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GENTILITY, GENDER, AND POLITICAL PROTEST The Barbara Bush Controversy at Wellesley College

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Using 452 letters sent in 1990 to Wellesley College over a student petition objecting to the choice of Barbara Bush as the graduation speaker, this article explores how an attempt to expand the boundaries of elite women's political behavior created a cultural and symbolic battle that centered upon the content of education, women's "manners" and civility, and their implications for elite women's participation in the broader Hobbesian social contract for citizenship. The article demonstrates that social class in its gendered form is essential to understanding the construction of citizenship.

The debate over the gendered nature of citizenship has been central to feminist struggles of the last century: On what basis would women of different social classes and races be allowed entry into public political discourse (Baker 1990; Cott 1987)? The debate is not merely a historical one over whether women can have a political voice; it is about how class (and race) continue to shape the different possibilities for this voice. This class aspect of gendered citizenship is founded upon assumptions about how the seemingly private behavior of women should shape their public voice. How women demonstrate the relationship between private behavior and public voice is learned in many different institutions in our society. For women who stay in, or attempt to enter, the upper class, the elite women's colleges have historically been one of the key sites where it is assumed this learning of appropriate behavior and voice will take place.

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Graduates of the elite women's colleges are expected to learn to be cultural carriers of a form of gentility that has been the basis for upper-class women's entrée into public discourse, as the recent posthumous adulation accorded to Rose Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis makes clear. It is women of the upper class, social scientists have argued (Baltzell 1979; Daniels 1988; Domhoff 1970; Ostrander 1984), who are expected to maintain the gendered class structure by the "setting of social and cultural standards for the rest of the population to admire and emulate" (Domhoff 1970, 34-35). The particular role of women studied by Ostrander (1984) and Daniels (1988) examines their volunteer activities and careers, the "invisible work" (Daniels 1988) that links the public and private worlds. Their research does not focus on women's participation in political activities, except as they form part of a volunteer career, nor does it explore how elite women's colleges transmit social class through modeling appropriate forms of behavior that connect the public and private realms.

At the elite women's colleges, the knowledge that students are supposed to accumulate is as much about behavior as it is about book learning, even if the form of this knowledge has been continually debated (Faragher and Howe 1988; Horowitz 1984; Solomon 1985). Colleges, just like primary and secondary schools, are expected to have "hidden curriculums" that teach appropriate class and gender behavior.

Using a highly publicized student political protest that took place at Wellesley College, we explore how an attempt to expand the boundaries of elite women's political behavior created a cultural and symbolic battle that centered upon the content of education, women's "manners" and civility, and their implications for elite women's participation in the broader Hobbesian social contract for citizenship. In 1990, 26 percent of the college's seniors signed a petition to protest the selection of First Lady Barbara Bush as the commencement speaker. The students saw the choice of Barbara Bush as a challenge to their gender expectations to be independent women and their interpretation of Wellesley's hidden curriculum. A widespread media-generated debate that followed focused upon what appeared to be a generational conflict over the changing valence of motherhood, selfless family life, and paid employment; however, an analysis of 452 letters written to the college about the conflict reveals how much gendered political structures and social class are discursively supported and underlie the public's consciousness of appropriate behavior for "elite," or soon-to-become elite, women.[1] When the students protested Barbara Bush, they broke the "silent" code that defined, limited, and circumscribed gendered class-based political behavior. It was this transgression that brought them and Wellesley's "teaching" into public consciousness.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONTROVERSY

Graduation marks a transition over which the commencement speaker symbolically presides. The choice of the speaker thus becomes a way an institution signals how it will be sending its graduates into the world and who they should become.

In this regard, the commencement speaker represents a future way of life and the institution's best hopes for its students. In the nineteenth century, it was usually clergymen who oversaw this ritual and provided the spiritual and ethical mantle to cover the graduates. In a more secular time, popular cultural and political figures have taken on this role by their very being, rather than what they actually say, reflecting what historian Warren Susman labeled the twentieth-century emphasis on "personality rather than character" (Susman 1979).

