

Young Jean

By David Blankenhorn

May you grow up to be righteous,
May you grow up to be true,
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you.
May you always be courageous,
Stand upright and be strong,
May you stay forever young.

Bob Dylan, "Forever Young," 1973

Usually the first things are the most important. Beginnings tell. Or at least, that's what I have long believed. So when I was trying in my own work to answer the question, what is marriage, I looked first and most carefully at the world's earliest recorded marriage laws, which come to us from the ancient civilizations of the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile river valleys. And when I was trying to answer the question, what is thrift, I looked first and most carefully at Chaucer and his colleagues, who first introduced this curious word into the written English language. ("He gan to stroke, and good thrite bad ful ofte.")

And so today, as we seek to assess nearly four decades of writing and engaged public witness by Jean Bethke Elshtain regarding feminism, marriage, and family, let us look first and carefully at the young Jean. The Jean of the 1970s – that curious decade to which so many of Jean's critics now look back with such nostalgia, especially with respect to the very topics now under review. The Jean from before all those frequent-flyer miles. From before all the victory laps, the honorary degrees, the Visiting This and Distinguished That, from before all those words of high praise from important people in high places. In short, let's consider the Jean Bethke Elshtain prior to the publication in 1981 of *Public Man, Private Woman* – a turning point after which, for Jean, things clearly rose to a new level.

1972

In the spring of 1972, Jean was 30 years old, a young wife and mother, and a doctoral candidate in political science at Brandeis University. She told me some years ago that a vivid memory from that time in her life is rocking a baby to sleep with one arm and turning the pages of an important book she was reading with the other. (Does anyone who knows Jean doubt the veracity of this story?)

In April of that year, she wrote a book review essay entitled “Beyond Sexual Politics” for the magazine *Commonweal*.¹ Jean is concerned in this review with Kate Millet’s 1970 book, *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer’s 1971 book, *The Female Eunuch* – two books which, we now know, stand as arguably the most famous and iconic feminist writings of the decade – and Juliet Mitchell’s 1971 book, *Women’s Estate*.

What must have been going through her mind at this time? Surely, on a purely pragmatic level, she must have been concerned about getting a respectable teaching job in a university after receiving her doctorate, a milestone which she hoped would occur (and which did occur) the following year. Surely she was also, to put it bluntly, aware of the time in which she was living – a time in which the feminism of Millet and Greer was so clearly in the saddle, so clearly the very definition of rising-sap daring and cutting-edge progressivism, that to deny or reject it, especially if one is a smart young woman hoping for a career in academia, was manifestly to run the risk of being viewed by one’s most influential peers as well as by most would-be employers and faculty colleagues, as ... what? ... out of step? ... a bit naïve? ... unsophisticated in matters of sex? ... insufficiently committed to women’s and progressive politics? Let’s just say, with confidence, all of those things. Surely Jean was aware of these facts. Everyone in her world was aware of them, in the spring 1972.

Given this context, the first thing that strikes the reader of this article is Jean’s brashness, gentled only slightly by her humor. It is a remarkable quality to find in one so young, a newcomer, a would-be junior academic working without a net and without any visible network, taking on in a little magazine none other than two of the founding mothers of the most important intellectual and social change movement of the era.

Right out of the box, we learn that Millet’s *Sexual Politics* suffers from “a certain confusion of categories.” As Jean read the book, major terms like class and status “were stripped of their usual meanings and tossed about in a fashion that never quite approached logical coherence.” In addition, Jean argues that Millet’s book features “a strong sense of victimization” while offering “little clear notion of what, if anything, could be done to change things for women.” For Jean, such a failure marks the essential difference between “revolutionary ideas” and “purportedly revolutionary ideas.”

On to Greer. Jean first reminds us that “male reviewers fell all over one another” to praise *The Female Eunuch*. Because Greer likes sex, and likes men, she is a feminist, Jean assures us, that men can like! Plus, Jean herself likes what Greer has to say about the female orgasm. (Yet: “But when she [Greer] enjoined women to hold out for ecstasy, not simply orgasm, I found myself backing away. How does one hold out for ecstasy anyway?”)

