were drawn into service—whether by enthusiasm or in the expectation of bounties—followed after and cared for their own men, earning their subsistence by nursing, cooking, and washing for the troops in an era when hospitals were marginal and the offices of quartermaster and commissary were inadequately run. Perhaps the most mythologized of these women is Mary Hayes, of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, who followed her husband when he enlisted as an infantryman. She seems to have spent the winter of 1777–78 at Valley Forge; at the Battle of Monmouth she not only carried water for his gun crew (apparently a standard task for women) but lived out her life in Carlisle, “doing nursing and menial work” until her death in 1832. “In this last month of her life,” writes her memorist, “Pennsylvania recognized her as a veteran” and gave her a pension, which she did not live to enjoy.

The women of the army made Washington uncomfortable. He had good reason to regard them with skepticism. Although they processed food and supplies by cooking and cleaning, they were also a drain on these supplies in an army that never had enough. Even the most respectable women represented something of a moral challenge; by embodying an alternate loyalty to family or lover, they could discourage enlistment of even encourage desertion in order to respond to private emotional claims. They were a steady reminder to men of a world other than the controlled one of the camp; desertion was high throughout the war, and no general needed anyone who might encourage it further. Most importantly, perhaps, the women of the army were disorderly women who could not be controlled by the usual military devices and who were inevitably suspected of theft and spying for the enemy. As a result, Washington was constantly issuing contradictory orders. Sometimes the women of the army were to ride in the wagons so as not to slow down the troops; at other times they were to walk so as not to take up valuable space in the wagons. But always they were there, and Washington knew they could not be expelled. These
women drew rations in the American army; they brought children with them, who drew half rations. American regulations took care to insist that "sucking babes" could draw no rations at all, since obviously they couldn't eat. "The very rules that denied a place in the army to all women sanctioned a place for some."

It is true that cooking, laundering, and nursing were female skills; the women of the army were doing in a military context what they had once done in a domestic one. But we ought not discount these services for that reason, or visualize them as taking place in a context of softness and luxury. "One observer of American troops . . . attributed their ragged and unkempt bearing to the lack of enough women to do their washing and mending: the Americans, not being used to doing things of this sort, choose rather to let their linen, etc., rot upon their backs than to be at the trouble of cleaning 'em themselves."

Women who served such troops were performing tasks of the utmost necessity if the army were to continue functioning. John Shy has remarked that the relative absence of women among American troops put Americans at a disadvantage in relation to the British; women maintained "some semblance of cleanliness." They did not live in gentle surroundings in either army, and the conditions of their lives were not pleasant. Although they were impoverished, they were not inarticulate. The most touching account of Yorktown I know is furnished by Sarah Osborn, who cooked for Washington's troops and delivered food to them under fire because, as she told Washington himself, "it would not do for the men to fight and starve too." At the end she watched the British soldiers stack their arms and then return "into town again to await their destiny."

In 1786 Benjamin Rush made a famous distinction between the "first act" of the "great drama" of the Revolution, a war accomplished by armies, and the revolution in "principles, opinions and manners so as to accommodate them to the forms of government we have adopted." The dichotomy applies to women's roles as well as the more general aspects of life that he had in mind. Women had been embedded in the military aspects of the war against Britain, but their roles were politically invisible. American literally lacked a language to describe what was before their eyes.

On the other hand, women were visible, even central, to the Revolution and to the patriot effort to transform political culture. That transformation was crucial if the Americans were to sustain the claim that they were doing more than refusing to pay taxes. Americans claimed both implicitly and explicitly that they were creating a new kind of politics, a democracy in which the people acted as constituent power, in which every adult citizen had an obligation to play an intelligent and thoughtful role in shaping the nation's destiny. . . . It was this cultural transformation that Americans had in mind when they referred, as they frequently did, to the "new era" that political mobilization would usher in.

A dramatic feature of pre-Revolutionary political mobilization was the consumer boycott. The boycott was central to the effort to change values, to undermine psychological as well as economic ties to England, and to draw apolitical people into political dialogue. Although consumer boycotts seem to have been devised by men, they were predicated on the support of women, both as consumers—who would make distinctions on what they purchased as between British imports and goods of domestic origin—and as manufacturers, who would voluntarily increase their level of household production.

Women who had thought themselves excused from making political choices now found that they had to align themselves politically, even behind the walls of their own homes. The loyalist Peter Oliver complained that "Mr. Otis's black Regiment, the dissenting Clergy, were also set to Work, to preach up Manufactures instead of Gospel." Many middle-class women spun in the context of service to the church, presenting their skeins to ministers, and leaving blurred the distinction between what they did politically and what they did in the name of religion. . . . As they decided how much spinning to do, whether to set their slaves to weaving homespun, or whether to drink tea or coffee, men and women devised a political ritual congruent with women's understanding of their domestic roles and readily incorporated into their daily routines.

