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## CONSERVATIVE POLICIES AND WOMEN'S POWER\*

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### ABSTRACT

The recent setbacks imposed on the feminist movement by the forces of the New Right have led women to an increased understanding of the importance of power in maintaining male dominance. Although men exercise power over women in a variety of ways, a review of the findings of social psychology indicates that almost all types of power derive from men's activities in the public sphere. The exercise of power has become a part of the male gender role and a primary source of men's identity and self esteem. The feminist movement's challenge to men's exclusive hold on the public sphere and its efforts to appropriate the sources of male power for women have provoked a massive retaliation from conservatives which is reflected in the policies of the Reagan Administration.

The aim of the modern feminist movement is to increase the social, political, and economic power of women. Feminists have increasingly come to understand that their efforts have locked them in a power struggle with the forces of male dominance (Eisenstein, 1981; MacKinnon, 1982). While the far right has never been sympathetic to feminism, in the last two years the women's movement has met a formidable opponent in the Reagan Administration. Policies which seek to limit women's reproductive freedom, abolish affirmative action programs, and increase women's economic dependence on men directly attack the programs women have won through years of struggle.

Despite admitting women to segments of the power structure, such as the United Nations and the Supreme Court, which have until now been closed to them, the Reagan Administration is in the main advocating policies which are directed at restoring

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the traditional structure and values of American society and which are rooted in and sustain capitalism and patriarchy. The massive cuts in social welfare programs, for example, are widely recognized as an attempt to reinvigorate capitalism at the expense of the poor. Since these programs primarily benefit women and their children, who constitute a majority of the poor, this also increases women's economic dependence on individual men and reinforces patriarchy.

In seeking to reestablish traditional values, the Reagan administration claims to have the support of a large portion of the population. Certainly a substantial number of voters are concerned about the declining reward for work, the instability of the nuclear family, threats to U.S. military superiority, the lack of respect for human life, and competing definitions of right and wrong (Miller, 1982). Indeed, many feminists may share these concerns.

Whether the Reagan Administration seeks only to reestablish traditional values of work, family, and nationalism, or whether it has consciously set out to restore the losses which have been inflicted upon patriarchy, the effect on women is the same. It is the thesis of this paper that such conservative policies will, if fully enacted and established within our legal system, reinvigorate patriarchy by reversing the gains women have made and by further reducing women's power.

The distribution of power between men and women is, thus, at the heart of conservative social policies. To understand how these policies affect women, it is important to understand power relationships between the sexes as they currently exist and how the feminist movement has threatened to change them. To successfully oppose conservative policies feminists must understand the dynamics of power and what power means to men. Accordingly, this paper reviews the findings of social psychology about power relationships between men and women, recent changes in these relationships, and the Reagan Administration's efforts to counter these changes by a return to the traditional power relationships of patriarchy.

#### POWER RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE SEXES

One common definition of power is the control of resources and social institutions which enables one person to change the behavior of another (Cartwright, 1959; Kipnis, 1976; French & Raven, 1959; Sherif, 1980; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). There are multiple bases of power with the six proposed by French and Raven (1959) frequently considered basic:

Reward power refers to the ability to mediate rewards such as money, food, promotion, and affection in order to obtain behavior change. Since men are more likely to work outside the home and are paid more than women, men have more monetary reward power than women. Personal rewards such as friendship, affection, and sexuality, while used by women, are equally available to men.

<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this paper, patriarchy is defined as a political structure that promotes male privilege by curtailing women's choices about their sexuality, child-rearing, mothering, loving, and laboring (Eisenstein, 1981: 14).

Coercive power refers to the ability to mediate punishments such as fines, demotion, injury, and disapproval to change another's behavior. Since men are, on the average, larger and stronger than women, and more often hold positions of authority than women, men typically possess more coercive power.

Referent power refers to the ability to get another to change behavior because the target of influence likes the powerholder, identifies with the powerholder, and wants to be like him or her. While referent power is appropriate for use by both women and men, in fact, it is probably possessed more by men, since masculine traits are typically valued more than feminine traits (Broverman *et al.*, 1970).

Expert power refers to influence over another because one possesses superior skills or knowledge. It is a common observation that men have more expert power than women. Feldman-Summers and Kiesler (1974) were unable to find a single area in which women were rated as more expert than men.

Legitimate power refers to influence exerted because the influencer feels he or she has the right to influence and the target feel obliged to comply. Such perceptions come about as the result of elections, laws, or socialization in which people believe it is right for one person to lead and another to follow. In our culture men are socialized to believe they have the right to influence, and this has been supported by language, laws, and institutions which provide the male with privilege.