Yet unlike those male reviewers, Jean views Greer’s book overall as “a severe disappointment.” Why? For starters, Greer “fails to confront psychoanalytic theory in any serious fashion.” Jean herself intends to confront it seriously: She would later in the decade study for a while at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute, and her writings

¹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Beyond Sexual Politics,” *Commonweal*, April 28, 1972.

throughout the 1970s insist that psychoanalytic theory must be a part of, not an enemy of, any serious feminism.² In addition, we learn that Greer's engagement with Marxist theory, a body of writing which Jean knows and respects, is "glib" and "a gross distortion." Jean has great fun deconstructing for us, almost word by word, a particularly long and tendentious Freud/Marx-sounding sentence from Greer's book, and concludes by briskly observing: "We can do without such naïve fairy tales at this late date."

Finally, Greer's "answer for how to fight the capitalist economy" – a question that Jean as a critic of capitalism takes seriously – is "frivolous" and a "cruel hoax." Greer breezily contends that individualistic acts of sexual rebellion by women will ultimately put an end to capitalist exploitation. Jean, who takes institutions seriously and who deigns to study how economic and political change actually occurs, will have none of it: "The walls of Jericho do not fall at the sounds of rock bands and the cries of ecstasy."

Like the "purportedly revolutionary" Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, as Jean sees it, is not a revolutionary, but someone merely playing-acting at being a revolutionary. And for the 30-year-old Jean Bethke Elshtain of Timnath, Colorado, who will soon get her doctorate in political science from Brandeis, that kind of unseriousness cannot and will not go unchallenged.

On, then, to Juliet Mitchell. Mitchell, Jean tells us, is woman of the left. She writes for *New Left Review*. She knows her Marx and her Freud. She is also a serious, "meticulous" scholar. Jean admires her "refusal to take refuge in monist causality" and her refusal to "seek mechanistic answers to complex social problems." Jean also admires Mitchell's frank discussion of children:

All Feminist with children will welcome the careful attention Mitchell pays to the crucial topic of socialization of the young. She seems genuinely concerned about the fate of children and strongly reiterates the crucial nature of the love and care children receive in their formative years – a topic ignored, glossed-over, or airily dismissed in much Feminist literature.

Here, then, in Mitchell, Jean finds for us a serious feminist thinker. Someone who attends to complexity and bothers with the details. A real – not play-acting – reformer-intellectual who rejects both "shallow antinomianism" and self-indulgent monist theories, and who therefore "knows that there are no easy paths to a just society." For these reasons, Mitchell's *Women's Estate* is for Jean "the only major Feminist analysis which doesn't leave a frustrated, gnawing aftertaste."

² Jean in 1978: "I agree with Juliet Mitchell that a rejection of psychoanalytic theory is fatal for feminism and, I would add, for all contemporary social thought." And: "That Freud has been a particular target of radical feminism is in itself indicative of the repressive function of that feminism."

See Elshtain, "Existentialism and Repressive Feminism," in Michael J. McGrath (ed.), *Liberation and the Modern Polity* (New York: Dekker, 1978), as reprinted in Elstain, *Real Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 166, 197. In this chapter Jean discusses Freud and feminism on pages 180-185. The particular Juliet Mitchell argument to which Jean refers in this 1978 essay is in Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

So what was going through Jean's mind in the 1970s with respect to women, sexuality, and families? And what style of intellectual does this graduate student aspire to be? I think the answers are clear enough. To me, most of them are present, at least in embryonic form, in this first mainstream-press article, from 1972. Here is my list of them.

Ten True Things about the Young Jean

1. Jean is brash, funny, and (to the outside eye) unafraid.
2. Jean writes for the public. She never dumbs down what she wants to say, but she also never hides behind elitist code-words or academic jargon.
3. Jean does not suffer intellectual sloppiness gladly. She likes to laugh at least as much as the next woman, but she is not fooling around. She demands intellectual rigor at all times, in others and in herself.
4. Jean refuses to confine herself to one, or even several, specialized fields of study. She reads nearly everything, and has limited patience for any would-be intellectuals who don't.
5. Jean is a liberal. Or perhaps the better term would be, a classic liberal. Although a severe critic on feminist grounds of liberalism's implicit view of the individual as a sovereign isolate (what Jean would later call liberalism's embrace of "Abstract Man"), Jean consistently recognizes values pluralism, rejects monism in all its forms,³ insists on the equal dignity of persons, calls for and personally models civility in disagreement and openness to other views, and cherishes political democracy and democratic civil society.

