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The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War I and the Demise of British Feminism

Susan Kingsley Kent

The outbreak of war in August 1914 brought to a halt the activities of both militant and constitutional suffragists in their efforts to gain votes for women. By that time, the suffrage campaign had attained the size and status of a mass movement, commanding the time, energies, and resources of thousands of men and women and riveting the attention of the British public. In early 1918, in what it defined as a gesture of recognition for women's contribution to the war effort, Parliament granted the vote to women over the age of thirty. This measure, while welcome to feminists as a symbol of the fall of the sex barrier, failed to enfranchise some five million out of eleven million adult women. When war ended, feminists continued to agitate for votes for women on the same terms as they had been granted to men, but organized feminism, despite the fact that almost half of the potential female electorate remained disenfranchised, never regained its prewar status as a mass movement. By the end of the 1920s, feminism as a distinct political and social movement no longer existed. This was due to the impact of the war on cultural perceptions of gender. Feminists' understandings of masculinity and femininity became transformed during the war and in the immediate postwar period, until they were virtually indistinguishable from those of antifeminists.

SUSAN KINGSLEY KENT is a Susan B. Anthony Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Rochester. Her fellowship enabled her to do the research for and to write this article; she is deeply indebted to the Susan B. Anthony Center for its support. Joan Scott brought her analytical skills and intellectual rigor to bear on a good many of the author's fuzzy formulations and offered much invaluable advice. More fundamentally, her work on gender has provided theoretical insights on which the author draws heavily in order to advance and sustain her arguments. She also wishes to thank Jim Cronin, Bonnie Smith, Valerie Hartouni, Joyce Berkman, and the associates of the Susan B. Anthony Center for their suggestions and criticisms, and Anne Davidson for her constant encouragement.

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As I have argued elsewhere,¹ prewar British feminists regarded their movement as an attack on separate-sphere ideology and its constructions of masculinity and femininity. They perceived relations between the sexes to be characterized by a state of war in which patriarchal laws, institutions, and attitudes rendered women vulnerable to sexual abuse and degradation, rather than by complementarity and cooperation, as separate-sphere ideologists so insistently claimed. For the most part, feminists believed masculinity to be culturally, not biologically, constructed and attributed women's victimization to a socialization process that encouraged the belief in the natural, biologically determined sex drive of men. Their demand for the elimination of separate spheres incorporated an attack on the cultural construction of the female as "the Sex" and of the male as the sexual aggressor. Insisting that male behavior could be changed, that masculinity and male sexuality were socially determined and not ordained by God or nature, feminists implied that femininity and female sexuality, too, were products of socialization. Challenging the dominant discourse on sexuality, they aimed finally to create a society in which the positive qualities associated with each sex could be assumed by the other, a society in which the "natural" equality and freedom of both men and women could be achieved.

Antisuffrage women, too, understood men to be inclined toward aggressiveness and destructiveness. They differed from feminists, however, in believing masculine characteristics to be natural, inherent, biologically determined, and, consequently, unchangeable. The anti-suffrage campaign of the early twentieth century was informed by the conviction that the antagonistic relations between the sexes were natural. Separate spheres, they argued, placed a wall between men and women, protecting women from the most primitive instincts of men. The transformation of existing boundaries between male and female such as those determining political participation would not further the interests of women but would harm them by placing them in direct competition with men, whose anger would be provoked and whose physical superiority and innate brutality would result in the destruction of women.²

Feminists and antisuffrage women, then, shared the goal of protecting women from men. But because they differed in their under-

¹ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860–1914* (Princeton, N.J., 1987).

² *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

standings of masculinity and femininity, and male and female sexuality, they offered diametrically opposed solutions to the problem of how best to achieve their ends. Feminists envisaged an evolution in male attitudes and behavior. Antisuffragists despaired of any such possibility, believing that women could find security only in the private sphere. Because that private sphere, for feminists, justified oppression and abuse, they sought the elimination of separate spheres altogether and the extension of the positive qualities associated with women to society as a whole.

With the onset of the Great War, many feminists began to modify their understandings of masculinity and femininity. Their insistence on equality with men, and the acknowledgment of the model of sex war that accompanied that demand, gradually gave way to an ideology that emphasized women's special sphere—a separate sphere, in fact—and carried with it an urgent belief in the relationship between the sexes as one of complementarity. This shift did not take place suddenly and was resisted throughout the twenties by many other feminists, but the acceptance of the dominant discourse on sexuality represented a fundamental, and finally fatal, abandonment of prewar feminist ideology. This fundamental and fatal change, this embracing of what amounted to an antifeminist understanding of masculinity and femininity, came about as a consequence of women's experiences and perceptions of the Great War.

* * *

In 1918, the Representation of the People Bill gave women over thirty the right to vote. Contemporary observers in the suffrage and antisuffrage camp—and most historians—attributed the government's change of heart on women's enfranchisement to its appreciation of the work performed by women during the war. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), noted in 1925 that “there was not a paper in Great Britain that by 1916–17 was not ringing with praise of the courage and devotion of British women in carrying out war work of various kinds, and on its highly effective character from the national point of view.”³ She quoted Minister of Munitions Montagu as having proclaimed, “It is not too much to say that our armies have been saved and victory assured by the women in the munition factories,” while Winston Churchill, for his part, declared that “without the work of women it would have been

³ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *What I Remember* (1925; reprint, Westport, Conn., 1976), pp. 226–27.

impossible to win the war.’⁴ Herbert Asquith, an inveterate foe of women’s suffrage, announced his conversion to the enfranchisement of women on precisely these grounds. ‘I think that some years ago I ventured to use the expression, ‘Let the women work out their own salvation,’ ” he recalled in March 1917. ‘Well, Sir, they have worked it out during this War. How could we have carried on the War without them? Short of actually bearing arms in the field, there is hardly a service which has contributed, or is contributing, to the maintenance of our cause in which women have not been at least as active and as efficient as men, and wherever we turn we see them doing . . . work which three years ago would have been regarded as falling exclusively within the province of men.’⁵

