

Commencement Address

Ann Arbor - December 12, 1970

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen

We are engaged in a ceremony traditionally dedicated to the women and the men who in different academic disciplines and professional fields have reached levels of proficiency which we have gathered here to recognize. The value of such ceremonies and of the traditions they represent are being questioned. Ex cathedra speakers are not popular on our campuses. When I was invited to partake in this ceremony in a double capacity as the recipient of an honorary degree and as speaker it was not without self-questioning that I accepted. For you who are graduating, during your stay at Ann Arbor, the University has changed. It is in many respects not the same university as the one you entered. Through the turbulence on our campuses though sometimes in spite of rather than because of it, we have entered a period of re-assessment which is not yet ended. I speak to you as a university woman and, I hope, a liberal, who has no particle of sympathy for the present assault upon universities, liberals, and "effete intellectuals." I am honored to be here and believe that a day like this one need be no empty ritual. I hope that you all are and will remain intellectuals, liberal in your outlook. We need all the intelligence and tolerance we can master; and I believe they are to be found in large measure in an assembly such as this one. The reassessment we are undergoing is not foreign to scholars in my field. The humanities have always invited us to range back in time and out in space with a freedom of spirit that stimulates our thought and imagination to approach the present questioningly. Without that freedom of spirit besides there is little creativity and little joy in living. Unpredictable, and quixotic, it is abroad among us today. I am glad of it.

I hope you will keep it alive—keep alive the kind of vision that was Cervantes'—^{Cervantes} a man who lived a difficult life in trying times—a vision which, Erich Auerbach said, "in its bright equanimity illumines everything and leaves it in a state of gay confusion," the confusion not of fear but of laughter perhaps and truth.

If I chose as my topic "Women, now...it is in part because President Fleming informed me that 1970 is a centennial year. One hundred years ago the University of Michigan admitted its first women students. It was a worthy decision. I note that it took Yale exactly 100 years to catch up. Michigan has not been the worst for it. At the time the Faculty may have felt earnest misgivings at the possible consequences. Retrospectively it is apparent that along with similar moves elsewhere in the closing years of the 19th century, Michigan's decision initiated one of those slow revolutions which, more surely than violent ones, alter the tenor of human history. In 1970 we can discern that, in spite of false starts, regressions and dead ends, the inexorable emergence of women in all spheres of social and professional activity, is one of the major characteristics of social change in the last 100 years.

More immediately, 1970 has been the year when, 50 years after they won the right to vote, women in America once again started to organize and to militate, thus as a group joining the radical moves toward freedom that have been surfacing everywhere. The Women's liberation movement; the National organization of Women; the sometimes eerie actions of militants; the careful investigations of the situation of women by the Women's bureau of labor and various university groups; the August 26th strike: these have made 1970 a memorable year. The potential power of the movement became apparent when it moved Capitol Hill to remember at least the equal rights amendment to the Constitution that it had managed to overlook for 47 years: the potential

power and the resistance; we know the outcome. Crossing the Atlantic, the Women's liberation movement has gathered momentum in Europe. Under the unexpected auspices of a "women's magazine"--Elle--largely dedicated to the promotion of a glamorous image of men--Frenchwomen, last November, held their first "Estates-general." The name refers deliberately to the national assembly that triggered the great French revolution. It was an impressive performance. The 325 women who attended discussed seriously documented reports that were concerned not only with women's rights but with critical appraisals, from the point of view of women, of the entire fabric of French social, political and cultural life, a symptomatic development.

The movement is young, confused, contradictory and vulnerable. Its more questionable aspects have been widely publicized so that some of us may already shrug our shoulders at its slogans; at its pedantically narcissistic sexual concerns; at the more absurd anti-male declarations. I confess I find some of its ⁿinvections funny: S.C.U.M. for example--the "Society for the cutting up of men." Whoever invented that has read Swift. These more sensational facets have had a mild shock value and the debates engendered have had some amusing side-effects. I think of the distinguished scholar, pressed by a Washington office to serve on a committee which "needed a woman," who answered, "Why? Can't a man do it?" And it was with a slightly raised eyebrow that I read footnote 22 of an article on "The Second Sex in academe."¹ It said, "Those on campus responsible for investigating charges of sexual discrimination should also check the representation of women in the following areas....commencement speakers and honorary degrees..."