³ Values pluralism, or the idea that, as the philosopher Isaiah Berlin succinctly put it, "not all good things are compatible," is at the very center of liberal thought. Regarding human goods or rights, for liberals the basic distinction is between what is often (including by Jean) called monism, or the view that all goods revolve around and stem from one master good, one permanent and complete solution, and what William Galston and other liberal theorists often call values pluralism, which is the view that the diversity of human goods cannot be measured according to one master standard, or fully rank-ordered, and therefore that important human goods can and often do conflict with one another.

Regarding the related issue of causality, a monistic view (such as Marxism in its crude form) posits that one factor is the ultimate cause of all social change (for Marxists, that factor is the mode of production and the class struggles deriving there from); whereas Jean and other liberal theorists reject the idea that one and only factor is the essential shaper of social change.

See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Conceptions of Liberty," in Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1969), 167, passim; and William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4-7, passim.

6. Jean is a feminist. Or perhaps the right term would be, a social feminist. She is a feminist who, on feminist grounds, cares about marriage and children.⁴
7. Jean is a political philosopher for families. She offers a normative vision of the family – mother, father, children – as a vital component of democratic civil society.⁵ In this sense, one might (and some do) call her “conservative.”
8. Jean does not worship at the alter of the free market and is a long-time critic of unbridled capitalism – in part because of its harmful effects on the family. She never (I think Errol can confirm) lies awake at night wishing for lower taxes or larger shopping-malls, and she does not despise the government. In this sense, one might (and some do) call her “liberal” or “left.”
9. In the larger, on-going culture wars between left and right, Republican and Democrat, Jean from the beginning has been essentially homeless. Politically, she is forever on the tramp, a perpetual seeker and quibbler who will not stay inside the lines, and who above all refuses to chain herself, as Orwell put it, to a smelly little orthodoxy.
10. Jean is wise. Even at 30, Jean was wise.

1979

In 1979 Jean was a 37-year-old associate professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, teaching courses on political thought and on feminist theory and politics. In the seven years since our last encounter with her as a graduate student at Brandeis in 1972, Jean worked steadily and in numerous ways on research and writing that would, in 1981, become part of her first book, *Public Man, Private Woman*, as well as on material that would, in 1982, appear in *The Family in Political Thought*, which Jean edited and to which she contributed an introduction and two substantive essays.⁶

As best I can determine, all her published writing during these seven years focus broadly on the topics of women, sexuality and procreation, feminism, and the family. Among her published essays from these years are:

- “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” published in the journal *Politics* in 1975;

⁴ Jean in *Public Man, Private Woman*: “The reflective feminist, then, begins her considerations with the important, not trivial, fact that Americans remain committed to family life and that it would require major social coercion and manipulation to destroy that commitment. Those thus committed include children as well as adults.” And therefore: “The reflective feminist must be as concerned with the concrete existence and self-understandings of children as she is with female subjects.” Elstain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 332-333.

⁵ See in particular Elstain, “The Family and Civic Life,” in David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elstain (eds.), *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family* (Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America, 1990), 119-132.

⁶ Elstain (ed.), *The Family in Political Thought* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982).

- “The Feminist Movement and the Question of Equality,” published in the journal *Polity* in 1975;
- “The Social Relations of the Classroom,” published in the journal *Telos* in 1976;
- “Against Our Will to Power,” a review essay, also published in *Telos*, in late 1977; and
- “Liberal Heresies: Existentialism and Repressive Feminism,” which appeared as a chapter of a book, *Liberalism and the Modern Polity*, edited by Michael J. Gargas McGrath and published in 1978.