Information power refers to the ability to change behavior through persuasion and the presentation of information. The traditional male life pattern, which has led to a greater likelihood of men receiving a higher education and working outside the home, has resulted in men's greater use of informational power.

Most of men's power over women derives from their activities in the public sphere. Their greater access to higher education, employment, and the political and legal systems has conferred on them the money, authority, and influence that are the bases of power. Women, on the other hand, have traditionally been blocked from participation in the public sphere and have been confined to a private sphere of child care, housework, and emotional support. Changes in education and the structure of the economy over the past three decades have allowed women into the labor force but only, for the most part, in low status, low wage positions. Men continue to hold most of the wealth and positions of authority in the society and to assert and strengthen their power in their interactions with women both in public and in private.

The everyday, nonverbal behavior of men clearly demonstrates the greater power that they possess. Henley (1977), Frieze and Ramsey (1976), and others have shown that sex differences in daily behaviors such as posture, eye contact, touching, and interpersonal distance are identical to power differences: Men, nonverbally, behave in a dominant, superior fashion by having a relaxed posture that takes up much physical space, maintaining little eye contact, touching women frequently, and maintaining a large personal space. Other researchers such as Unger (1976; 1979), Meeker and Weitzel - O'Neill (1977), and Lockheed and Hall (1976) have shown that sex differences in behaviors such as self-disclosure, group participation, conformity, and aggressiveness can all be attributed to men's greater power rather than any

inherent differences between the sexes.

For purposes of this consideration, perhaps more important than the fact that men have more power than women is that they use their power to control and dominate women and thus maintain their power. They do so by ignoring or devaluing the accomplishments of women (e.g., Deaux and Taynor, 1973; Massengill and DiMarco, 1979), by denying women access to skills, jobs, and information (e.g., Levitin, Quinn, and Staines, 1971), by withholding rewards (e.g., U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976), and by physically abusing women (e.g., Roy, 1977).

The importance of power to men can be understood in purely rational terms--power helps in accomplishing one's goals. But why is power over women so important? The most popular conception stems from the observation that the young male child is reared primarily by women (e.g., mothers, grandmothers, female babysitters, female elementary school teachers). The boy perceives women as controlling and dominating him and, unable to identify with the female, he develops a life-long need to escape female domination and power and to demonstrate his own superiority (e.g., Dinnerstein, 1976; Horney, 1967; Farrell, 1974; Lederer, 1968). Most who hold this view argue that fathers and other males should take a larger, more active role in childrearing. While expanding the traditional male role may be highly desirable, two additional sources of male's desire for power over women are likely more germane. First, power is a central part of the male gender stereotype, and second, the use of power has certain metamorphic effects.

### Power and Masculinity

A content analysis of the male gender stereotype shows that power and influence are key components. Men are perceived as more aggressive, not easily influenced, very dominant, very skilled and worldly, acting as leaders, and rough (Broverman *et al.*, 1970). These traits exemplify the French and Raven bases of power. The typical picture of women is one of weakness and powerlessness. Furthermore, research by Ellis and Bentler (1973) suggests that men see themselves as more masculine to the extent they do not possess stereotypically feminine traits. This, of course, is well captured in the phrase, the "opposite sex." Therefore, it should come as no surprise that a key component of many men's identity is to be more dominant and powerful than women. As Jessie Bernard (1974) pointed out, power, especially coercive power, is the one sex difference "most jealously insisted upon by men."

The importance of male power over females is illustrated by Komarovsky's (1976) research on male college seniors in which she found that the inability to present a powerful masculine image was a source of great anxiety. Male power, especially male power over females, appears to be central to many men's definitions of themselves. With power they are men; without it they are no better than women. Men's need to have power over women, paradoxically, gives women what Pleck (1977) calls masculinity-validating power over men. By acting less powerfully than men, by

letting men win, drive the car and flex their muscles, and by telling men how big, strong, and masculine they are, women validate a man's masculinity.

### Metamorphic Effects of Power

But men value power so highly and guard it so carefully not only because they have incorporated power into their self-image, but also because of what Kipnis (1976) calls the metamorphic effects of power use. He argues that the successful wielding of power changes the perceptions powerholders have of themselves and of the targets over which they exercise power. Since men have so much more power than women, they are more subject to these metamorphic effects. To further understand men's reactions to a loss of power we must understand these metamorphic effects.