The Barbara Bush controversy began simply enough. Unlike other colleges and universities where the administration chooses the commencement speakers, seniors at Wellesley select and rank order their preferences by vote, although the results of the balloting are kept secret. The president of the college then invites the highest vote getter, going down the list until someone accepts. Reflecting the range of political beliefs at the college, the 1990 senior class chose author Alice Walker, who accepted in December and then rescinded shortly thereafter. Barbara Bush was invited next. The college's administration announced she was the commencement speaker in early March; by mid-March a petition signed by 150 seniors of diverse social backgrounds was sent to the college's president, Nannerl O. Keohane. It read:

> We, the undersigned, as concerned Senior Class members, are disappointed at the final results of the Commencement Speaker Selection process. We are outraged by this choice and feel it is important to make ourselves heard immediately. Wellesley teaches us that we will be rewarded on the basis of our own merit, not on that of a spouse. To honor Barbara Bush as a commencement speaker is to honor a woman who has gained recognition through the achievements of her husband, which contradicts what we have been taught over the last four years at Wellesley. Regardless of her political affiliation, we feel that she does not successfully exemplify the qualities that Wellesley seeks to instill in us.
>
> We realize that retracting our offer to Mrs. Bush at this time would be discourteous. Therefore, we propose extending an invitation to an additional speaker who would more aptly reflect the self-affirming qualities of a Wellesley graduate.

The campus story of the petition was picked up by a local suburban newspaper, then broke in the Boston Globe and went out on the AP wire. Editorials and opinion pieces, television interviews, letters to the editor, cartoons, and President George Bush's comments on it at a press conference made the protest national, even international, news. Mrs. Bush's invitation was never rescinded, as some media commentators assumed the students wanted. By coincidence, and not in response to the students, Mrs. Bush announced in April she was also bringing Raisa Gorbachev, the wife of the president of the Soviet Union, who would be accompanying her husband to the United States on his state visit. The graduation was held on June 1, 1990, and was carried live by television stations and was covered by an enormous retinue of reporters from around the world.

Over 7,000 print-medium stories were filed worldwide on this protest. Prompted by the news stories and President Bush's comments that his wife would make a fine commencement speaker, Wellesley College received 452 letters over a six-month period about some aspect of the controversy.[2]

METHODS AND LETTER WRITING

Letter writing, a well-honored political tradition in American society, is a way for people to voice their opinions. The majority of the 452 letters from both alumnae and the general public that constitute the basis for this article were sent to the college's administration, mainly the president. Writers assumed that the institution was responsible and should be held accountable for the students' petition and their behavior. Only 6 percent of the letters were addressed directly to the students; an additional 3 percent were copies sent to the students. The letters were primarily in response to print journalism and secondarily in response to TV coverage.

These letters were individual acts. There is no formulaic quality to the letters or any indication of a letter writing campaign, unlike in other contemporary attempts to sway political opinion. The letters came from 46 states, representing urban, suburban, and rural locales, as well as from other countries. Traditional demographic variables are less easily ascertained from letters. Few writers mentioned either race, political affiliation, martial status, or age.

We were able to code for sex of the letter writer and affiliation to Wellesley College, which in the case of alumnae, we used as an approximate substitute for age. Of the 452 letters, 75 percent were written by women and 19 percent were written by men. (Another 1 percent of the letters were joint letters written by spouses. In 4 percent of the letters, we could not tell the sex of the writer.) Except on a few issues noted in this article, gender was not statistically significant in explaining the letter writers' views. When we divided the letters by the writer's stated connection to Wellesley College, we found that 37 percent of the letters came from writers who indicated that they were alumnae. In a smaller group of letters (7.5 percent), the writers identified a college connection as parents of children at the college or friends of alumnae, but the largest group of letters (55 percent) were written by nonalumnae, both men and women; therefore, the letters do not reflect merely a debate within the Wellesley College "family," but touched a wider societal nerve. Unlike in many public forums where the voice is usually male, in this epistolary form, it was primarily women who were debating with one another.