In addition, in 1979, Jean published two significant essays on contemporary feminism – one in a popular left-wing magazine, and the other in a scholarly volume in the field of the sociology of knowledge. Together, these two articles – constituting, as it were, Jean’s final and culminating words on this subject for the decade of the 1970s – merit a moment of our attention.

1979 – Part One

Jean’s wonderfully entitled “Methodological Sophistication and Conceptual Confusion” appeared in 1979 as a chapter of a book, *The Prism of Sex*, edited by Julia A. Sherman and Evelyn T. Beck.⁷ The book’s intellectual framework is scholarly and necessarily somewhat abstract, and so is Jean’s chapter, but Jean’s purpose in writing this piece comes through loud and clear. It’s a radical purpose. She is aiming at nothing less than a smack-down, a public undressing, of mainstream political science’s understanding and treatment of women as political beings and of what Jean elsewhere, following Vaclav Havel, would call “moral acts.”⁸ She isn’t messing around. She isn’t shooting at small game. She’s going here for the big prize, and what she produces is a significant feminist contribution to our understanding of the epistemology of the contemporary social sciences.

She begins with the proposition that “inequality of class, sex, and race are constituent features of the status quo,” and invites us to wonder why this is so. One part of the answer, she tells us, with regard to sexual inequality, is that Jean’s own discipline, political science, is methodologically committed to a world view, a fundamental way of seeing and studying reality, that tends to disappear women politically and, as a necessary consequence of the epistemology itself, trivialize and denigrate women’s participation in public life.

⁷ Julia A. Sherman and Evelyn T. Beck (eds.), *The Prism of Sex: Toward an Equitable Pursuit of Knowledge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

⁸ Elshstain, “Politics without Cliché,” *Social Research* 60, no. 3 (Fall 1993).

But let's hear the tale in Jean's own words. Most mainstream political scientists "are unaware of the philosophical foundations of their enterprise and thus cannot even consider the contestable assumptions concerning human nature imbedded with their frameworks of analysis." And which "contestable assumptions," heretofore unrecognized and therefore unexamined, does Jean now wish to examine? Well, for starters, she wishes to examine the notion that the individual is "ontologically prior to society and alone" and that the human mind is therefore "asocial." Jean describes this simplifying and simplistic assumption as a belief in "Abstract Man" – the human person essentially as a calculating, self-interested isolate, in some respects the political scientist's version of what economic theorists call *homo economicus* ("economic man") – and Jean, as a feminist and as a careful student of epistemology, is having none of it.⁹

Second, she wishes to examine and contest the assumption that scientific description is separable from normative evaluation. Jean is quite familiar with the notion that describing (naming the "is") and evaluating (naming the "ought") are and must be, for the true scientist, entirely separable activities. But on this matter as well, Jean is having none of it. She slyly reminds us that those who decline the severance of fact from value and who believe as she does that "description is always from a point of view and is hence evaluative" are typically "considered fuzzy-minded, impressionistic, and incapable of rigorous analysis – a description not unlike stereotypic characterizations of female thinking processes." But ultimately for Jean "there is no such thing as mere description." There is no one here but us humans, she suggests, and all of us – even the "practitioners of an ostensibly value-free social science" – begin from and end with a normative point of view, including a point of view about human nature and destiny. Those political scientists who deny this truth may be methodologically sophisticated – they may dazzle us with regression coefficients and tidy data-sets – but finally their work is "sometimes bogus, always boring," because at bottom they are conceptually confused.

Actually, Jean tells us, they are more than merely confused. For "by narrowing the scope of politics in the ways I have criticized, leading analysts representing mainstream social science have lent their support to those who benefit from inegalitarian social arrangements and who seek to maintain and to defend the politics which helps them to get more of what there is to get." Ouch.

Does this fairly severe indictment mean that Jean is casting blame on privileged male political scientists? Well, yes and no:

That the majority of women in contemporary political science have been trained within and have thus adopted the very presumptions which served and still serve to legitimate sexual inequality so long as it, in turn, serves the status quo indicates the strength and power of the dominant paradigm and the distance we have to go to achieve an equitable pursuit of knowledge. So long as feminist criticism of bias in scholarship takes place within the presumptions of the dominant mode of

⁹ Jean also criticizes in some detail in 1978 what she calls "the liberal theory of abstract individualism" in Elshstain, "Existentialism and Repressive Feminism," 167-179.

political inquiry, feminist scholars will fail to create a powerful alternative framework of explanation.