But as Andrew Rosen has observed, at least one other factor persuaded many former antisuffragists in Parliament to reverse their position on votes for women. Several M.P.s hinted that the militancy of the prewar years might very well resurface after the war if women were not enfranchised. Walter Long suggested that Parliament avoid “a renewal of those bitter controversies over which we have wasted so much time in the past,” by including women in any new franchise bill.⁶ The Marquess of Crewe more explicitly gave voice to concerns about postwar conflict, arguing,

The atmosphere after the conclusion of the war . . . cannot be in the political sense calm. It may be very much the contrary. . . . I recall the political position on this subject as it existed just before the war. We all know how high feelings ran. . . . It would have been no surprise to us, the members of the Government of that day, if any one of our colleagues in the House of Commons who had taken a prominent line either for or against the grant of the vote to women had been assassinated in the street. . . . That is an atmosphere, if the grant of the vote is refused, which will undoubtedly be recreated, one of these days.⁷

Fear of renewal of the sex war so characteristic of the prewar period, then, contributed at least in part to the women’s victory in 1918. Fear of women’s power also determined the terms under which they would be admitted to the franchise. While the Representation of the People Bill gave men the vote on the basis of residence of premises, a grant of universal manhood suffrage, it restricted the women’s vote

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁵ Quoted in Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up, Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women’s Social and Political Union, 1903–1914* (London, 1974), pp. 262–63.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 264.

⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 265.

to those who were householders or the wives of householders and who had attained the age of thirty. The age requirement ensured that women would not enjoy a majority over men, whose numbers had been greatly reduced in the slaughter of war. The acceptance of this qualification by the NUWSS constituted an abandonment of its long-held principle of sex equality: votes for women on the same lines as it was or should be granted to men. Fawcett and other NUWSS leaders explained to their unhappy Labour followers, most of whom would not be eligible to vote because they were under age, that they did not want to “risk their prospects for partial success by standing out for more.”⁸

Fawcett’s capitulation on so major an issue was not simply a reflection of her cautious nature. It represents a subtle current of fear—unspoken and most likely unconscious—that seems to have permeated feminist ranks during the war, a nagging concern that the gains women had made during the war were only for the duration and that any misbehavior on their part would bring down ruin on their heads. Fawcett suggested as much as early as December 1916, in response to a letter from Lord Northcliffe urging her to organize “some great meeting or united deputation” to persuade the government to include women in a new franchise act after David Lloyd George replaced Asquith as prime minister. She opted for the private deputation rather than the public meeting, explaining, “I believe that as a consequence of the experience of the last twenty-nine months, Women’s Suffrage has obtained a new and far stronger position than ever before; and that this is due not only to the good work done by women, but to the good spirit in which it has been done, the spirit of whole-hearted love of our country and reverence for its aims in this war. It is this, if I mistake not, which has made such an impression on the public mind. We must beware of acting in any way calculated to weaken this position.”⁹

The defensive posture of the feminist movement during and after the Great War contrasted sharply with the confidence and assertiveness displayed in the prewar era. Ray Strachey lamented that “modern young women know amazingly little of what life was like before the war, and show a strong hostility to the word ‘feminism’ and all which they imagine it to connote.”¹⁰ “Why,” despaired Winifred Holtby, “in 1934, are women themselves often the first to repudiate the movements of the past hundred and fifty years, which have gained for

⁸ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *The Women’s Victory—and After: Personal Reminiscences, 1911–1918* (London, 1920), p. 146.

⁹ Fawcett, *What I Remember*, p. 239.

¹⁰ Ray Strachey, ed., *Our Freedom and Its Results* (London, 1936), p. 10.

them at least the foundations of political, economic, educational and moral equality?"¹¹

The answer to her query is a complicated one. At least two developments contributed to the demise of feminism as a mass movement: the rise of antifeminism in Britain and ideological and institutional division within the ranks of organized feminism. These developments were intricately bound up with one another and, while not new, received great impetus and immense significance from the experience of war. They represented attempts on the part of postwar society to recreate order in the aftermath of the greatest upheaval Britain had faced up to that time. For, as Joan Scott has argued, "war is the ultimate disorder, the disruption of all previously established relationships, or the outcome of earlier instability. War is represented as a sexual disorder; peace thus implies a return to 'traditional' gender relationships, the familiar and natural order of families, men in public roles, women at home, and so on."¹²

Feminist insistence on equality and the rights of women to participate in the public realm of work and politics threatened a return to normalcy in the minds of many people and raised the specter of continued conflict after the Armistice. Arabella Kenealy, in a book pointedly titled *Feminism and Sex-Extinction*, urged in 1920 that "men and women are naturally dependent upon one another in every human relation; a dispensation which engenders reciprocal trust, affection and comradeship. Feminist doctrine and practice menace these most excellent provisions and provisions of Nature by thrusting personal rivalries, economic competition and general conflict of interests between the sexes."¹³ After the partial enfranchisement of women in 1918, public anxiety about women's place in society centered on work. Kenealy's purpose was to persuade women to recognize the inevitability of sex differences and to give up their wartime jobs to men. Her most powerful argument against women working rested on the assertion that men would use violence against them if they refused to vacate their positions.¹⁴

¹¹ Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1934; reprint, Chicago, 1978), p. 96.

¹² Joan W. Scott, "Rewriting History," in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, and Margaret Collins Weitz (New Haven, Conn., 1987), p. 27.