The alumnae signified their connection to the college by signing their letters with their graduation year. This allowed us to make a close approximation of the alumnae writers' ages. Among the alumnae, over 75 percent of the letters are from older alumnae (Classes of 1920-59); 23.5 percent are from more recent classes (1960-90). We cannot assume that the age distribution of alumnae reflected the age distribution of the nonalumnae.

Among alumnae, we suspect that those who have the ear of the president and others in the administration called; by contrast, alienated alumnae are not likely to write.[3] Among alumnae, those who wrote probably fell somewhere in the middle, feeling in some way attached to the institution. In the body of this article, we indicate which letters were written by alumnae in the sentences introducing the quotes.

Letterheads and signatures were the indicators of the writers' basis of authority for voicing an opinion: While alumnae signed their letters with their year of

graduation to signify connection to the institution, nonalumnae often used titles (marital and work) or wrote other statements of who they were in order to convey to the reader why their letter should be read and their viewpoint taken seriously. (Alumnae also used titles, but their graduation year was foremost as their basis for authority.) In addition to coding for demographic variables, we coded the content of the letters using a standard grounded theory approach to develop the codes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). We coded the letters based on actual language used by the writers, similar to the way researchers code field notes. Through analyzing the content of the letters, major themes or topics emerged. In the majority of letters, we could clearly ascertain the writer's general position on a topic (or topics), coding each topic as ranging from negative to positive. Each major coded topic forms a section of this article.

The letters varied in content: Some letters were long and about many topics; other were short and addressed only one issue. Unlike a survey where a person is responding to a set of questions that can then be compared and reported in the aggregate, letter writers wrote what they wanted in response to widely disparate media coverage. This means that the number of letters on a particular topic varies. For instance, 40 percent of the letters included a personal narrative. In each section, only those letters that contain material on a given topic will be discussed.

PROTEST AND MANNERS

Three-quarters of those who wrote to Wellesley were more concerned about the student protest itself than Barbara Bush's acceptability as the commencement speaker: The behavior of the students, not merely women's generational "choices" for marriage versus career, was the impetus for the letters. Of the letter writers who addressed the student protest, 77 percent objected to the students' behavior; only 23 percent supported it. Letter writers opposed to the students' position most frequently mentioned their outrage (26.3 percent) and distress or shock (27 percent) because they felt either that a first lady should not be treated this way or that the students' "ill-breeding" allowed them to attempt to rescind an invitation that had already been extended (even though the student petition clearly did not ask for this). An additional 20 percent expressed embarrassment or shame over the students' behavior and the college faculty and administration's acceptance of this form of dissent. Nonalumnae were also likely to support Barbara Bush as the speaker, criticizing the student behavior as negative. The alumnae opinions were more mixed, but generational differences were not significant; that is, older alumnae were as likely to support or condemn the student protests as were the younger cohorts.

Many of the letter writers conflate education at an elite women's college with character training. Such a conflation is not historically inaccurate. Wellesley, as with many of the other seven sister schools founded in the late nineteenth century, was established with the mission of infusing Christian women's virtue into education. Character training that fitted young women for elite behavior was considered as central to the college's duty as was the effort to create a curriculum that could rival Harvard's (Hertz and Reverby 1992; Horowitz 1984). Well into the twentieth century, alumnae of the elite women's schools "recalled that they absorbed gentility and manners while at college" (Solomon 1985, 170). Wellesley, until the mid-1960s, required a course on the Bible and posture training in physical education, practiced "gracious living" in its dorms, and taught its students how to get groceries into the back of a station wagon without exposing their thighs.