Actually, Jean is just getting warmed up:

Feminist scholars must not be fooled by the few victories women have achieved in those minor skirmishes over whether Professor So-and-So's data on nonparticipation really correlates at the level claimed, or whether some other Professor So-and-So's research model or design fails to control for variables x, y, or z. Such victories are in the nature of family feuds: they occur within what Wittgenstein would call a single language game, an arena, in this instance characterized by refined and sophisticated techniques coupled with conceptual confusion. Perhaps this combination of sophistication and confusion helps to explain why so much contemporary political science is so trivial and leaves us so cold.

Ouch.

And what, when all is said and done, do these seemingly abstract quarrels about methodological first principles have to do with women and politics? For Jean, it is clear, the answer is – just about everything. Her theses in this essay, she tells us, are intended as “depth connections” seeking to disrupt and fundamentally reshape

a political discourse which has linked women traditionally to values trivialized as emotive and subjective preferences; which ties political behavior to a narrow view of rationality associated with a belief in predictable behavior (women, as irrational creatures, are shoved to the periphery of rational political behavior as thus understood); [and] which sees the polity as an aggregate set up to serve instrumental purposes or interests [and therefore also as] bifurcated conceptually and objectively from the private world of emotions, feelings, and non-instrumental relations.

What is to be done? Jean wants nothing less than for feminists and others to develop “an alternative explanatory theory” based on new criteria “as to what counts as a political activity or issue and what does not.”

A tall order, of course. But one which Jean in her own work goes some distance toward meeting, not only in this 1979 essay but also in later, longer works – one thinks particularly of Jean's 1987 book, *Women and War*, and her 2002 book, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*.¹⁰

1979 – Part Two

¹⁰ Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). See also Elshtain (ed.), *The Jane Addams Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

Also in late 1979, Jean wrote a short essay for *The Nation* entitled “Feminists Against the Family.” To this occurrence as well, for several reasons, attention must be paid.

First, consider the context. *The Nation* was then, as it remains today, distinctly a magazine of the left. In the late 1970s, the pages of the *The Nation* were chock-a-block full of arguments in support of anti-anti-communism (which is one way to be indirectly pro-communist), socialism, and various other strands of leftist and progressive thought, including left-wing feminism.

What must have been going through Associate Professor Elshtain’s mind in 1979, as she chose *The Nation*, of all places, to publish her attempted take-down of feminism’s view of the family? Well, as we’ve seen already, the young Jean could be brash. She was always cordial and never a bully, but she did not lack self-confidence, was not reticent about speaking her mind, and typically engaged with controversy, whether it be with the mainstream establishment in political science or the leading lights of radical feminism, by confronting it directly rather than searching for ways to avoid it. The brashness, then, must have been part of it.

More broadly, however, Jean seems to have believed, in good faith and with a straight face, that writing such an article for *The Nation* was a normal and natural thing to do. Jean was a feminist in good standing approaching a pro-feminist magazine with something to say about a problem within feminism. What’s so odd about that?

It’s important for us to recognize yet again that Jean was, as she still is, quite serious about her feminism, in terms of both self-identification and professional credentials, such as carrying out pro-feminist scholarship and teaching college courses on the subject. She had her union card. She could show you her scars. She had (as she has today) absolutely no interest in sitting in the back of the feminist bus.