¹³ Arabella Kenealy, *Feminism and Sex-Extinction* (London, 1920), p. vii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. vi. "If women are to have scope and authority identical with men's, then they must forgo all privileges; must come out from their fence behind strong arms and chivalry to meet masculine blows in the face, economic and ethical—if not actual" (*ibid.*, p. 108).

Where once women had received accolades of the highest order for their service to the country during wartime, by 1918 they were being vilified and excoriated for their efforts. Irene Clephane, in 1935, noticed that press attitudes toward women workers began to change between 1918 and 1919. "From being the saviours of the nation," she wrote, "women in employment were degraded in the public press to the position of ruthless self-seekers depriving men and their dependents of a livelihood. The woman who had no one to support her, the woman who herself had dependents, the woman who had no necessity, save that of the urge to personal independence and integrity, to earn: all of them became, in many people's minds, objects of opprobrium."¹⁵ Philip Gibbs, a war correspondent, returned from the front and reported that ex-soldiers could not find jobs because "the girls were clinging to their jobs, would not let go of the pocket-money which they had spent on frocks."¹⁶

E. Austin Hinton, in a letter to the *Saturday Review* in December 1918, attempted to trivialize and invalidate women's war efforts, insisting that the woman who took up "what she calls 'war work'" did so "for the sake of a love or flirtation and associated giddiness, which the freer and more licensed life has made it possible to indulge."¹⁷ A correspondent for the *Leeds Mercury* wrote in April 1919 of his "unfeigned pleasure" that women bus conductors and underground drivers would no longer be holding their positions. "Their record of duty well done," he complained, "is seriously blemished by their habitual and aggressive incivility, and a callous disregard for the welfare of passengers. Their shrewish behavior will remain one of the unpleasant memories of the war's vicissitudes."¹⁸ Given the actual nature of the war's vicissitudes, this is quite a profound statement of hostility. As W. Keith pointed out in the *Daily News* in March 1921, in an article titled "Dislike of Women," "The attitude of the public towards women is more full of contempt and bitterness than has been the case since the suffragette outbreaks."¹⁹ The hostility toward women, the pressures on them to leave their jobs and return to the domestic sphere, were intense—and successful. By 1921, fewer women were "gainfully employed," according to the census of that year, than in 1911.²⁰ In 1927,

¹⁵ Irene Clephane, *Towards Sex Freedom* (1935), quoted in Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (London, 1981), pp. 185–86.

¹⁶ Philip Gibbs, *Now It Can Be Told* (London, 1920), p. 548.

¹⁷ Quoted in Braybon, p. 190.

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 193–94.

²⁰ In 1911, 32.3 percent of British women reported themselves "gainfully employed." By 1921, the figure had fallen to 30.8 percent (*ibid.*, p. 210).

Oxford University limited the number of students permitted to attend the women's colleges.²¹

The postwar backlash against feminism extended beyond the question of women's employment; a *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* ideology stressing traditional femininity and motherhood permeated British culture. Holtby decried "this powerful movement to reclothe the female form in swathing trails and frills and flounces, to emphasise the difference between men and women—to recall Woman, in short, to Her True Duty—of . . . bearing of sons and recreation of the tired warrior."²² Cicely Hamilton observed that

to-day, in a good many quarters of the field, the battle we thought won is going badly against us—we are retreating where once we advanced; in the eyes of certain modern statesmen women are not personalities—they are reproductive faculty personified. Which means that they are back at secondary existence, counting only as "normal" women, as wives and mothers and sons. An inevitable result of this return to the "normal" will be a revival of the old contempt for the spinster—the woman who has failed to attract a husband, and who has therefore failed in life; and an increase in the number of women who live, or endeavour to live, by their sexual attraction.²³

Hamilton's critique was not, however, typical. Feminists responded ambiguously and ambivalently to these attempts to reestablish separate spheres. The National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC)—the successor organization, after 1918, to the NUWSS—continued to campaign for equal suffrage and expanded its efforts to include "all such other reforms, economic, legislative, and social, as are necessary to secure a real equality of liberties, status, and opportunities between men and women."²⁴ The practical extension of the NUSEC's scope of activity proved difficult to determine, however, as feminists disagreed about just what reforms constituted feminist demands. Under the leadership of Eleanor Rathbone, a longtime executive committee member of the NUWSS, the NUSEC veered off on a "new feminist" course, seeking to appeal to a much larger and broader group of women, particularly those in the trade unions. Many "old" feminists, a good number of whom, like Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, had actually been too young to participate in the

²¹ Vera Brittain, *The Women at Oxford: A Fragment of History* (New York, 1960), p. 172.

²² Holtby, p. 119.

²³ Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant* (New York, 1935), p. 251.

²⁴ Fawcett, *Women's Victory*, p. 160.

prewar campaign for the suffrage, objected to this new direction, which reflected altered understandings of masculinity and femininity and of the nature of the relationship between the sexes.

“New feminism,” as Rathbone explained it, embodied the belief that the equality of women with men had been achieved. “Women are virtually free,” she announced to her NUSEC colleagues in her presidential address of 1925. Having gotten that “boring business” out of the way, feminists could now turn to the needs of women as women, not as imitators of men. “At last we can stop looking at all our problems through men’s eyes and discussing them in men’s phraseology. We can demand what we want for women, not because it is what men have got, but because it is what women need to fulfil the potentialities of their own natures and to adjust themselves to the circumstances of their own lives.”²⁵ Family endowment, also referred to as the endowment of motherhood; birth control; and, by 1927, protective legislation appeared to Rathbone and her “new” feminist supporters—many of them, like Mary Stocks, Maude Royden, Margery Corbett-Ashby, Eva Hubback, and Kathleen Courtney, veterans of prewar feminist struggles—to be the best way to safeguard women’s interests. Those interests, it became clear, and the justification for “new” feminist demands, centered on the role of women in the home and “the occupation of motherhood—in which most women are at some time or another engaged, and which no man . . . is capable of performing.”²⁶ To “old” feminists, espousing a strictly egalitarian position, “new” feminist arguments reminded them of nothing so much as the anti-feminist arguments marshalled in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to deny women equality with men. In 1927, the women’s movement split, with “new” feminists in the National Union facing strong opposition from such “equalitarians” as Elizabeth Abbott, Lady Rhondda, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Cicely Hamilton, Rebecca West, Winifred Holtby, and Vera Brittain, who removed themselves to newly founded organizations such as the Open Door Council and the Six Point Group to continue to lobby for sex equality.