If behavior and appropriate manners are still conceived of as knowledge in women's education, then indeed the protesting students can be perceived as failing the college's most important "hidden curriculum." On the surface, the letter writers' anger sounds like the students had flunked a manners' training course. For such writers, the students had betrayed the historical mission of the college to perpetuate upper-class manners that should shape elite's women's private behavior and public discourse (Daniels 1988; Ostrander 1984). One letter writer who supported the students captured this when she wrote, "Older women felt they were not 'polite,' but the issues they raised were important and substantial. It was not a tea party." For many of the writers, however, there was no difference between how you behaved when invited to a tea party and how you voiced your differences on political questions, no difference between private and political/public behavior. For them, the private realm is their public existence and the tea party is not a "private" affair. Conversely, what would be construed as political was also seen as covered by private behavior.

Manners, because they reflect on power relationships and respect, are ultimately political acts. Barbara Bush understood this quite well. A biographical sketch of her noted that her persona is partly a function of beautiful manners (Williams 1992, 124). In contrast, many of the letter writers thought the students did not share this understanding and, put simply, lacked civility. In the letters, 68 percent commented on the students' protest, describing it in the following ways: as rude (11 percent), ill-mannered (9 percent), inappropriate values (15 percent), arrogant (11 percent), showing no common sense (7 percent), or exhibiting bad judgment (14 percent). In addition, in 20 letters the writers saw the students' action as so negative that they wrote to say an apology to Mrs. Bush was necessary. As one alumna wrote, "We learned that there can be more than one point of view, but that differences should be handled in good taste. This group apparently hasn't learned about being gracious when that point of view doesn't prevail." Another irate letter writer declared, "I would like to add my name to the group of women in this country who are ashamed of the behavior of your rude class of 1990 regarding Barbara Bush. Women of privilege supposed intelligence are adult spoiled brats! Marvelous!"

For some of the letter writers, Barbara Bush symbolized a kind of wifely purity, separate from politics even though her husband was the president. By criticizing Mrs. Bush as an appropriate commencement speaker, the students placed her squarely in the world of political life. Just as second wave feminists had argued that the "personal is political," the student protest made the structure of women's lives part of the mainstream political terrain. The students, by "dragging" Mrs. Bush into a politicized arena, unveiled the gossamer curtain that ideologically hides the family and private life from the seemingly public world. Such an unveiling deeply

offended many who had seen Mrs. Bush's symbolic position as a reflection of this acceptable division, not as part of a two-person political career (Papanek 1975)—a controversial position that First Lady and Wellesley alumna Hillary Rodham Clinton presently confronts.

Others wrote about politics in a more conventional, party-based sense. Using the stationery from her Cunard Line cruise, one letter writer picked up on a familiar Republican theme and described the students as "ill-bred liberals." Others used the expected presence of Raisa Gorbachev to attack the "godless Russians." One woman declared: "How dare that college insult our very gracious First Lady, Barbara Bush? How dare you?! Mrs. Bush is *the* educator . . . certainly not Madame Roushkie . . . thank goodness. This has turned off millions . . . enjoy it." With the linkage of Mrs. Gorbachev to the event, writers were able to tie together women's liberal behavior and "godless" communism.[4] While the cold war may have been cooling, the war over women's roles continued and employed its rhetoric (Enloe 1993).

The tone of the negative letter writers suggests that it is not appropriate for proper women to express dissatisfaction publicly once an invitation has been extended. In her response to the letter writers, Wellesley College's then president, political scientist Nannerl O. Keohane, noted that Wellesley does teach students about the first amendment and the importance of free speech in American society. One 1938 alumnae offered a more complicated political analysis:

> Very likely there could have been a more appropriate choice of speaker than Barbara Bush and surely students are free to express their point of view on this as on any question. These were not the factors which caused the negative reaction among people I know. Instead, the disappointment and criticism centered on the failure of the students to follow the time-honored tradition, after defeat in a fair vote, of publicly controlling disappointment and gracefully accepting the will of the majority.

While accepting the right of dissent, this alumna felt the students had broken acceptable social norms that link women's private and public behaviors.