Kipnis argues that people who have power use it to obtain things they want. To the extent that they use directive and controlling power, the powerholders tend to attribute the behavior of others to their own exertion of power rather than to the other person's volition, thus devaluing the target of power and his or her products. The powerholder then attempts to maintain a social and psychological distance from this inferior target of power.

This pattern of control, misattribution, devaluation, and segregation can be clearly seen in men's behavior toward women. Falbo and Peplau (1980) and Johnson (1974) have shown that men use more directive and controlling forms of power than women, and many studies have shown that males view their own behavior in a more egotistical fashion than females (Levine et al., 1976; McHugh et al., 1975; Stephan et al., 1976), taking more credit for their success than women and attributing their failure more to external causes. Observers of both sexes tend to believe the performance of a woman is due more to external circumstances than the comparable behavior of a man (Deaux and Emswiller, 1974; Feather and Simon, 1975; Feldman-Summers and Kiesler, 1974). Likewise, the devaluation of women and their products is well-documented (Deaux and Taynor, 1973; Goldberg, 1968; Massengill and DiMarco, 1979; Pheterson et al., 1971).

Kipnis also argues that the successful wielding of power will lead the powerholder to possess higher self-esteem than the target of power. If one has few resources one will have few wants satisfied. On the other hand, if one has much power, that power can be used to satisfy one's desires. The powerholder is likely to be praised, flattered, and to have his or her wishes carried out, however trivial they might be. Having desires met and receiving flattery cannot but make one feel good, especially in comparison with those low in power. One would therefore expect that men, having more power than women, will receive more flattery and have desires met more frequently. Women, lacking power generally, will receive less reinforcement and consequently feel less good about themselves. In addition the power attempts of women are often appeals of helplessness and Johnson and Goodchilds (1976) have shown that using helplessness to get one's way results in lowered rather than raised self-esteem. Thus, having more power than women, and using this power, frequently leads men to feel better about themselves than women.

By having and using power, male self-esteem has become based, at least in part, on power.

### THE EFFECT OF POWER LOSS

Although men currently have superiority to women on all of the bases of power, as suggested previously, women's current surge for equality can be understood as an attempt to increase their own power. Taking courses in self-defense and assertiveness replaces the power of helplessness with coercive power; returning to school provides informational and expert power; fighting through the courts and the legislatures to end sex discrimination results in women's gaining legitimate power; gaining abortion rights gives women legitimate power over their own bodies.

As women gain power men lose power. In some senses the loss is in concrete terms. For example, when women take jobs previously held only by men, men no longer have exclusive access. In other cases, male power becomes less usable, as when women learn self-defense techniques by which male coercive power is met with counterpower. The negative relationship between male and female power can be seen in the research of Winter, Stewart, and McClelland (1977). They found that the greater the power motivation of the husband, the lower the wife's career level. In a world of male dominance, the question becomes how men respond to this loss.

If Kipnis's analysis of the metamorphic effects of power is correct, and if power is deeply imbedded in the male gender role, it is an idealistic and vain hope to picture men suddenly denied this power stepping back quietly. Even with the best intentions, men, whose views of themselves and of women, whose behaviors and feelings of self-worth, are tied to their possession of power over women, are not going to respond positively to the loss of that power. Feminists argue that men are drunk with power; however, based on this analysis it might be more accurate to say that men are drugged with power, and wittingly or unwittingly, are likely to be addicts. They shape their experience in terms of a stereotype in which power, especially power over women, is central, and the use of this power has led them to feel important and to devalue women. Power has become the key ingredient in male self-esteem and, for many men, the definition of being a man is tied to possession and use of power.

As such it is unlikely men will hand over their power, for to do so will mean, for many men, to hand over their image of themselves as a man and the basis for their self-esteem. A man beats his wife and refuses her a career outside the home not because he particularly enjoys those activities in their own right, but because such actions protect a masculine lifestyle in which he feels like a man, and because of the metamorphic effects of power lead him to believe he has the right to do so. Thus, an anticipated power loss will likely meet with strong resistance.

## CONSERVATIVE POLICIES AND WOMEN'S POWER

During the decade of the 1970s women advanced their struggle for increased power and control over their own lives from the personal to the political arena. Through courts and legislatures women sought changes in discriminatory laws and the enactment and enforcement of laws which require equal treatment. And they won. The 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment by Congress and a majority of state legislatures, the 1971 child care income tax deduction, the prohibition of sex discrimination in education by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and the rapid adoption of no-fault divorce laws, among many other changes, legitimized women's quest for equality and represented some real advances in power for women by increasing their options regarding marriage, reproduction, education, and employment.