This is not to argue that the “new” feminist agenda was inherently antifeminist; obviously, such demands can be quite radical. As Rathbone argued, women’s needs are often very different from those of men, and a strictly egalitarian line failed sometimes to address those needs. The difficulty arose from the arguments new feminists advanced to legitimate their demands. Not the *rights* of women but the *needs* of

²⁵ Eleanor Rathbone, “The Old and the New Feminism,” *Woman’s Leader* (March 13, 1925), p. 52.

²⁶ “What Is Feminism?” *Woman’s Leader* (July 17, 1925), p. 195.

women *as mothers* backed feminist appeals now. Not equality but sexual difference characterized the relationship between men and women as new feminists understood it. Whereas demands for equality in the prewar period were closely linked with the notion of sex war, the emphasis on sexual difference carried with it an assumption of complementarity. And complementarity smacked of separate spheres. When “new” feminists made demands based on women’s traditional special needs and special functions, when they ceased to challenge the dominant discourse on sexuality, their ideology became virtually indistinct from that of antifeminists.

Mary Stocks, editor of the *Woman’s Leader*, defended family allowances, or the endowment of motherhood, as a feminist issue because it involved “the conscious allocation to the mothers *qua* mothers of resources adequate for the proper performance of their function.”²⁷ She shared Rathbone’s conviction that the endowment of motherhood was a far more important demand than equal pay and equal opportunities for women,²⁸ the latter arguing that “the majority of women workers are only birds of passage in their trades. Marriage and the bearing and rearing of children are their permanent occupations.”²⁹

“The proper performance of their function” also justified for “new” feminists the demand that “expert and disinterested birth control advice” be made available to married women so that they might “improve the standard of [their] ‘product.’ ” The *Woman’s Leader* did not intend to make a case for birth control *per se*, but only a case for birth control as a feminist issue “once its justifiability is established. . . . We are not advocating birth control as good in itself,” the editors wrote. Their first object of concern was not the right of women to control their own bodies but the children those bodies produced. “Our attitude in this matter is inspired by a reverence for human personality. . . . It is a reverence which revolts at the thought that the seeds of life may be sown thoughtlessly and on unprepared ground; at the thought that its fruit may be unwanted and inadequately tended; at the thought that its increase may destroy instead of fulfilling the life from which it comes.”³⁰

“New” feminist demands arose from the conviction that sexual difference rather than a common humanity characterized the “natural”

²⁷ Quoted in Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood, Child and Maternal Welfare in England, 1900–1939* (London, 1980), p. 170.

²⁸ Rathbone, p. 52; “What Is Feminism?” p. 195.

²⁹ Eleanor Rathbone, “The Remuneration of Women’s Services,” *Economic Journal* (March 1917), p. 65.

³⁰ “Is Birth Control a Feminist Reform?” *Woman’s Leader* (October 2, 1925), p. 283.

relationship between men and women. As Rathbone insisted, “whatever may be the truth about the innate differences between the sexes, it is unquestionable that their differences in functions, especially the difference between the paternal and the maternal function and all its results upon social life and occupational groupings, do bring it about that each sex tends to acquire a special kind of experience and to develop its own forms of *expertise*.”³¹ She believed that “this traditional difference of outlook” between men and women “corresponds to real facts of human nature and human experience.”³² When the *Woman’s Leader* hailed Rathbone’s book advocating the endowment of motherhood, *The Disinherited Family*, as “perhaps the most important contribution to the literature of Feminism since the publication, in 1869, of J. S. Mills’ [sic] *Subjection of Women*” and referred to women’s “peculiar and primary function of motherhood,” then the distance between feminism and antifeminism had been effectively traversed.³³ As Olive Banks has pointed out, interwar feminism “trapped women in the cult of domesticity from which earlier feminists had tried to free themselves.”³⁴

Women who identified themselves as “old” feminists, or equalitarians, objected to the implications of the new feminist demands. Elizabeth Abbott charged that Rathbone and her colleagues embraced a doctrine that was not, in fact, feminist at all. “‘New Feminism,’” she raged, “sees in maternity an eternal disability—just as anti-suffragism saw eternal disability in other generalizations such as ‘sex,’ ‘motherhood,’ ‘the home.’ The equalitarian knows that it is not maternity in itself which is the disability; it is the horribly low and unequal status of woman, the everlasting conception of her as a means to an end instead of as an end in herself, that makes not only maternity but sometimes every hour of a woman’s day a disability.”³⁵ Helen Ward advocated a third position somewhere between that of Rathbone and Abbott but agreed that “certain aspects of the ‘new feminism’ makes us uncomfortably reminiscent of the Anti-Suffrage Society in all its glory.”³⁶ Lady Dorothy Balfour of Burleigh urged that a hard and fast

³¹ Eleanor Rathbone, “Changes in Public Life,” in Strachey, ed. (n. 10 above), pp. 73–74.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³³ *Woman’s Leader* (March 28, 1924), p. 72.

³⁴ Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (New York, 1986), p. 178.