1. AAUP Bulletin, September 1970, pp. 283-95 by Ann Sutherland Harris.

In a more serious vein, rather than the shock value, it is the long term effort that will count and it is too early to know if the women's movement will be sustained over a long period. Let us imagine for a few brief seconds that we have moved back to 1948, the 100th anniversary of the first congress for the rights of women held in the United States. I might then have proffered congratulations on the gains made since 1848--very real gains: the vote; the massive presence of women in all kinds of jobs; the successful careers in teaching, law, business, administration. In 1970, although women, we are told, have shown a slight inclination to "drop out" of the more demanding professions, the basic facts have not changed. Women in our society are more prominent than ever before. In Ceylon, India and Israel, countries not in easy political circumstances, they are prime ministers. America to be sure can boast only one woman senator, and ten women in the House of Representatives, good, and too few. But increasingly in the United States women are present in all the realms of art and literature; and some in the sciences. One of these--Dr. Crosby--is on this platform today. Women have thus exploded the popular theory--so crippling for women--that by nature women are incapable of thinking creatively. We know the argument: Where are the women Shakespeares, Beethovens, Einsteins, and so on? True, none as yet, nor perhaps will there ever be. But, in truth, I have yet to meet those Shakespeares, Beethovens and Einsteins among the men who use the argument to deter young women from pursuing a desired career. Consider in contrast that unprejudiced Ohio computer, of which you may have heard: programmed to select 100 ideal persons for jury duty, it serenely picked 100 women. I have felt quite drawn to computers ever since. It might hold further surprises for us if we questioned it on the distribution of potential

talent between men and women in the graduating class. But these are sterile arguments and irrelevant to boot.

Still, the facts are there. "Women work," a Frenchwoman Célia Bertin wrote in a book entitled The Age of Women,² "that is what characterizes our time. Everyone knows it, and no one finds it surprising any more." What has changed then? Why in 1970, are so many educated and successful women, who enjoy a greater degree of freedom than ever before and participate in all spheres of cultural, social and political activity suddenly showing signs of dissatisfaction? How justified are their claims and what are their purposes? In a society where men and women work and live together at every level, amicably on the whole, in fact often affectionately--the phenomenon concerns us all.

The movement has surfaced in the last two years. It had been gathering momentum earlier as book after book appeared, written by women, read by women, discussing the feminine condition. It was overshadowed for a while by the more dramatic demonstrations of student unrest and racial dissatisfaction. Many women were active in all the many militant groups at odds with our present society. But the women's groups are probably the only ones which on certain major issues were able to take positions that cut across the boundaries of ideology, age, class, race and nationality. This was the case in France. Militant women are often women committed to some ideology. But to the extent that they were able to keep divisive ideologies in check in the interests of the broader issues that united them, women have startled in equal measure complacent congressmen and radical spokesmen. The most immediate ~~political~~ concern of women if they truly want to be effective should then be to devise a course of action which could

2. Le Temps des femmes, Paris, 1958.

reinforce that unity rallying the mass of women behind it. If that were done I can think of no greater potential for action today. To what purpose? A simple question, with no simple answer.

In the past women, understandably, have been anxious primarily to create the conditions which would allow them to participate fully as citizens and persons in the life of a society whose institutions and customs worked according to recognizable established patterns. What women sought were equal rights and everybody took it for granted that equal rights meant similar work under similar conditions. Women workers were judged by men's norms. Where obvious physiological differences intervened, women were judged wanting; and they were penalized—lower pay, routine jobs, fewer opportunities, etc. Women, when they worked, were hired in spite of the fact that they were women. They accepted the negative status and the ensuing discriminations. Now, the more thoughtful women are looking beyond that frame. Equal rights yes, and among them the right to function freely as women, in conditions favorable to women; among those rights is the right to be, in some respects, different, and not inferior thereby. This, I think is a sign of maturity. Thoughtful women now are questioning themselves and each other: What kind of being is the feminine being? What is the woman's function in our contemporary society? What do women really need, desire, enjoy? What kind of relations do they value in their personal and professional lives? What are the flaws in our collective life which could be ^{corrected} and are not? They are questioning Freud. Not in regard to his essential insights but in regard to some of the interpretations he has given of women's needs and relationship to men which they see as oriented by his own conditioning as a man in a particular society. As in the case of the paradoxical interplay of common cause and divergent ideologies, the effort at re-appraisal is ambiguous. Women who are asking for the right to function fully as the

human persons they are, are at the same time defining their outlook in terms of a category. I could give many other examples of conflicting drives; not the least of these being that women, often considered as the guardians of the status quo, are showing the kind of concern for fundamental questioning usually associated with men.