Even after the commencement, the letters continued a dialogue about women's right to protest. One recent alumnae, Class of 1989, reminded the students that even traditional, if unpopular, points of view should be heard and that women should not silence other women because it will undermine both women's and all human rights:

> There seem to be some Wellesley women who believe that other Wellesley women should not be allowed to voice their opinion if it disagrees with their own.
>
> Dangerous I thought. For years I have been fighting for the right to speak my mind regardless of its content, and now I find that individuals that I would consider my own "kind" (and who I thought were fighting for that right along side me) will condemn me if I happen to have a different opinion. They are "embarrassed" and "ashamed" by this achievement. Why?
>
> I should think that they would be proud that women of any "kind" could finally feel secure enough in themselves and within society that they could voice their opinions without fear of retribution and backlash and be prepared to deal confidently with opponents and exploiters.

Those defending the students wrote to say they felt proud or respected the students for their protest (20 percent). Similarly, these supporters saw the students as courageous (5 percent), assertive and outspoken (4 percent), and exhibiting good judgment (4 percent). For instance, the parent of a Wellesley student wrote:

> I think that the young women who made the protest had some very valid comments. Furthermore, it took a lot of courage to make such a protest, particularly when it involved a very popular woman. Being popular does not equate to being right. . . . I admire the ability of Wellesley young women to think for themselves and to speak up for themselves. I am very pleased that my daughter is going to college in such an environment.

An alumna from the Class of 1955 wrote directly to the protesting students:

> Please, please, don't be intimidated into silence or complacency, as you join the outside world without even the support of your fellow alumnae. It is unfortunately not true that the next time will be easier. For the next time, and the next, and the next, you will most likely be standing up alone and not on the shoulders of 149 other students. But, just as we have tried to make your travels easier, you must continue to stand up and fight for what you believe is right.

The Bush controversy reinvigorated the historical debate over the role of women in American civic life and political culture. Western political theory has had difficulty devising "any mode by which women might have a political impact on government or fulfill their obligations to it" (Zagarri 1992, 192) because so much of the theory conceives of the civic and domestic realms as separate (Hawkesworth 1990; Helly and Reverby 1992; Kerber 1980). Indeed, feminist theorists have argued that the separation of the public/civic realm and the private/domestic was necessary to the very establishment of liberal theory, since, as both Hegel and Rousseau argued, "as guardians of the private realm of need, desire and affectivity, women must ensure that men's impulses do not remove them from the universality of reason" (Young 1990, 100-101). This containment was seen as women's civic work.

Manners are central to the carrying out of this civic/political culture. In teaching and demonstrating refined tastes and behaviors, it was argued that "manners . . . ultimately helped reconcile the individual with the duties of citizenship. Manners thus implied something far more profound than the way a person held his or her teacup" (Zagarri 1992, 200-201). While it was always assumed that refined and educated women could play a political role, they were to do so as "ladies." When the antisuffragists mounted their arguments against women's entry into citizenship through the vote in the nineteenth century, their "most powerful argument was that suffrage was dangerous because it threatened the existence of separate spheres. If women voted, they would abandon the home and womanly virtue" (Baker 1990, 69). When women gained the vote, the antisuffragists were right: They did lose "their place above politics and their position as the force of moral order" (Baker 1990, 69).

Barbara Bush seemed to rise above this: to be an old-fashioned lady retaining the silent code of manners and "the force of moral order." By questioning her

appropriateness, the students thus attacked a symbol of a seemingly easier political time and highlighted the trade-offs for public life that women appear to have made in the twentieth century.

If politics were gender neutral, the Bush/Wellesley debate might never have been as vituperative. The students merely circulated a petition, a form of protest central to the American tradition and certainly to the American campus. They did not stage a sit-in at the president's office, show up with guns at the student union, or interfere with the running of the college in any way, but they did step outside of what many thought was appropriate female political/personal behavior as it has evolved within this liberal democracy, indeed outside womanhood itself.