Accordingly, maybe “brash” isn’t the best word, after all. Maybe the best word is “feminist.” Here’s a clue on this point. In her 1975 article, “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” a study in part of the internalization of ideology through which women become “the unwitting perpetrators of their own second-class status,” Jean insists that women today must and will “break through those moribund and destructive assumptions which decree and applaud female frivolousness, pettiness, narrowness of outlook, and repetitive pointlessness of purpose.” Why? Because unless women themselves develop a new and more robust “consciousness” of themselves as determined political and civic persons, “the ultimate result will not be a restructured society by a reshuffling of personnel.”¹¹

A pretty big mouthful, that – and all of it, vintage Jean. And by the way, do you get the feeling that the “girl” in Jean’s story – the girl who puts away frivolity and narrowness of outlook and instead becomes a person who is determined and unafraid and sometimes “brash” and always intellectually serious and courageous – is ... Jean? That’s what I thought, when I read those sentences from 1975. I thought: “That person is Jean.” And

¹¹ Elshtain, “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” *Politics* 10, no. 2 (November 1975): 146.

such a person, if she believed that she had something worthwhile to say about radical feminism in late 1979, might well and truly conclude that saying it in the pages of *The Nation* is not just an idea, but a *jim-dandy* idea. She might even think to herself, with a kind of inner smile: “This may cause a ruckus!”

Whether Jean herself thought it or not, the article certainly *did* cause a ruckus.¹²

She begins by asserting that “much that is exciting and fruitful” has emerged from the critiques of the family coming from feminist thinkers. She briefly tells us what that “much” consists of. But we also learn that “from the start there was something terribly wrong with much of the feminist treatment of the family.” By “wrong” does Jean mean that much of this writing is “careless and unscholarly”? Well, yes, she does mean that, but there is something more – something that is “deeply rooted and bitter.” What is most “terribly wrong” in Jean’s view is that feminist writing about the family tends to be guided by “an imperative” that can result in “mean-spirited denunciations of all relations between men and women and in expressions of contempt for the female body, for pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing.”

What is this “imperative”? It’s the imperative of naming as the primary source of women’s oppression “the sex distinction itself,” such that male *qua* male becomes the fundamental source of tyranny. The main institutional embodiment of this tyranny is the family, and for this reason, the family in much of feminist thought becomes “*the* institution to reform, revolutionize, or destroy if feminist aims are to be realized.”

Jean, by and large, will have none of it. She is no defender of the patriarchal family, but the last time she looked, we humans still tended to live in family groups, especially when children are involved, and therefore the realistic task facing progressives is not to imagine that they should or even could *deconstruct* the family, but rather to seek to *reconstruct* it in practical ways that serve the goal of human thriving.¹³ Radical feminism’s contrary imperative of an all-out “sex war, centered in the family” thwarts the possibility of achieving that humane goal.¹⁴

For Jean, the radical feminist critique of the family is an egregious example of what she calls the “politics of displacement.” It’s an important term for her, and she returns to it frequently in her writings on feminism and families. She does not like the “politics of displacement” one little bit.¹⁵ Let’s pause for a moment to grasp why it bothers her so.

¹² Elshtain, “Feminists Against the Family,” *The Nation*, November 17, 1979. This article was like a pebble dropped in a smooth pond. It produced a lot of ripples. Apparently one of them, appearing some ten years later but clearly following in the path of Jean’s 1979 article, is Christina Hoff Sommers’ excellent “Philosophers Against the Family,” which was published as a chapter in George Graham and Hugh LaFollette (eds.), *Person to Person* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

¹³ Jean more fully examines the three possible “responses” to the family crisis – retrenchment, deconstruction, and reconstruction – in Elstain, “Family Reconstruction,” *Commonweal*, August 1, 1980.

¹⁴ Jean revisits this theme – I think it may be her most recent iteration, but who can keep track of them all? – in Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 203-226.

¹⁵ In *Public Man, Private Woman*, she describes the politics of displacement as (p. 91) “volatile and dangerous,” in part because such a politics becomes (p. 242) “a substitute for real politics.”

As Jean sees it, there are times – particularly in the context of social changes and challenges that Jean takes pains to enumerate¹⁶ – in which a society’s or a group’s political gaze can move away (can be displaced) from what is causally most important, and instead focus on what is either at best of secondary importance, or on what in truth is more a symptom than a cause. A trite example may serve to illustrate. What is hurting me is a stone in my shoe. My political demand is for a new shoe. In making such a demand, I am advancing a politics of displacement.