³⁵ Elizabeth Abbott, “What Is Equality?” *Woman’s Leader* (February 11, 1927), p. 4.

³⁶ A. Helen Ward, “What Is Equality?” *Woman’s Leader* (February 25, 1927), p. 20.

reliance on the “new” feminist agenda, ignoring the equalitarian demands of the past sixty years, could produce a situation whereby “we may find ourselves building up new barriers more difficult of destruction than even those existing to-day.”³⁷ She, like Ward, feared that the National Union might founder on the rock of “new” feminism.

They were right. The issue over which the NUSEC split in March 1927 was that of protective legislation, which prewar feminists had adamantly and consistently opposed as being discriminatory against women. At the annual council meeting, the executive committee of the National Union reaffirmed its commitment to the principle that “legislation for the protection of workers should be based, not upon sex, but upon the nature of the occupation.” Rathbone then introduced an amendment that charged the executive committee with considering a number of other factors before deciding the stance it would take on the issue, including “whether the workers affected desire the regulation and are promoting it through their own organizations” and “whether the policy of securing equality through extension [of the regulation to men] or through opposition [to the regulation] is the more likely to meet with a rapid and permanent success.” After intense debate, the amendment carried by a vote of eighty-one to eighty.³⁸ In response, eleven members of the executive committee, including the honorary secretary and honorary treasurer, resigned, explaining that the amendment weakened and compromised the demand for equal opportunity for men and women. “To acquiesce in this change of fundamental principles would have been a betrayal of the women’s movement,” argued the eleven, “for which we have been working, some of us for more than thirty years.”³⁹

Old feminists within the NUSEC and such equal rights organizations as the Open Door Council and the Six Point Group protested vociferously against protective legislation. Cicely Hamilton argued that it treated women “from youth to age as if they were permanently pregnant.”⁴⁰ Winifred Holtby observed that protective legislation “perpetuates the notion that [women] are not quite persons; that they are not able to look after themselves; to secure their own interests, to judge whether they are fit or unfit to continue employment after mar-

³⁷ Dorothy Balfour of Burleigh, *ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁸ “To Officers and Members of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship,” *Woman’s Leader* (March 11, 1927), pp. 36–37.

³⁹ “Statement by the Eleven Resigning Officers and Members of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship Executive Committee,” *Woman’s Leader* (March 11, 1927), p. 38.

⁴⁰ Hamilton (n. 23 above), pp. 208–9.

riage, to enter certain trades, or to assume equal responsibility with men in the state. It fosters the popular fallacy that women are the weaker sex, physically and mentally."⁴¹ Both Holtby and Vera Brittain accepted family allowances and birth control as vital feminist demands. They parted company with "new" feminists, however, over the underlying insistence that the chief occupation of all women was motherhood. They were leery, in Brittain's words, of "the tendency of fertility-worship to degenerate into the belief that women have no social value apart from their reproductive functions—a belief which immediately removes them from the category of human being."⁴² Holtby believed that the "new" feminist emphasis on sexual difference could have quite dangerous consequences not only for feminism but also for democracy, liberty, and reason generally, offering the words of the British fascist Oswald Mosley as a warning. "The part of women in our future organization will be important, but different from that of men," Mosley had written. "*We want men who are men and women who are women.*"⁴³ Holtby condemned "the emphasis laid on the exclusively feminine functions of wifehood and motherhood. Throughout history, whenever society had tried to curtail the opportunities, interests and powers of women, it has done so in the sacred names of marriage and maternity. . . . In the importance of sex too often has laid the unimportance of the citizen, the worker and the human being."⁴⁴

Above all, postwar feminism, both old and new, eschewed even the slightest hint of sex war. Rebecca West noticed in 1923 the "modern timidity about mentioning that there is such a thing as sex-antagonism."⁴⁵ Christabel Pankhurst, one of the chief prewar ideologists of feminism as a response to war waged by men on women, sought in 1921 to soften her stance, writing that "one sex should honour and reverence the other."⁴⁶ Cicely Hamilton, another veteran of suffrage militancy, charged in a 1921 article entitled, "Women Who Repel Men," that a recent attack on Newnham College was the fault, as Sheila Jeffries has reported it, of "the women's reluctance to com-

⁴¹ Holtby (n. 11 above), pp. 81–82.

⁴² Vera Brittain, "Men on Women," *Time and Tide* (June 22, 1928), quoted in Paul Berry and Alan Bishop, eds., *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* (London, 1985), pp. 118–19.

⁴³ Holtby, p. 161.

⁴⁴ Winifred Holtby, "Black Words for Women Only," *Clarion* (March 24, 1934), quoted in Berry and Bishop, eds., p. 86.

⁴⁵ Rebecca West, "Equal Pay for Men and Women Teachers," *Time and Tide* (February 9, 1923), quoted in Dale Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London, 1984), p. 54.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Sheila Jeffries, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880–1930* (London, 1985), p. 149.

promise and be amenable to men. She advised the women to play down their independence."⁴⁷ Holtby and Brittain, despite their strong support for equalitarian feminism, never spoke of the relationship between the sexes as one of antagonism. Only Rebecca West, writing in 1925, dared to announce,

I am an old-fashioned feminist. I believe in the sex-war. . . . When those of our army whose voices are inclined to coo tell us that the day of sex-antagonism is over and that henceforth we have only to advance hand in hand with the male I do not believe it. . . .—when [a postwar feminist] says in a speech that “women must learn to work with men.” I disagree. I believe that women know how to work with men. But I believe that it is the rarest thing in the world for a man to know how to work with women without giving way to an inclination to savage his fellow workers of the protected sex. . . . The woman who forgets this, who does not realise that by reason of her sex she lives in a beleaguered city, is a fool who deserves to lose (as she certainly will) all the privileges that have been won for her by her more robustly-minded sister.⁴⁸

West’s prophesy soon proved to be correct. “New” feminism, espousing an ideology of sexual difference and separate spheres for women and men, could not sustain itself as a distinct political, social, and economic movement and soon became swallowed up and disappeared, along with many of the gains women had won. How do we account for this change in feminist ideology, this abandonment of a position of equality with men, this emphasis on sexual difference and complementarity of the sexes?