The boycotts were an occasion for instruction in collective political behavior, formalized by the signing of petitions and manifestos. In 1767 both men and women signed the Association, promising not to import dutied (taxed) items. Five years later, when the Boston Committee of Correspondence circulated the Solemn League and Covenant establishing another boycott of British goods, they demanded that both men and women sign. The manifesto of the women of Edenton, North Carolina, against imported tea is perhaps the best known of these collective statements. Collective petitions would serve women as their most usable political device deep into the nineteenth century. . . .

Nowhere can the dependence of rebellion on the transformation of values be seen more clearly than in the continuing struggle for recruitment into the army of militia. . . . In every state except Pennsylvania, militias enrolled every able-bodied free white man in their rolls, and drew those men together in the public exercises of training day. There was no counterpart for women of a training day as a bonding experience that simultaneously linked men to each other, to the local community, and at the same time to the state.

Training day underscored men's and women's different political roles; military training was a male ritual that excluded women. Women, in turn, castigated it as an arena for antisocial behavior. When peacetime drill turned into actual war, women logically complained that they had been placed at risk without their consent. . . . [R]eligious believing women were deeply skeptical of a military culture that encouraged drink as indispensable to the display of courage and was unper­urbed by those who broke the third commandment.

In this context patriots needed to find an alternative to women's traditional skepticism and resistance of mobilization. . . . [T]he alternative role involved sending sons and husbands to battle. The Pennsylvania Evening Post offered the model of "an elderly grandmother of Elizabethtown, New Jersey" in 1776: "My children, I have a few words to say to you, you are going out in a just cause, to fight for the rights and liberties of your country; you have my blessings. . . . Let me beg of you . . . that if you fall, it may be like men; and that your wounds may not be in your back parts."

Women who thrust their men to battle were displaying a distinctive form of patriotism. They had been mobilized by the state to mobilize their men; they were part of the moral resources of the total community. Sending men to war was in part their expression of surrogate enlistment in a society in which women did not fight. This was their way of shaping the construction of the military community. They
were shaming their men into serving the interests of the state; indeed shaming would become in the future the standard role of civilian women in time of war.

The third way in which women transformed what was valued and what was scorned involved crowd behavior that was both disorderly and ritualized—sometimes at one and the same time. Working-class women, who spent much of their lives on the streets as market women or shopkeepers, surely were part of these crowds.

The organizers of the Revolutionary crowds were male, and the bulk of the participants seem to have been young artisans. The rhetorical devices of the great Pope’s Day crowds, with their violent battles centered on the effigies of Pope, Devil, and Pretender, were couched in male emblem and male language. In these tableaux, women seem to have been marginal. But women devised their own roles in public ritual. They formed part of . . . the great public funerals for the victims of the Boston Massacre and for the martyred child Christopher Seider.

Women also invented their own public rituals. Most noteworthy of these was the effort of Hannah Bostwick McDougall in New York in April 1770. When her patriot husband Alexander McDougall was arrested for publishing a seditious broadside, his wife “led a parade of ladies from Chapel Street to the jail, entertaining them later at her home.”

Better known is the house-to-house campaign of the patriot women of Philadelphia, led by Esther Reed and Deborah Franklin Bache, to raise money for Washington’s soldiers and to get women of other states to do the same, accompanied by an explicit political broadside and by intimidating fund raising. “I fancy they raised a considerable sum by this extorted contribution,” sneered Quaker loyalist Anna Rawle, “some giving solely against their inclinations thro’ fear of what might happen if they refused.”

Bringing ritual resistance to Britain out of the household and into the streets shaded into violence. . . . Perhaps the most violent act of resistance we know is that of the New York woman who was accused of incendiarism in the Great Fire when the British entered the city in 1776. She received her eulogy from Edmund Burke on the floor of the House of Commons:

... Boycotting imports, shaming men into service, disorderly demonstration—all were ways in which women obviously entered the new political community created by the Revolution. It was less apparent what that entrance might mean. There followed a struggle to define women’s political role in a modern republic. The classic roles of women in wartime were two: both had been named by the Greeks, both positioned women as critics of war. . . . Antigone upholds decency.

Cassandra, who foresees the tragic end of the Trojan War, expresses generalized anxiety and criticism.