A French sociologist³ meditating on the implications of these ambiguities in the women's movement considers them as potentially dynamic. He suggests that in the Western world unquestionably, perhaps everywhere, women are most immediately situated in the sensitive areas of change that affect our way of life. It is essentially the fabric of our daily living that is being rapidly modified by technology. It is the area of daily living he notes that is of the greatest consequence to the mass of women. Secondly, the change in women's biological status that has come with the freedom to control child-bearing, and its social consequences are unprecedented--truly revolutionary in kind. Simultaneously, women's relatively rapid access to positions of responsibility^g has placed them in increasing numbers on what he calls the periphery of power, while social custom has banned them from the centers of decision. He sees their situation thus defined^g as particularly critical and potentially dynamic, giving women a viewpoint on the needs of the community as a whole which could be bold and innovative.

Women then, besides constituting a forum of a privileged kind by their very situation, could be an active factor in creating a climate favorable to the cultural changes we are seeking. The thesis is plausible and at least in part true. Whatever their special sphere of contestation, a common theme does run through the women's rebellion: their dissatisfaction at the

3. Henri Lefebvre, La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne (Daily life in the modern world), Paris 1968.

abominably slow pace with which laws, customs and institutions are registering the new conditions and the new facts with which they have to live day by day. That critical view can create a solidarity between the very diverse groups of women and could be a powerful incentive to common, constructive, positive action. But that action will flourish only to the extent that ~~if~~ women look beyond themselves to the whole community. This requires hard work, thought, objectivity and, besides, dedicated passion.

Women have always worked. They have labored in fields, domestic service, sweat-shops, factories...; a patient host of women, unrecognized, presumably invisible. Arguments that refer them back to a home are specious and impertinent. A majority of women probably have never worked exclusively in the home. Today, as we all know, women comprise one-third of the working-force in this country. In our ghettos, among the poor, many women most certainly would welcome life at home if they could afford it; many women are happy when afforded that possibility. Other women do not want to have to choose between home and career; some honestly prefer a career. But whatever the option, women want to make it freely and are beginning to be lucid enough not to tolerate that the theme of home and motherhood be exploited as an alibi for vicious discriminations against women who work or would like to work--masking discriminatory practices in pay and opportunity. In a vigorously aggressive article entitled "Women's lib on Capitol Hill,"⁴ Judith McFadden, a woman familiar with the intricacies of Capitol Hill, points out what the "tender concern" of Congressmen for "wives, mothers and housewives" has cost women in obsolete and callous--even cruel--laws on such matters as abortions, work conditions, the realities of child bearing and

4. The Progressive, December 1970, pp. 22-25.

child rearing. She quotes as still typical, despite its outworn rhetoric, the statement made by a Secretary of State sixty years ago at the time of a debate on women's suffrage: "There never was a greater mistake, there never was a falser fact stated than that the women of America need any protection further than the love borne them by their fellowmen. Do not imperil the advantages they have..." A familiar cry when rights are in the balance. Personally I am always surprised that, at the heart of the university community—the most hospitable to women of all our institutions—I find kind and intelligent men, familiar with the work of modern biologists, genetecists, sociologists, statisticians, who still, when it comes to admitting women, giving them higher degrees and more especially jobs, put forward age-old, discredited arguments concerning feminine limitations and so ~~to~~ justify illegal, discriminatory practices.

For women to accuse "male chauvinism" is hardly enough. "Male chauvinism" does not explain why, with fifty years of voting rights behind them, women who have done so much in some realms, have done so little to correct the inequities they are now denouncing. Have they done more than men in the general sphere of Civil Rights? of discrimination? of cultural concerns as a whole? Like men, women have an immense capacity for self-interest; their indifference toward their less privileged fellow citizens, their self-indulgence and inanity can take on truly monstrous proportions. If men too often unconsciously equate feminity with inferiority, women too often equate feminity with inanity. One of the obstacles to real feminine freedom is the vacuous image women accept of themselves and transmit to their children. In this respect many adolescent girls rank among the more irretrievable casualties of our society. If now the women's liberation movement fails to pass from contestation to effective action and achievement, it can only flounder in inanity. It must look to present action not to past grievances. Women have always wielded a fair amount of power—personal and social. It

has gone unrecognized perhaps but it has nonetheless been real. Women after all have a large influence on the development of their children and deeply influence men: all our literature and our arts testify to that. They are not merely oppressed. The time has come for us openly to assume these responsibilities along with our demands.

The first goal of the women's movement is, and I think should be, legally and culturally, to secure the conditions that favor the autonomy of all women; that is to secure the right of women to decide for themselves what their fields of activity will be; to secure the opportunities for women that will make that decision possible without their being penalized in any fashion because of their feminity; to obtain that the basic inequities in work, pay, recognition, promotion be corrected. This will not happen overnight. However hard they fight for those rights women will probably have to continue to live and work as happily as they can for a couple more generations in a world where they will be outranked and outnumbered in the high echelons of any hierarchy. But they must persist. Beyond this struggle women must see that the justice they seek for themselves be extended to all.