A number of feminists pointed to the First World War as the key event in effecting this transformation in thought. Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, for one, attributed her switch to what amounted to a “new” feminist position to the massive male aggression manifested by the war. Whereas once she had dreamed of “a golden age which was to come with the self-assertion of women” with the outbreak of war, she explained in 1917, “we women were brought back to the primitive conception of the relative position of the two sexes. Military organisation and battle afforded the grand opportunity for the superior force capacity of the male. Again man was the fighter, the protector of woman and the home. And at once his power became a reality.”⁴⁹ The

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Rebecca West, “On a Form of Nagging,” *Time and Tide* (October 31, 1925), quoted in Spender, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁹ Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, *Motherhood and the Relationship of the Sexes* (London, 1917), pp. 14, 15.

aggression unleashed in the war, so unprecedented, so destructive, so horrifying in its effects, seems to have convinced Gasquoine Hartley that masculinity was essentially characterized by violence and brutality. Such an understanding necessitated that women, if they were ever to be really free, must accept “the responsibilities and limitations of their womanhood. And by this I mean a full and glad acceptance of those physical facts of their organic constitution which make them unlike men, and should limit their capacity for many kinds of work. It can never be anything but foolishness to attempt to break down the real differences between the two sexes.”⁵⁰ Prior to the war, feminists had been seeking “to break through the barriers of sex. We have been pursuing power,” Gasquoine Hartley wrote, but the war had shown her the error of her ways. “We saw how war spoke with a more powerful voice, and the women who had been snatching at power felt the quickening of a quite new spirit of humbleness.”⁵¹

Christabel Pankhurst hinted of much the same fear when she wrote in 1924, “Some of us hoped more [*sic*] from woman suffrage than is ever going to be accomplished. My own large anticipations were based upon ignorance (which the late war dispelled) of the magnitude of the task which we women reformers so confidently wished to undertake when the vote should be ours.”⁵² Pankhurst’s prewar writings made it quite clear that she sought in the vote the means by which women would end the sexual abuse and degradation of women.⁵³ The realization that this would not be possible came to her as a result of her observation of the massive destruction of the Great War, the manifestation, for her as for so many others, of an innate male aggression. Cicely Hamilton understood the defensive posture of feminism to be a response to the aggression and anger displayed by returning soldiers. “With no enemy to subjugate, in the shape of man or beast,” she maintained in 1927, “an unemployed instinct may turn on women and subdue them to complete femininity [*sic*]. . . . The peace in our time for which we all crave will mean a reaction, more or less strong, against the independence of women.”⁵⁴

While Hamilton viewed male aggression as largely a learned response, Gasquoine Hartley and Pankhurst saw in the war a lesson

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 31.

⁵² Christabel Pankhurst, *Pressing Problems of the Closing Age* (1924), quoted in Rosen (n. 5 above), p. 270.

⁵³ See Kent (n. 1 above), chaps. 6, 7.

⁵⁴ Cicely Hamilton, “The Return to Femininity,” *Time and Tide* (August 12, 1927), in Spender, p. 79.

about the nature of masculinity, which led them to reevaluate their beliefs about femininity as well. Where they had once conceived masculinity and femininity to be the products of laws, attitudes, and institutions that encouraged an unfettered and aggressive male sexuality and a passive, even nonexistent female sexuality, they now took up a variation of the “drive-discharge” model that relied on the notion of biological drives to explain male behavior. The social bases of masculinity and femininity gave way to a biologically determined, innate male and female sexuality, which in turn suggested that women must act differently in order to protect themselves and society from the aggression unleashed by war. In classic antifeminist terms, these feminists gave voice to the cultural belief that the war had demonstrated the need for the reconstruction of separate spheres, of barriers between men and women, of sexual difference if society were to return to a condition of normalcy, defined in biological or natural terms.

The premium placed on sexual difference arose from two seemingly contradictory, certainly paradoxical developments of the war: on the one hand, the very real differences between the experiences of the front and those of the home helped to create an almost insurmountable barrier between the individuals—that is, the men and women—in each realm; and, on the other, the perceived blurring of gender lines occasioned by the upheaval of war compelled society to reestablish sexual difference as a way to recreate the semblance of order. As Eric Leed has pointed out, “War experience is nothing if not a transgression of categories.— . . . war offered numerous occasions for the shattering of distinctions that were central to orderly thought, communicable experience, and normal human relations.”⁵⁵ Britons sought to return to the “traditional” order of the prewar world, an order based on natural biological categories of which sexual differences were a familiar and readily available expression.

Leed and Paul Fussell have written movingly of the sense of alienation and estrangement felt by men at the front from those left behind in safety at home. The division of front and home, Fussell has asserted, “was as severe and uncompromising as the others generating the adversary atmosphere.”⁵⁶ Siegfried Sassoon maintained that “the man who really endured the War at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers.”⁵⁷ Vera Brittain felt this division with regard to her fiancé Roland, the “fear that the War

⁵⁵ Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 21.

⁵⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975), p. 86.