In America an evangelical version of Cassandra flourished. Many, perhaps most, women were unambivalently critical of the war and offered their criticism in religious terms. . . . In 1787, when the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention were stabilizing a Revolutionary government and embodying their understanding of what the Revolution had meant in the Federal Constitution, they appeared the classic text of the alternative perspective: an anonymous pamphlet called Women Invited to War. The author defined herself as a “Daughter of America” and addressed herself to the “worthy women, and honourable daughters of America.” She acknowledged that the war had been a “valiant . . . defense of life and liberty,” but discounted its ultimate significance. The real war, she argued, was not against Great Britain, or Shaysites, but against the Devil . . .

. . . Then the “Daughter of America” assumed an unusual voice, the voice of the minister, speaking to the special responsibilities of women and articulating the murmur that men were more prone to sin than were women: “But perhaps some of you may say, there are some very heinous sins, which our sex are not so commonly guilty of, as the men are; in particular the vile sin of drinking to excess, and also profligate swearing and cursing, and taking the great and holy name of God in vain, are practiced more by men than by women.”

In a few pages the author had moved from the contemplation of women in war emergencies to the argument that women ought to conduct their wars according to definitions that were different from men’s; that the main tasks that faced the republic were spiritual rather than political, and that in these spiritual tasks women could take the lead; indeed that they had a special responsibility to display “mourning and lamentation.”

In the aftermath of the Revolutionary war, many women continued to define their civic obligations in religious terms. They way to save the city, argued the “Daughter of America,” was to purify one’s behavior and pray for the sins of the community. By the early nineteenth century, women flooded into the dissenting churches of the Second Great Awakening, bringing their husbands and children with them and asserting that their claim to religious salvation made possible new forms of assertive behavior—criticizing sinful conduct of their friends and neighbors, sometimes traveling to new communities and establishing new schools, sometimes widening in a major way the scope of the books they read. Churches also provided the context for women’s benevolent activity. Despairing that secular politics would clear up the shattered debris of the war, religious women organized societies for the support of widows and orphans in a heretofore unparalleled collective endeavor. If women were to be invited to war, they would join their own war and on their own terms . . .

Between 1775 and 1777 statutory language moved from the term subject to inhabitant, member, and finally, citizen. By 1776 patriots were prepared to say that all loyal inhabitants, men and women, were citizens of the new republic, no longer subjects of the king. But the word citizen still carried overtones inherited from antiquity and the Renaissance, when the citizen made the city possible by taking up arms on its behalf. In this way or reasoning, the male citizen “exposes his life in defense of the state and at the same time ensures that the decision to expose it can
not be taken without him; it is the possession of arms which makes a man a full citizen." This mode of thinking, this way of relating men to the state, had no room in it for women except as something to be avoided.

Many aspects of American political culture reinforced the gender-specific character of citizenship. First, and most obvious, men were linked to the republic by military service. Military service performed by the women of the army was not understood to have a political component. Second, men were linked to the republic by the political ritual of suffrage, itself an expression of the traditional link between political voice and ownership of property deeply embedded in Lockean political theory. By the late eighteenth century most jurisdictions permitted male owners of land, of movable property of a set value, or men who paid taxes to exercise the franchise; in each case it was understood that control of property was connected with independence of judgment. If the ownership of property was requisite to political independence, very few women—even in wealthy families—could make that claim. Women of the laboring poor were of course particularly vulnerable. Like all married women, they were legally dependent on their husbands; as working people the range of economic opportunities open to them was severely restricted. Apprenticeship contracts, for example, reveal that cities often offered a wide range of artisanal occupations to boys but limited girls to housekeeping and occasional training as a skilled seamstress. Almshouse records display a steady pattern: most residents were women and their children; most "outwork" was taken by women. Their lack of marketable skills must have smoothed the path to prostitution for the destitute. The material dependency of women was well established in the early republic.

Finally, men were linked to the Revolutionary republic psychologically, by their understanding of self, honor, and shame. These psychological connections were gender-specific and therefore unavailable to women. Thus in his shrewd analysis of the psychological prerequisite for rebellion, Tom Paine linked independence from the empire to the natural independence of the grown son. The image captured the common sense of the matter for a wide range of American men, who made Common Sense their manifesto.

The promise of fame was positive reinforcement for physical courage. The army had negative reinforcements as well. For cowardice there were courts-martial and dismissal from service. There was also humiliation, which, observes historian Charles Royster, might take the form of "being marched out of camp wearing a dress, with soldiers throwing dung at him." Manliness and honor were thus sharply and ritually contrasted with effeminacy and dishonor. It is not accidental that dueling entered American practice during the Revolution. Usually "British and French aristocrats" are blamed for its introduction, but that does not explain American receptivity; the duel fit well with officers' needs to define their valor and to ritually contrast with effeminacy and dishonor.