Recognizing women's potential political power, President Carter actively supported the ERA and appointed record numbers of women to federal office. He included three women in his cabinet, elevated 28 women to federal judgeships, and appointed women to an unprecedented 22 percent of top level governmental positions (OURSELF, December 1980: 4). Between 1973 and 1982 women also increased their representation in Congress from three to four percent and in State legislatures from six to ten percent and saw the election of four female governors (Allgood, 1974: 541; Joseph, 1982).

Although implementation and enforcement of the new laws followed more slowly and women remained grossly underrepresented in government, they had begun to turn the apparatus of the state to their own uses. However, as O'Brien has noted, "as far as women are concerned, even a modest reformism is perceived as revolutionary" (1981: 162), and the prospect of a state supported revolution against male privilege provoked a massive retaliation from the right. Turning Carter's liberal formulations of family policy and women's rights on their head, the right mobilized large amounts of money and volunteer labor around family issues as part of a broader conservative agenda (Eisenstein, 1982).

Once in office the Reagan Administration moved quickly to disempower women through budget cuts, regulatory changes, and the appointment of anti-feminists to important executive posts (Schafran, 1981). Much of Reagan's domestic program vividly illustrates the reassertion of male power and traditional gender-role stereotypes. Since economic independence from men and reproductive freedom are essential to women's ability to control their own lives and, thus, to women's equality and power, the counterattacks in these areas have been particularly virulent.

### Economic Independence

As the prior analysis has shown, female access to previously all-male domains in the world of work threatens not only male power, but male self-esteem. Since



employment, education, and money provide the bases for almost all forms of power, affirmative action and anti-sex-discrimination legislation directly threaten traditional masculinity. By promoting equal access to male jobs, positions of authority, and wages, such programs actually diminish male power and force men to alter their perceptions of themselves as superior to women. Furthermore, having equal access to jobs would provide women, ultimately, with equal reward, coercive, expert, and informational power. Therefore, it is critical to male dominance to dismantle such programs. Accordingly, under the Reagan Administration, Federal affirmative action programs have been gutted and deprived of enforcement funds, as have efforts to combat sex discrimination in employment and education. In the last year, seventy-five percent of government contractors have been exempted from affirmative action guidelines; the budgets of the main enforcement agencies, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, have been slashed; and severe limitations have been imposed on back pay awards (Wall Street Journal, April 21, 1982; New York Times; June 29, 1982; Working Papers, January/February 1982).

While the dismantling of affirmative action programs places stumbling blocks in the path of women's economic advancement, conservative initiatives have also diminished educational and training opportunities for women. Cutbacks in CETA, WIN, and student loans restrict the choices available to women in education, training, and, eventually, in employment. For example, half of CETA participants have been women and CETA jobs have helped staff community programs important to women such as day care, rape crisis, and spouse abuse centers (Joseph, 1982; Schafran, 1981). These public service employment jobs have been eliminated and special job training targeted at women faces an additional 60 percent cut in fiscal year 1983 (AFL-CIO American Federationist, February 1982: 14-15).

Poor women have experienced a double burden due to cutbacks in social welfare provisions for AFDC, Food Stamps and Medicaid and in job training which offered them an opportunity, however slim, of escape from economic dependence on men or the state. Already cut, WIN is scheduled to be replaced by a workfare program in which welfare recipients will be forced to take low wage, high turnover, dead-end jobs or lose their benefits. Since three to four times as many recipients are cut off welfare for failure to meet workfare's stringent requirements as find jobs, the main effect will be a further narrowing of poor women's already limited economic alternatives (Dollars & Sense, February 1982: 6-8).

Finally, the Reagan Administration is eliminating women's jobs directly by reducing government employment. Women constitute one-half of government employees and since most are in lower status, lower seniority positions, they are hit particularly hard by these cutbacks. Over a half million state, federal, and local government jobs have already been lost (Dollars & Sense, January 1982: 3-5). At the federal level, these reductions in force, or RIFS, following civil service rules, have led to ludicrous situations in which government executives are paid high salaries for filing and performing other secretarial chores while the women they have replaced are out of work (New York Times, July 16, 1982).