⁵⁷ Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (New York, 1930), p. 280.

would come between us—as indeed, with time, the War always did, putting a barrier of indescribable experience between men and the women they loved. . . . Quite early I realised this possibility of a permanent impediment to understanding.”⁵⁸

The dichotomy of home and front, of private and public, of women and men appeared very early, even among feminists. Shortly after the outbreak of war, the London Society for Women’s Suffrage changed its name to the London Society for Women’s Service, implying a shift of focus from public, political affairs to traditional women’s concerns. The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, in an unreflective, almost knee-jerk reaction to war, turned to work that reasserted gender divisions. “We . . . very early arrived at the conclusion,” Fawcett recalled, “that the care of infant life, saving the children, and protecting their welfare was as true a service to the country as that which men were rendering by going into the armies to serve in the field.”⁵⁹ The age-old cultural associations of men with war and women with home and children emerged with virtually no resistance from feminists; indeed, they were often fostered by feminist rhetoric.

The dichotomy of home and front led, finally, to a situation whereby the soldiers on the line felt a greater sense of solidarity with Germans sitting across No Man’s Land than with their compatriots at home. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, one of the early supporters of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), described in 1938 a visit from an officer on leave, who told her “that many men at the front felt that women had left them to their fate—but he put it more strongly than that.”⁶⁰ Leed has argued that the bellicosity and rage directed at those at home by the front soldiers exceeded that aimed at the enemy.⁶¹

The hostility and anger directed toward the home—symbolized and epitomized by women—got played out after the war. Hamilton described the postwar era as “an ugly epoch,” when “the passion of enmity, fanned through four years, was not extinguished by the mere act of signing an armistice; it took time to burn itself out, and so long as it burned we had need to hate, and our hatred, deprived of an outward object, turned inward. . . . The war mood seemed to have become a habit with us; instead of hating by nation we hated by party and by class.”⁶² Though she did not mention hatred by sex, in keeping with

⁵⁸ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (1933; reprint, London, 1978), p. 143.

⁵⁹ Fawcett, *What I Remember* (n. 3 above), p. 218.

⁶⁰ Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, *My Part in a Changing World* (London, 1938), p. 316.

⁶¹ Leed, pp. 109–10.

⁶² Hamilton, *Life Errant* (n. 23 above), pp. 186, 187.

postwar feminist silence on sex war, she did relate an incident that occurred in 1919. "I remember asking a conductor to stop his bus for me in the Fulham Road; as he made no movement, I thought he had not heard and pulled the cord myself—whereupon the man turned and struck me."⁶³ It is likely that this experience and others inspired Hamilton's belief that a return to normalcy depended on women's return to traditional femininity, characterized by passivity and dependence, rather than by independence, initiative, and activity.

But it was not so much that the war had taught millions of men to be aggressive, as contemporaries believed but, rather, as Leed has claimed, that the "realities of this war were realities that frustrated aggression and turned all acts of hostility inward. The realities of [a defensive trench] war equipped the soldier with a fund of repressed motives, images of an aggressive self that often assumed fantastic form. These motives could not be acted upon in the context of war. But after its conclusion they could be acted out in the relative security of postwar social and political life."⁶⁴ Front soldiers returned home in a violent frame of mind. Philip Gibbs wrote in 1920 of the veterans,

All was not right with the spirit of the men who came back. Something was wrong. They put on civilian clothes again, looked to their mothers and wives very much like the young men who had gone to business in the peaceful days before August of '14. But they had not come back the same men. Something had altered in them. They were subject to queer moods, queer tempers, fits of profound depression alternating with a restless desire for pleasure. Many of them were easily moved to passion when they lost control of themselves. Many were bitter in their speech, violent in opinion, frightening.⁶⁵

Although postwar crime rates did not rise dramatically,⁶⁶ Gibbs reported that "the daily newspapers for many months have been filled with the record of dreadful crimes, of violence and passion. Most of them have been done by soldiers or ex-soldiers." He was struck by the "brutality of passion, a murderous instinct, which have been manifested again and again in . . . riots and street rows and solitary crimes. These last are the worst because they are not inspired by a sense of injustice, however false, or any mob passion, but by homicidal mania and secret lust. The murders of young women, the outrages upon little

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁶⁴ Leed, p. 114.

⁶⁵ Gibbs (n. 16 above), pp. 547–48.

⁶⁶ John Stevenson, *British Society, 1914–45* (New York, 1984), p. 372.

girls, the violent robberies that have happened since the demobilizing of the armies have appalled decent-minded people.”⁶⁷

This rage, here expressed in sexually violent acts against women, also appeared in the misogynist literature of D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, and Ernest Hemingway and suggests the second development of the war with regard to gender relations—that of blurring of gender identities and roles. Sandra Gilbert has noted that the antiheroes of postwar literature, “from Lawrence’s paralyzed Clifford Chatterley to Hemingway’s sadly emasculated Jake Barnes to Eliot’s mysteriously sterile Fisher King . . . suffer specifically from sexual wounds, as if, having traveled literally or figuratively through No Man’s Land, all have become not just No Men, nobodies, but *not* men, *unmen*.”⁶⁸ Gilbert has seen in the poetry of Lawrence in particular the process whereby “the unmaning terrors of combat lead not just to a generalized sexual anxiety but also to a sexual anger directed specifically against the female,” who is now held responsible for the war and the suffering it caused. “Through a paradox that is at first almost incomprehensible,” she has argued, “the war that has traditionally been defined as an apocalypse of masculinism seems here to have led to an apotheosis of femaleness.”⁶⁹

The First World War dramatically upset the perceived gender system of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. As men went off to war, women joined the work force in unprecedented numbers, taking jobs as munitions workers, agricultural laborers, tram conductors, ambulance drivers, frontline nurses, and, finally, after the disasters of 1916, auxiliary soldiers. In 1915, Mary Somerville exclaimed in the *Women’s Liberal Review*, “Oh! This War! How it is tearing down walls and barrier, and battering in fast shut doors.”⁷⁰ By 1918, as Harriet Stanton Blatch observed, “England was a world of women—women in uniforms.”⁷¹ For many women, the opportunity to contribute to national life, to work and to be well paid, was a rewarding and exhilarating experience. But for many other people, the notion of women doing men’s work created enormous anxiety, and women in uniform were seen disapprovingly to be “aping” men. One woman wrote to the *Morning Post* in July 1916, describing four women dressed in khaki:

⁶⁷ Gibbs, p. 551

⁶⁸ Sandra Gilbert, “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 423.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 423–24.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Braybon (n. 15 above), p. 155.