Secondly, women must continue the subtle battle against habit, and prejudice, winning the right not only to be treated legally as equals by men, but to be fully accepted within that equality with the right to their differences as women. I think of Virginia Woolf who, Clive Bell tells us "resented" the way men "patronized" women. "Assuredly," he writes, "Virginia did not wish to be treated as a man. She wished to be treated as an equal, just possibly as a superior. . . . Anyhow the least suspicion of condescension irritated her undeniably." *Virginia Woolf was superior after all, but even* is not palatable. It must disappear. It is a social ill not limited to men. Virginia Woolf herself was not impervious to it, witness her attitude

To women without
her condescension
or patronization

toward James Joyce for instance. It was that condescension toward the unfamiliar that limited her great talent and not the feminine sensitivity which colored it and gave it its insights and originality. Women, now, are not rejecting the idea that their status as women and the centuries of experience behind them have endowed them with forms of understanding and affectivity that are different from men's. They are objecting to the use that has been made of the divergence in a number of irrelevant discriminatory practices. Actually, because they are not as fully committed as men to existing routines, they may be more lucid in distinguishing the obsolete and the wasteful.

In their present critical mood women may find out that they do not want to work under the pressures we know. They may not want to "compete," to "make the grade," to gauge success in terms of TV images and publicity. They may rebel for themselves and for man too against the kind of life so many men endure in offices and public positions. In this respect some may for a while have to sacrifice their drive to recognition in the interests of other achievements. What seems now to be happening is that the more lucid women are developing more confidence and independence of judgment with regard to their work, an inner assurance and authority without which real achievement is impossible. ~~For~~ the path to that inner independence is more difficult than the road to outer forms of liberation. It requires an immense effort of self-knowledge and self-discipline ^{all its more so} because it may take for women as yet uncharted forms. It is a perilous undertaking too because it could lead to the kind of withdrawal we see among "drop-outs," in "communes," in drug-trips, etc. The price paid ^{could be} ~~is~~ heavy in cultural impoverishment for both individuals and the community and ^{it might need only} ~~new forms of~~ segregation. For complete realization, both the inner and the outer independence are as necessary as they are rare. I think university and professional women could play a key role in keeping the Women's lib moving

forward in truly effective ways.

Women are not alone in questioning themselves; men too, not only young men, are questioning the "roles" they are expected to play, the purposes of their activity. In the article I alluded to, Judith McFadden quotes a sociologist as follows "Men can only operate in fantasy structures...like the Pentagon and like the U.S. government with seals and all the wings and eagles. They have a fantastic panoply that men create. Males are always elaborating these highly mythical structures." Like all generalizations this is at best a half-truth. If women are not as impressed as they used to be by the panoply, neither are men. In the process of shaking off male authority, ^{women too} could easily erect their own mythical panoplies. They need the critical eye of men, just as men need theirs. The time is ripe for dialogue, not enmity. As I look back over the history I know best--French intellectual history--it does appear that women have flourished and shown remarkable talent whenever they have been placed in circumstances where they could develop freely and were sustained by the understanding respect and affection of a circle of friends among their outstanding men.

I am no sociologist. But I have wondered about the labels that circulate among us, labels used to define our society and consequently ourselves: neo-capitalistic; bourgeois; technological, technocratic; a leisure society; a consumer's society; a technological-bureaucratic society; a bureaucratic society of programmed consumership--take your choice. For all I know they all apply in some manner. It is hardly controversial to conclude that we do not know what kind of society we are in. We are going through a major cultural change and we know it is likely to be long, confused and dangerous. Interesting too. You, men and women who are graduating today, have better things to do than to spar with each other, create fantasy structures or fight

dead and sterile issues. What, inside or outside the university we surely hope to do is, together, to draw from the conflicts, the claims and contestations those elements out of which a coherent society and ^aricher culture will emerge, a society in which we can live in relative happiness, at peace with each other and not unduly frustrated in our aspirations. The climate at present is not altogether favorable to be sure, and it will take a couple of generations of dedicated hard work to make it so. We are going to have to live in the confusion of this era as best we can. I think we can detect beneath the anarchy and the conflicts possibilities that will eventually enrich us all. Perhaps you young women have the key to some of the most desirable of these. You will have to be obstinate, clear-headed, self-critical, principled and unprejudiced. But, men and women, we all need each other if we are to live, in times of uncertainty, lives that we can respect. I wish you all an affectionate godspeed, not as from a mythical podium of aged wisdom but as a long time fellow voyager in our strange, beautiful and troublesome world.

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