

Reimagining Feminism

Maria Laurino (June 08, 2009)



Discovering a feminist-motherhood agenda in the actions of Michelle Obama that incorporates both Old World and American traditions.



I have been intrigued to watch how Michelle Obama has been introducing Old World ways into a very New World White House (see my blog post "Living in the New World, Choosing from the Old") but I'm even more fascinated with the new type of feminism that she's introduced in the past few months – one that has been sorely missing for decades and is vital to helping improve the lives of women and children. Mrs. Obama has shifted from the Seventies paradigm of an equal rights feminism to a broader, and long-forgotten vision of the movement, that seeks to protect the interests of mothers and children.

First, Mrs. Obama moved her mother into the White House to ensure the continuity of care that Marion Robinson has long provided for her granddaughters. Then she announced that her family would grow a garden. Mrs. Obama is making the garden a national symbol of healthy family eating, and says that she was inspired by the idea because working long hours as a professional woman often meant serving her children fast food. After the Obama's pediatrician warned of the health risks of processed, high calorie foods, the family changed its eating habits.

Both choices have an Old World counterpart. My grandfather, adopting the traditions of agrarian southern Italian life, planted a large garden in a lot next to the apartment building he owned. He grew the vegetables that my grandmother would pick fresh each morning for the day's meals. Having grandma take care of the children has long been an Old World tradition too.

But Mrs. Obama's decisions can also be traced to a very American tradition – the women's temperance movement. Indeed, some women scholars argue that feminism wasn't always as disconnected from the private realm as it is today, but diverged in that direction in the twentieth century and never returned to its more complicated roots.

Janet Giele's 1995 book, *Two Paths to Women's Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism*, examined both movements and offered a broader picture of temperance women than the rigid, puritanical teetotaler. Many temperance leaders took up their crusade because of the profound loss of a husband or a son to alcohol abuse, channeling their grief into creating what they believed was a better society. The suffragettes, on the other hand, acted more like the precursors to the modern feminist movement, focusing on women's equality.

Giele argued that mainstream feminism would be well served by adopting strategies similar to those of moderate temperance leaders, who also supported the suffrage movement while they fought for causes such as the purification of drinking water. For the feminist movement to once again achieve broad support, these two strands – one that sought to protect women's interests as wives and mothers, the other that fought for universal human rights – must converge again.

Former first lady Hillary Clinton's feminist's roots were closer to the suffragette movement; she represented the modern feminist movement's demand for equality. In fact, Mrs. Clinton alienated a lot of women when she famously commented that she had no desire to stay home and bake cookies. In the White House, Mrs. Clinton requested a west wing office and took on a policy role.

Mrs. Obama, on the other hand, said that her initial responsibility was to be "First Mom" and has



been speaking primarily to women's needs as wives and mothers. Her charisma and enormous popularity suggest that she can merge these two divergent strands of feminism.

A feminist motherhood agenda: To modern ears, the words ring of contradictions. If, generally speaking, feminism engages us in the world, motherhood, at least temporarily, draws us away. Feminism looks outward – a bold attempt to change the values of a society in which men hold positions of power and decision making; motherhood turns instinctively inward, fiercely geared toward protecting your child.

Today, I can no longer dismiss as dusty old relics cultural traditions that sought to protect the sanctity of the family. I've come to imagine that the Old World's deeply ingrained familial instincts can serve as a backdrop to a broader discussion of care: Who is going to provide it and who is going to pay for it?

Perhaps the nature of being an in-between person, those of us who straddle the competing and conflicting values of our hyphenated ancestries, mean resisting cultural extremes, searching instead for a place that, at least in the imagination, melds what's worth preserving with life-affirming change.

Which leads me to believe that the ancestors of immigrants and the ancestors of those who came here on slave ships, using the New World tools of education and its principles of justice, can help fashion a society that will not undermine our ability to work and to nurture but significantly aid it.

And who better to lead the way than Michelle Obama?

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