Although discouraging women from employment advancement and training seems counter to the conservative emphasis on self reliance and the work ethic, it is consistent with a policy that sees working women as the cause of economic problems and family instability (Eisenstein, 1982). The founder and president of the Christian Broadcasting Network summarized the conservative case against working women at a New Right "Family Forum":

Deficit spending...put an intolerable burden on the American people. So it became necessary for women to enter the work force not because they wanted to but because they had to. Twenty-five million children under school age are dumped into day care centers by their mothers. Teenagers come home and there's no one there, so they think, "How about a little marijuana and a little sex." When mother gets home she's tired, and squabbles with her husband. They get divorced, the children lose their role models, there is more rebellion in the schools and homosexuality and the children of divorce get divorced themselves (New York Times, July 28, 1982).

In conservatives' eyes, the panacea for social problems is to force women back into the home.

#### Reproductive Freedom

As George Gilder (1973) and others have pointed out, male access to self-perpetuation through reproduction is controlled by women. Women's freedom to have children if and when they want represents not only the freedom to fit children comfortably into other aspects of their lives, and hence increase their power, but also greatly limits male prerogative. In the past women could not, in fact, exert as much deliberate and effective control as they do now. The unrelenting drive by conservatives to limit women's reproductive freedom can, in part, be understood as an attempt to limit women's power over themselves and over men.

Although conservatives have accused the Reagan Administration of dragging its heels on social issues, its close ties with conservative leaders Paul Laxalt, Orrin Hatch and Jesse Helms reflect its sympathy for proposals such as a human life amendment and the Family Protection Act. In keeping with the New Right aim of forcing women back into the home, this legislation would restrict women's control over reproduction and restrain their participation in public life by reviving stereotypes of masculine and feminine behavior.

The Family Protection Act (S.1378; H.R. 3955) is billed an attempt "to foster and protect the viability of the American Family". Protecting the family, according to the New Right, means limiting women's options. The Family Protection Act constrains women's reproductive choices by restricting sex education in the schools and limiting teens' access to birth control. Further, in a systematic effort to restore traditional gender roles, it removes the ability of Legal Services to handle

divorces for its client (two thirds of whom are women), restricts federal initiative in spouse abuse legislation, eliminates prohibitions against sex discrimination in education, and blocks federal funds for education materials which "do not reflect a balance between the status role of men and women, do not reflect different ways in which women and men live and do not contribute to the American way of life as it has been historically understood".

In seeking to legislate sex differences the Family Protection Act attempts to insure unequal spheres for men and women with men dominating and in control of women. Indeed, conservatives know that if stereotypical distinctions of masculinity and femininity can be maintained, men will retain their tremendous power advantages. As long as men define themselves as masculine by not adopting behaviors thought characteristic of women, and women define themselves as feminine to the extent they do not possess behaviors believed typical of men, patriarchy will flourish.

The attempts by the Reagan administration to limit women's economic and reproductive freedom and to reestablish the traditional family are rather subtle but effective efforts to reinvigorate patriarchy. Nowhere in the rhetoric of the Reagan Administration are women, power, or patriarchy mentioned; yet, the effects reveal the motive. These policies and their successes demonstrate that men do not have to rape, batter, or verbally abuse women to assert male dominance; simply advocating social policies in the name of capitalism, private enterprise, and traditional family values can serve equally well.

#### CONCLUSION

Deceived by the apparent willingness of men to grant women more power and choices in education, employment, and reproduction in the early 1970s, feminists underestimated patriarchy's significance to the political and economic system and how deeply it is ingrained in both women and men. As has been graphically demonstrated, what the state gives it can also take away and with startling speed. Lacking a firm political and economic base of power, women have had to rely on information and persuasion to defend their gains. Abandoning this unsatisfactory strategy, women are now looking to exercise their power of numbers, to increase their representation in government, and to take revenge on their political opponents.

If there is anything to be learned from men, it is that to use power is to gain it. Feminist organizations and women's groups must confront issues of vital importance to all women such as day care, women's health, reproductive freedom, parental leave and equal wages on all appropriate fronts. As has been shown, women cannot rely only on laws and government but must exercise their power of numbers and enforce their legal rights in order to gain more favorable educational and

employment conditions, the necessary services to enable them to combine employment and family, and more reliable means of reproductive control.

Women must also exercise their power in personal interactions and reject stereotypical feminine behavior, refuse to validate men's "masculinity" in traditional ways, and support those whose behavior breaks the bonds of dualistic gender roles, often at great personal cost. Feminists have learned that they cannot press women's concerns in isolation from one another and that they need the validation and support of their sisters in what appears to be a bitter fight (Eisenstein, 1982; Gordon and Hunter, 1977-78; MacKinnon, 1982). They must also learn not to underestimate the resistance to women's gains and the power of patriarchy.

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