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## A Peculiar Brand of Feminism

By the late 1960s, white southern women still constituted an identifiable group distinct from the rest of the American female population. Although they had followed national trends by asserting themselves in a male-controlled society, few of them actually joined the radical feminist movement represented by women's liberation groups in the 1970s. Yet virtually all the previously examined antiracist activists who experienced the post-civil rights era fought for gender equality and strongly identified feminism as a central issue in their lives. The reasons for such a stance are to be found in these women's southern identity.<sup>1</sup>

The first factor accounting for this distinctiveness was the complex relationship of white southern women activists with their native region. Indeed, just as their identity was divided by their double status as oppressors and victims, their attitude to the South was characterized by an ambivalent tension between an urge to rebel against their culture and a sense of belonging to it, a tension reflecting the weight of southern history since the Civil War and affecting their definition of themselves. These women's attitude regarding gender issues paralleled their attitude regarding race insofar as they challenged the southern patriarchal order while claiming to reform it—to redeem it as far as many of them were concerned—not to destroy it, out of a deep attachment to their culture. From that perspective, the national feminist movement seemed in some respects irrelevant to their fight.

The second factor of distinctiveness—directly linked to the first—was the primacy of race over gender among southern female activists during and after the struggle for racial equality. This characteristic is obviously due to the extreme form of racial oppression that existed in the South in contrast to other parts of the United States. In a society where racism justified the lynching of black men in the name of the protection of white womanhood, it was hardly

conceivable on the part of white women to equate sexism with racism. So, if many white female racial activists struggled with the constraints of gender during the fight for racial justice, they did not put this issue to the fore for some time. Ultimately, when legal segregation was abolished and when the feminist movement arose, they publicly endorsed the concept of gender equality and became committed to the cause of women's rights but saw the fight against sexism only as a corollary of the ongoing fight against racism, which remained a sore issue in the South in spite of the gains of the civil rights movement.

The unique character of white southern feminism was finally demonstrated by southern women's attitudes to the women's liberation movement. Indeed, the national movement that emerged from the 1960s was led by middle-class white women who had not experienced southern racism firsthand, and clearly gave priority to the fight against gender oppression over the fight against racism. As a result, many southern women, white and black, did not sympathize with this movement. Thus it appears that the women's liberation movement strengthened the bonds of southern sisterhood by pitting black and white women from the South against the most vocal national white feminist leaders.

### Southern Women and the South

Here are the words Eliza Paschall wrote around 1970 for the *Great Speckled Bird*, a counterculture newspaper established in 1968 in Atlanta: "The main problem of the southern white woman, quite seriously and with no malice, is the southern white man. . . . Just as we say that whites cannot be free until blacks are free, we can say that men cannot be free until women are free. So help us down the statue, will you? As Lillian Smith so well pointed out in 'Killers of the Dream,' it's cold and lonely and not much fun on a pedestal."<sup>2</sup> This statement shows that, by the late 1960s, after more than a decade of struggle against segregation, Paschall had become a feminist. Her denunciation of female oppression, however, remained anchored in her southern experience. Her words point to the fact that, through her involvement in the civil rights movement, she was emancipated not so much from patriarchy per se as from white southern patriarchy. This was also the case of most of her fellow white female activists.

A major distinctive feature of white southern female activism in race relations was its nonconfrontational approach, based on the assumption that racial dissenters were not apostates but prophets in their beloved South. This characteristic can actually be extended to southern white women's activism in all other spheres, including gender issues. On the one hand, the women who challenged southern orthodoxy during the segregation era distanced themselves sufficiently from their native culture to challenge its norms, even to turn to outside forces such as the federal government or national organizations to defeat southern racism. Yet, on the other, they remained fundamentally loyal to the South and clearly identified with their fellow southerners when it came to defining themselves either in the course of informal exchanges with fellow southerners or nonsoutherners, or through autobiographical writing. Their personal evolution through the years of their adult lives was thus marked by a permanent tension between an urge to assert themselves as individuals—and as women—and a deeply ingrained sense of community bonding them to “their” people—that is, southerners.

Owing to their dissenting views on race, many of the white women considered in this book could appear as disloyal to their native culture. This trait was especially salient among the most radical female activists of the older generation such as Smith, Durr, and Braden. The bleak portrait of the segregationist South these women drew stood in stark contrast to the idealized picture conveyed by the myths of the Old South or the Lost Cause that remained powerful well into the twentieth century. Beyond the critical look they cast on their society, their relative lack of loyalty showed in the perspective they adopted throughout their adult lives, a perspective that crossed regional barriers to consider the South as an integral part of the nation.