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The classical republican view of the world had been bipolar at its core, setting reason against the passions, virtue against a yielding to the vagaries of fortune, restraint against indulgence, manliness against effeminacy. The first item in each of these pairs was understood to be a male attribute. The second was understood to be characteristic of women's nature; when displayed by men it was evidence of defeat and failure. The new language of independence and individual choice (which would be termed liberal) welcomed women's citizenship; the old language of republicanism deeply distrusted it.

Between 1770 and 1800 many writers, both male and female, articulated a new understanding of the civic role of women in a republic. This understanding drew on some old ingredients but rearranged them and added new ones to create a gendered definition of citizenship that attempted (with partial success) to resolve these polarities. The new formulation also sought to provide an image of female citizenship alternative to the passivity of Cassandra or the crisis-specificity of Antigone. The new formulation had two major—and related—elements. The first, expressed with extraordinary clarity by Judith Sargent Murray in America and Mary Wollstonecraft in England, stressed women's native capability and competence and offered these as preconditions of citizenship. "How can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? or virtuous who is not free?" asked Wollstonecraft. Murray offered model women who sustained themselves by their own efforts, including one who ran her own farm.

By claiming civic virtue for themselves, women undermined the classical polarities. Their new formulation of citizenship reconstructed general relations, politicizing women's traditional roles and turning women into monitors of the political behavior of their lovers, husbands, and children. The formulation claimed for women the task of stopping the historical cycle of achievement followed by inevitable degeneration; women would keep the republic virtuous by maintaining the boundaries of the political community. Thus Lockean childdrearng was given a political twist; the bourgeois virtues of autonomy and self-reliance were given extra resonance by the Revolutionary experience.

That revealing document is an ambivalently worded expression of their political self-concept, meandering from third person to first person and back again. Sometimes its authors speak in emphatic collective voice, claiming that only relatively trivial "opinions & manners" forbade them "to march to glory by the same paths as the Men." Otherwise, "we should at least equal, and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good." Sometimes they offered only the humble viewpoint of an individual excluded from the center of action: "The situation of our soldiery has been represented to me." Their ambiguity reflects the oxymoronic quality of the conception of the woman citizen in the early republic.

Women were assisted in their effort to refine the idea of the woman citizen by changes in male understanding of the role. "The people" of Revolutionary broadsides had clearly been meant to include a broader sector of the population than had been meant by the citizenry of Renaissance Florence; how much more inclusive American citizenship ought to be was under negotiation. It seemed obvious that it had to include more than those who actually took up arms....

But the nature of citizenship remained gendered. Behind it still lurked old republican assumptions, beginning with the obvious one that men's citizenship included a military component and women's did not. The classical republican view of the world had been bipolar at its core, setting reason against the passions, virtue against a yielding to the vagaries of fortune, restraint against indulgence, manliness against effeminacy. The first item in each of these pairs was understood to be a male attribute. The second was understood to be characteristic of women's nature; when displayed by men it was evidence of defeat and failure. The new language of independence and individual choice (which would be termed liberal) welcomed women's citizenship; the old language of republicanism deeply distrusted it.

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The honor, like fame, was psychologically male. The language of citizenship for women had to be freshly devised....

For the earliest extended American attempt to locate women in the larger political community, we must turn to the fund-raising broadside that Bache and Reed devised for their campaign and sent to Washington along with their contributions.
Men, even young men, seem to have recognized, even encouraged, this new women's role. "Yes, ye fair, the reformation of a world is in your power," conceded a Columbia College commencement speaker. Considering women in the "dignified character of patriots and philanthropists" who aim at "the glory of their country and the happiness of the human race," he maintained that women displayed their patriotism and philanthropy in the context of courtship, marriage, and motherhood. In courtship, they can exclude "libertines and coxcombs" from their society, influencing suitors "to a sacred regard for truth, honour, candour, and a manly sincerity in their intercourse with her sex." In marriage, the wife could "confirm virtuous habits" in her husband, and "excite his perseverance in the paths of rectitude."

But it was when he reached the role of mother that his paean to the republican woman waxed most enthusiastic. It was, after all, in her role as mother that the republican woman entered historical time and republican political theory, implicitly promising to arrest the cycle of inevitable decay by guaranteeing the virtue of subsequent generations. . . . He concluded by welcoming women's new political responsibilities: "Contemplate the rising glory of confederated America. Consider that your exertions can best secure, increase, and perpetuate it. The solidity and stability of the liberties of your country rest with you, since Liberty is never sure, till Virtue reigns triumphant. . . . While you thus keep our country virtuous, you maintain its independence and ensure its prosperity."