⁷¹ Quoted in Gilbert, p. 425.

They had either cropped their hair or managed so to hide it under their khaki felt hats that at first sight the younger women looked exactly like men. . . . I noticed that these women assumed mannish attitudes, stood with legs apart while they smote their riding whips, and looked like self-conscious and not very attractive boys. . . . I do not know the corps to which these ladies belong, but if they cannot become nurses or ward maids in hospitals, let them put on sunbonnets and print frocks and go and make hay or pick fruit or make jam, or do the thousand and one things that women can do to help.⁷²

Charlotte Haldane wrote scathingly in 1927 of the “‘war-working’ type of ‘woman’—aping the cropped hair, the great booted feet, and grim jaw, the uniform, and if possible the medals of the military men.”⁷³ Whether one approved or not, it was quite true, as Winifred Holtby observed, that “so far as modern war is concerned, the old division of interest between combatant and non-combatant decreases, and the qualifications of the combatant lose their dominantly masculine traits. . . . War ceases to be a masculine occupation.”⁷⁴

A blurring of gender identities occurred at the front as well as at home. The unprecedented opportunities made available to women by the Great War—their increased visibility in public life, their release from the private world of domesticity, their greater mobility—contrasted sharply with the conditions imposed on men at the front. Immobilized and rendered passive in a subterranean world of trenches, men found that “the war to which so many [of them] had gone in the hope of becoming heroes ended up emasculating them, depriving them of autonomy, confining them as closely as any Victorian woman had been confined,” as Gilbert has argued.⁷⁵ The terrors of the war and the expectations of manliness on the part of the front soldier combined to produce in large numbers of men a condition that came to be known as “shell shock.” As Elaine Showalter has demonstrated, these cases of shell shock were in fact cases of male hysteria. “When all signs of physical fear were judged as weakness and where alternatives to combat . . . were viewed as unmanly,” she has written, “men were silenced and immobilized and forced, like women, to express their

⁷² Quoted in Jenny Gould, “Women’s Military Services in First World War Britain,” in Higonnet et al., eds. (n. 12 above), p. 119.

⁷³ Charlotte Haldane, *Motherhood and Its Enemies* (1927), quoted in Braybon, pp. 222–23.

⁷⁴ Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (n. 11 above), p. 164.

⁷⁵ Gilbert, p. 448.

conflicts through the body.”⁷⁶ The war made many men anxious about their masculinity: Ford Madox Ford’s character in *Parade’s End* agonized, “Why isn’t one a beastly girl and privileged to shriek?”⁷⁷ The identification of men with characteristics called feminine contributed a great deal to the misogyny of the postwar period. As Showalter has suggested, “men’s quarrels with the feminine element in their own psyches became externalized as quarrels with women.”⁷⁸

Only now, after the horrific events of the Great War, the specter of conflict between men and women could hardly be tolerated; postwar society sought above all to reestablish a sense of peace and security in an unfamiliar and very insecure world. The insistence on gender peace—a relationship of complementarity between men and women in which women did not compete with men in the public sphere and thereby provoke men to anger, the world as envisaged by antifeminists—appears to have been the most fundamental step in that direction, for as Scott has persuasively argued, gender is constitutive of social relations and serves to conceptualize and legitimate new forms of power relations.⁷⁹ Prewar egalitarian feminism, with its suggestion of sex war, seems to have become associated in the public mind with a renewal of the massive conflict so recently ended; while, for many feminists at least, “new” feminism, with its insistence on women in the home, became associated with passivity, with peace. Maude Royden, for instance, who had been active in the feminist movement since 1908, gave voice to precisely these cultural perceptions when she wrote to the NUSEC on the resignation of the eleven equalitarian executive board members in 1927. “When I reflect that the legalistic interpretation of equality must lead us to abandon our work for the League of Nations . . . and concentrate on agitation in favour of women being admitted on equal terms to all ranks of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, it seems to me that it was time that the Union should clear its mind on what it meant by ‘equality.’”⁸⁰

Whereas prewar feminists could assert women’s independence and equality of the sexes in the conviction that they would ultimately ensure a better world for both women and men, the traumas of the Great War helped to establish in the cultural consciousness what Fus-

⁷⁶ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady, Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York, 1985), p. 171.

⁷⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 173.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–75.

⁸⁰ *Woman’s Leader* (March 18, 1927), p. 50.

sell has called the “modern *versus* habit: one thing opposed to another, not with some Hegelian hope of synthesis involving a dissolution of both extremes . . . , but with a sense that one of the poles embodies so wicked a deficiency, or flaw or perversion that its total submission is called for.”⁸¹ Feminists seem to have internalized this mental habit only slightly less than the rest of British society. As Cicely Hamilton wrote, with sadness, of the postwar period, “injury of those who were not of our camp became, as it were, a habit; and that habit, well-acquired [during the war], has not yet been thrown off—while the younger generation was bred in it.”⁸² Violence, war, and conflict could only be avoided, it appeared to British society after 1918, by reasserting gendered spheres of public and private. Feminism, by accepting the terms of the larger culture, by putting forward a politics of sexual difference, lost its ability to advocate equality and justice for women.

⁸¹ Fussell (n. 56 above), p. 79.

⁸² Hamilton, *Life Errant* (n. 23 above), pp. 295–96.