For Jean, what is hurting women is not the existence of “the sex difference itself,” nor is it the existence of the family as a constituent institutional feature of human groups. In another publication about this same time, Jean calls for “real structural changes in American life” that empower women and support family life. She has own list of such changes – including, as we’ve just seen, a more robust political consciousness for women and a radical change in how Jean’s own profession of political science views women, politics, and values. There are plenty of others. And of course, from the outset, Jean has done more than talk the talk, make an argument. She has tried, with uncommon success, to *live* these changes. In her own life she has *done* them. In that sense, to borrow from Gandhi’s evocative plea to the world, “she *is* the change she is seeking.”

But for reasons that she is pleased to explain, Jean’s list of pro-woman social changes does *not* include a root-and-branch assault on the normative two-parent home or on the institutions of marriage and fatherhood. Quite the contrary. In her view, *those things are not the stone in a woman’s shoe*.

Listen to Jean make this point a short time later in *Public Man, Private Woman*: “It is the isolation and debasement of women under terms of male-dominated ideology and social structures that must be fought, not the activity, the humanizing imperative, of mothering, or of being a parent, itself.” The family, at least at its best, *humanizes* us. Among other things, as Jean puts it in *The Nation*, the “family, however shakily or imperfectly, helps to keep alive an alternative to the values which dominate in the marketplace.” For this reason, Jean suggests, true critics of the free market (such as readers of *The Nation*) should seek to support and reconstruct, not simply eviscerate, one of the few institutions left in our society that does not meekly imitate the market’s logic or bow down subserviently before its dictates.

Ultimately, Jean is so vexed by feminism’s “politics of displacement” regarding the family because, as a political scientist, what matters most to Jean is *real* politics, not phony politics, or what Jean in this essay in *The Nation* calls “pseudo-politics.” Real politics stands a chance of producing real change. Pseudo-politics – politics as misplaced anger, or as what Bob Dylan in one of his songs calls “phony false alarms” – not only seldom produces real change, but can actually thwart the possibility of such change, again in ways that Jean is more than happy to enumerate.

¹⁶ *Public Man, Private Woman*, 91.

Remember also that, for Jean, this worry about political displacement is nothing new. In fact, the issue seems to fit nicely with her basic temperament, as someone who prizes rigorous thought and intensively guards against conceptual sloppiness and the conflation or confusion of categories. Recall, for example, that first Elshtain essay, from the spring of 1972, in which we learn that Kate Millet's writing reveals "a certain confusion of categories" and in which the young Jean, trying to clear up some of this confusion, proffers the distinction between "revolutionary ideas" and "purportedly revolutionary ideas." The former, it seems, sometimes command Jean's allegiance and always command her interest. The latter, I think it's fair to say, she holds in contempt – or at the very least, if we need to put it more mildly, these are ways of thinking that hold absolutely no allure for her.

Here we can finally discern, I think it's fair to say, Jean's deepest and most heart-felt complaint against radical feminism. It's not just that they haven't read enough (though they haven't). It's not just that they are "terribly wrong" about the family (though they are). And it's not just that such undisciplined, displaced anger against the Other can turn inward, on the self, in ugly and distorting ways (though it can).

Jean's ultimate beef with these folk is that they can bark, but not bite. Intellectually, they are phonies. As Jean put it in 1978, "of all theories of women's liberation, radical feminism claims the most but offers the least." And as she puts it in this essay in *The Nation*, radical feminism "has become linked up in the popular mind with efforts to erode or destroy the meaning and relations of family life *in the absence of any workable alternative*" (emphasis in original).¹⁷

"Feminists Against the Family" caused quite a stir. Nearly six months after its publication, *The Nation* devoted a sizable portion of its April 5, 1980, issue to readers' responses to Jean's piece – the magazine having, as the editors put it, "held off publishing until we had sufficient space." Almost all of the responses were highly critical. Amazingly, some of these respondents continue to this day to press their case against Jean's view of this matter, whenever the opportunity arises.

As I try to look back on it, it seems that 1979 was a pretty good year of work for University of Massachusetts Associate Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain. In the name of serious feminist scholarship, she thumbed her nose, methodologically speaking, at virtually the entire establishment of her chosen profession. And marching under the same banner, she managed thoroughly to piss off nearly every radical feminist in the country, and a few more of their friends besides. And last, but certainly not least, she worked toward the conclusion of *Public Man, Private Woman*. Not a bad way to end a decade.