As the comments of the Columbia commencement speaker suggest, the construction of the role of the woman of the republic marked a significant moment in the history of gender relations. What it felt like to be a man and what if felt like to be a woman had been placed under considerable stress by war and revolution; when the war was over, it was easy to see that it had set in motion a revised construction of gender roles. Wars that are not fought by professional armies almost always force a renegotiation of sex roles, if only because when one sex changes its patterns of behavior the other sex cannot help but respond. In this the American Revolution was not distinctive. The Revolution does seem to have been distinctive, however, in the permanence of the newly negotiated roles, which took on lives of their own, infusing themselves into Americans' understanding of appropriate behavior for men and for women deep into the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries.

Some of the change in men's roles was intentional: republicans had in mind an explicit revision of the relationship of individual men to the state. Furthermore, the independence that the state had claimed for itself against Great Britain was understood to be appropriately echoed in the self-assertiveness of individual men. . . . Some of the change in men's roles was unexpected. . . . Hierarchical relationships were disrupted. Thousands who had intimidated stamp tax collectors, or invaded the homes of loyalist elite like Gov. Thomas Hutchinson, or mutinied within the army for back pay would never be deferential again. College students rebelled against ancient restrictions, slaves ran away with the British, or, as in the case of Quock Walker, successfully claimed their natural rights under the new constitutions.

Revolutions ideology had no place in it for the reconstruction of women's roles. But these roles could not help but change under the stress of necessity and in response to changes in men's behavior. Dependence and independence were connected in disconcerting ways. For example, the men of the army were dependent on the services of the women of the army. . . . And, paradoxically, although men were "defenders" and women "protected" in wartime, the man who left his wife or mother to "protect" her by joining the army might actually place her at greater physical risk. Even those most resistant to changed roles could not help but respond to the changed reality of a community in which troops were quartered or from which supplies were commandeered. Women's survival strategies were necessarily different from those of men. It ought not surprise us that women would also develop different understandings of their relationship to the state. In the years of the early republic, middle- and upper-class women gradually asserted a role for themselves in the republic that stressed their worthiness of the lives that had been risked for their safety, their service in maintaining morals and ethical values, and their claim to judge fathers, husbands, and sons by the extent to which these men lived up to the standards of republican virtue they professed. Seizing the idea of civic virtue, women made it their own, claiming for themselves the responsibility of committing the next generation to republicanism and civic virtue, and succeeding so well that by the antebellum years it would be thought to be distinctively female and its older association with men largely forgotten. Virtue would become for women what honor was for men: a private psychological stance laden with political overtones.

Those who did most to construct the ideology of republican womanhood—like Judith Sargent Murray and Benjamin Rush—had reflected Revolutionary experience authentically, but also selectively. They drew on Revolutionary ideology and experience, emphasizing victimization, pride, decency, and the maintenance of ritual and self-respect. But they denied the most frightening elements of that experience. There was no room in the new construction for the disorderly women who had emptied their pispots on stamp tax agents, intimidated hoarders, or marched with Washington and Greene. There was no room for the women who had explicitly denied the decency and appropriateness of the war itself. There was no room for the women who had despaired and who had contributed to a war-weariness for peace at any price in 1779–81. There was no room for the women who had fled with the loyalists; no room, in short, for women who did not fit the reconstructed expectations. Denial of disorder was probably connected to the institutionalization of the Revolution in the federal republic. The women of the army were denied as the Shaysites were denied; to honor and mythologize them would have been to honor and mythologize the most disconcerting and threatening aspects of rebellion. . . .

. . . When we write, at last, an authentic, holistic history of the Revolution, . . . it will be disconcerting; its author will have the ability to render multiple perspectives simultaneously.

. . . [T]he Revolution will be understood to be more deeply radical than we have heretofore perceived it because its shock reached into the deepest and most private human relations, jarring not only the hierarchical relationships between ruler and ruled, between elite and yeoman, between slave and free, but also between men and women, husbands and wives, mothers and children. But the Revolution will also be understood to be more deeply conservative than we have understood, purchasing political stability at the price of backing away from the implications of the sexual politics implied in its own manifestos, just as it backed away from the implications of its principles for changed race relations. The price of stabilizing the Revolution was an adamant refusal to pursue its implications for race relations and for the relations of gender, leaving to subsequent generations to accomplish what the Revolutionary generation had not.