Racism constituting their primary target, they presented the South as the region of the United States the most affected by it and called attention to the southern segregationist system as a dangerous disease for the whole nation. For instance, in 1953 Durr wrote to her friends Clark and Mairi Foreman, describing the region as a “vermiform appendix . . . swollen and tight with green, nasty, filthy, smelly pus and germs.” She added: “[It] can infect the whole nation if we don't operate on it.”<sup>3</sup> Durr's correspondence during the post-*Brown* decade reveals her somber vision of the South. During the school desegregation crisis, she wrote to Clark Foreman: “I think we have raised up a breed of real Nazis down here. I think it is the fault of your people and mine, the

slave owners and the ‘good families’ who looked down on the Negroes, and you know it is true.” In 1959, she did not seem to see any way out of the crisis, writing again to the Foremans: “Until people in the rest of the country realize that this southern situation is part of the overall rottenness that infects the country and stop thinking of us as different and do something toward making the Federal government and northern industry stand up and take definite action, all the pious good wishes really don’t make any sense.”<sup>4</sup> Durr and other women activists struggled in particular to correct misinterpretations about the South that resulted from the extremely polarized dimension of the debates about desegregation. They combated on two fronts to prove to the rest of the nation that a significant proportion of whites were not segregationists and needed outside help. They also wanted to show that middle-of-the-road liberals who did not favor federal coercion during the school desegregation crisis tended to overemphasize southern whites’ readiness to implement the *Brown* decision.

The article Eliza Paschall wrote for the May 1960 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* echoes Durr’s point of view as it reflects her attempt to differentiate herself from the so-called southern point of view in the thick of white resistance to desegregation. The article starts with these words: “It is common practice among Southern spokesmen to refer to the ‘Southern point of view.’ Our Capitol in Atlanta resounds with speeches which say that all Georgians agree. And it is always stated or implied that what they all agree on is that our present system of a legally racially segregated society is best.” Paschall goes on to expose her dissenting view: “I am a Southerner. From *my* point of view, not only does the U.S. Supreme Court have jurisdiction over Georgia, but the school decision was a correct one.” In response to the various arguments put forward by the opponents of desegregation, she declares: “I do not set my standards of morality by what others do, in the North or in Chicago or in South Africa. I set them by what I believe in my heart, and I do believe in my heart that segregation is a disease that affects all parts of a being, human or political.” She then distances herself from the southern white majority and from the opinion leaders who take this majority as their standard: “I do not agree with the ‘realistic liberals,’ who daily play the game which has as its primary rule: To be influential you must stay in the group. What influence do we have if we constantly yield to the pressure of ‘This is not the time. It would cause trouble’?” Finally, in the closing sentence of the article, she blends

her southern identity with her American one by asserting: “There is another Southerner whose view I would accept as my own. That Southerner is George Washington. The words are ‘Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair.’ The standard is the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

The white women activists who were in the habit of corresponding with national politicians and opinion leaders struggled to convince them to stop compromising with the segregationist South, insisting on the fact that the South owed allegiance to the United States and its Constitution. Just as Durr corresponded with national politicians asking them to resort to federal means to break massive resistance, or as Braden set up national campaigns to guarantee the constitutional liberties of dissenters inside and outside the South, Paschall wrote to officials of the Kennedy administration to prod them into exerting pressure on southern authorities in favor of desegregation.<sup>6</sup>

The women tended to write in an increasingly reproachful tone as the desegregation crisis deepened in the early 1960s. For instance, in her letters to Burke Marshall—assistant attorney general for civil rights for the Kennedy administration—Durr expressed disapproval at appointments in the South of federal judges known for their segregationist leanings: “I believe you to be an honest man, I hear you are,” she wrote in 1961, “and I think Robert Kennedy wants to do a good job, but how can we believe in any speeches when the MEN who are appointed are the worst enemies of integration?” In the same vein, Paschall wrote to Dean Rusk, secretary of state, in 1962, asking for the State Department to send representatives to Atlanta to discuss the local situation with the city’s leaders—something federal officials refused to do unless they were formally invited. Her argument went as follows:

We may be “underdeveloped” but we are not a foreign country, and it seems unnecessarily formal for the American government to wait for an invitation to send someone here in its behalf. The South has made progress, as any person who has been sick and is “getting better” has made progress, but—and I say this as a lifelong resident of South Carolina and Georgia—to permit us the luxury of setting our own pace of progress so completely out of step with the rest of the world is to grant to the South special privilege beyond the point of kindness.<sup>7</sup>

Paschall and others also resented the national media’s tendency to publicize the positive image of the South provided by prominent southern liberals.