¹⁷ Elshtain, "Existentialism and Repressive Feminism," 166. In this essay Jean also argues (p. 185) that this current of feminist thought "offers to women symbols of denial in the guise of liberation" and, flowing from that critique, warns that "the hour is late" and that we must enable ourselves "to distinguish genuine from bogus movements for social change."

Postscript: Staying the Course

When I first met Jean, in the late 1980s, her most intensive and creative work on feminism and families was largely behind her. I do not mean that she stopped thinking and writing about these topics. (Is there in fact *any* topic of which it can be fairly said that Jean has stopped thinking and writing?) But I do mean that, at certain point, one essentially finishes saying what one wants to say about a subject; after that, the main intellectual tasks are public repetition, elaboration, and occasional revision in light of new evidence; and that for Jean, regarding the once nearly all-consuming topics of feminism, women, and families, that turning point seems to have been reached about 1990.

There were exceptions, of course. Her wonderful book on Jane Addams, for example, came out in 2002. But in the main, after having stirred the pot quite dramatically throughout the 1970s and 1980s on the subject of Women, Jean largely moved on, somewhat in succession, to those three other (and equally pint-sized) topics – War, Democracy, and God. Yes, Women remained a key part of the increasingly famed Elshstain Portfolio. But the portfolio as a whole expanded rapidly after the late 1980s, and most of the growth was in new directions.

At the same time, beginning in the late 1980s, Jean gave deeply and selflessly of herself in helping me and a few others (including William Galston, Mary Ann Glendon, Norval Glenn, David Popenoe, Barbara Whitehead, and Judith Wallerstein) to start a new project of collaborative research and interdisciplinary deliberation – what we called a Council on Families, charged with the goal of thinking freshly and with new urgency about families, marriage, and children in the United States. And to house and administer this Council on Families, Jean and I and the others organized a new think tank, the Institute for American Values. Jean has chaired every single meeting of our Council on Families, and has labored carefully over every one of its reports. For many years she has also served as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Institute for American Values. She continues in that role today. (I serve as the Institute’s president.)

One way, then, for me personally to think about Jean is that, at the very moment twenty years ago that I was rapidly getting into the family issue, Jean was slowly getting out. Yet, to work with her during those years, one would never really have known that fact. On this cluster of issues, Jean stayed the course. She kept working.

And she keeps working on this issue. She writes articles for both the scholarly and popular press. She talks to journalists. She pulls academic consultations together. She mentors younger scholars and writers. She travels endlessly, giving speech after speech on this topic to scholarly, civic, political, and religious audiences across the country, and even the world. I’ve heard her give them. They are brilliant and brash and funny. It’s like she’s saying it all for the first time.

She never complains; she is cheerful in all weathers. One morning several years ago, she phoned me from some airport somewhere, having just boarded a plane for New York, where she was scheduled to give a keynote address later in the day to a gathering of

scholarly and journalistic big-shots that our Council on Families had pulled together. But, while trying to hoist her bag into the plane's overhead compartment, she had twisted her knee – the knee of the “good” leg, the one that had not been weakened by childhood polio. I could tell that she was in severe pain. Could I call a doctor, she asked, and have the doctor meet her at the airport? She explained that there was no time to go to a hospital, fill out forms, get x-rays, etc. All that she needed was a quick shot of cortisone in the twisted knee, and she would be good to go for her keynote address. She could fill out forms and get examined later. All of which, amazingly enough, is exactly what happened. That's what I mean when I resort to possibly thin-sounding phrases such as hard work, dedication, high spirits and standards, and no complaining to describe who Jean is.

In these respects, forever young.

-end-

This paper was written in 2010 for the conference, “Public and Private: Feminism, Marriage, and Family in Political Thought and Contemporary Life,” held at the University of Chicago Divinity School on February 25-26, 2010, as the first in a series of conferences entitled “The Engaged Mind,” aimed at examining the work of Jean Bethke Elshtain.