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## "Narcissus"

But I have reached my destination and, kneeling at water's edge, look and see myself framed by everything that goes on - endlessly beginning all around ME.

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By Robert Cording

# WHATEVER gave people the notion that feminism has a moderate side

Perspectives  
Carol Iannone  
Sept. 2001 - NYPress

## Seneca Falls

Whatever gave people the notion that feminism has a moderate side? Whenever you probe what is called "liberal" or "moderate" feminism, you almost inevitably find a vein of pure radicalism. Betty Friedan, for example, has often been cited as a reasonable sort of feminist. Yet her landmark book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which launched the contemporary women's movement, is marked by radical assertions, as when she compares 1950s housewives to the zombified inmates of a concentration camp and demands that American women be collectively educated out of any desire to devote themselves to family life.

Contrary to their protestation that the women's movement is only about giving women "choice," mainstream feminists clearly aim, in totalitarian fashion, to create total parity between men and women in every sphere of life, an agenda that includes driving as many women as possible into the workplace. Partly as a result, we are becoming a nation of one-child and no-child families.

The 19th-century women's movement is also offered as an instance of a moderate feminism based on the classical liberal principles of the American Founding—individual rights, political equality, the primacy of reason. This view sounds plausible, inasmuch as early feminism apparently pursued a limited, rational goal—the vote—and, having attained it with the adoption of the 19th Amendment in 1920, retired quietly from the scene. But scratch the surface of this picture and you find the utopianism beneath: that aspect of the 19th-century women's movement that Henry James caustically satirized in *The Bostonians* (1886).



On a recent vacation in the lovely Finger Lakes region of central New York, I visited Seneca Falls, site of the first Women's Rights Convention, held on July 19-20, 1848, and attended by such notables as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass. The town itself is a memorial to the women's movement, having several historical sites devoted to it, as well as a charmingly quaint street sculpture commemorating the meeting between Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the other outstanding 19th-century feminist. It was here that the Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments" was signed, setting forth the ideals of the women's rights movement.

While the document lists some specific, rational grievances, particularly the denial of the franchise, its overall effect is to shatter any notion that the earlier feminism was more reasonable than its late-20th century counterpart. In fact, much of the Declaration smacks of today's "Feminazism"—owing less to the American Founding than the French Revolution, redolent less of 1776 than its own year, 1848, the year in which the *Communist Manifesto* was first published.

The Declaration advances a Marxian view of the total oppression of one sex by the other from the beginning of time, proclaiming that the "history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her." Also Marx-like, it portrays the curious willingness of woman to cooperate in her own "social and religious degradation" as a type of false consciousness imposed on woman by man, who has "endeavor[ed] in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life."

So it was then and so it is now: feminism cannot credit women for having minds—and distinct natures—of their own, but must see them as the brainwashed victims of men.

It is true that the Seneca Falls Declaration, unlike modern feminism, bases itself on the laws of "nature" and the "Creator." But it does so only to repudiate all values and understandings derived from human experience, history and tradition. Thus a woman's right to absolute equality as delineated by the Declaration is described as "a self-evident truth growing out of the divinely implanted principles of human nature," and any "custom or authority adverse to it" is "to be regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with mankind."

Such sentiments are profoundly inimical to the limited purposes of a liberal state, as well as to the free exchange of ideas in a liberal society. In fact, reading this remarkable Declaration, you surmise that 19th-

century America rejected the suffragists not because they were demanding the vote but because they were seeking to delegitimize all existing human institutions and, as implied by their threatening language, to silence any disagreement.

The same overheated rhetoric may also account for the fact that the full text of the Declaration—supposedly the foundation stone of modern feminism—is so seldom quoted today. Perhaps the document is felt as something of an embarrassment, not only by contemporary liberal feminists but by their radical sisters as well, whom it makes appear less like groundbreakers than just the most recent incarnations of female irrationalism.

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These pages are dedicated to all kids,  
but especially to Riana, Maia, and Christopher.

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