Ultimately, what the protesting students did was break the genteel code that expects women, especially elite women, to suffer in silence when they disagree or are offended by someone's political or personal statements. Similarly, Daniels (1988, 52-53) argues that in voluntary organizations, elite women are not supposed to act assertively or protest decisions they do not like. The outrage about the protest revealed how slowly political beliefs about women shift even when underlying economic and social realities have changed. Unknowingly, the students' attempt to enter the public political sphere as ungendered was thwarted.

EDUCATION FOR REAL WOMANHOOD

Gendered class behavior in its multiple forms was the key element underlying the controversy. While a majority of the letter writers addressed the protest directly, differences over what the Wellesley students thought their lives should become, and therefore their objection to Barbara Bush, were also salient. Unlike the coeducational universities, there is still a cultural belief that the elite women's colleges have a special mission to instill the importance of *noblesse oblige* and to value familial duty. While certain cohorts of Wellesley graduates contain members who became "career women," the emphasis on earning a college degree was not for careerist purposes until the recent era. Many of the letter writers thought the language of the petition demonstrated Wellesley's value shift toward a seemingly selfish, individualist, careerist woman who would no longer serve as an appropriate role model for American womanhood. As one irate nonalumna argued, "I fear for the country when these two-dimensional Barbie Dolls encounter real life. God knows if they ever can become real women like Barbara Bush."

Over a third of the letter writers believed that the protest would negatively affect the college's reputation as a training ground for "real women" to instill gendered character as much as intellectual knowledge. Words like the college's failure to make its students "real women" or "well-rounded" pepper the letters. Well-rounded did not mean courses in English and Physics; rather, as one nonalumna argued,

> In spite of how disgraceful this seems, at least one enormous good has come from it. It clearly shows that Wellesley's great desire to train women to take their position of leadership in the world has gradually, subtly become destroyed to such an extent that the Wellesley educated woman does not see an achievement in the role of "best supporting actress." Unless one takes the lead one is of no value!
>
> The fact that one has gently encouraged another from the background to become the leading political figure in our government or that one has given birth to and nurtured five young human beings into happy, healthy productive lives, in turn raising families of their own, is a Non-Value. "She has achieved nothing on her own." What an incredible insult! What a totally selfish, distorted point of view we must be nurturing at the College.
>
> And now this emphasis on self is out in the open for all the World to see. What a disgrace for Wellesley. Who in their right mind would support this kind of education?

Letter writers questioned, like the woman quoted above, whether education at a women's institution had distorted the students' beliefs to only value professional work. One alumna declared, "By all means let us hear from those volunteers who have invested not in the stock market but in the character and quality of life around them." Such letters reflect a deep societal uncomfortableness with women who accept the seemingly white middle-class masculine prototype of devotion to career, which is then interpreted by the media (and by extension the letter writers) as devotion to self. An alumna from the Class of 1970 wrote, "The implications that women are worthy of honor only if they have 'gained recognition' in the traditional male sense saddens me. Surely this is not what Wellesley is teaching."

Almost one third of the letters mention that there are differing expectations for Wellesley women that set them apart: "elite," "scholarly," "intelligent." Interestingly, nonalumnae were more likely to attack the students for their "character," using the words "self-righteous" and "spoiled" in addition to "intelligent." Alumnae by contrast mentioned "intelligence" and focused less on the "self-righteousness" because, presumably, to attack the students directly was to attack themselves.

For those angered by the Wellesley students' protest, a Wellesley education became equated with a narrow feminist position that emerged out of one part of the women's movement in the 1970s. An alumna from the class of 1933, clearly exasperated by this "change" at the college, opposed "Wellesley's at first *gradual*, now plummeting race toward radical feminism, anti-conservatism, anti-majority emphasis—in short, toward blatant liberal expressionism on all fronts." Questioning how this way of thinking could occur, many letters writers asked, "How sad these ladies are so warped on what "success" is. How narrow-minded they are. How did they get this way? Is the school to blame?" Others focused the blame on "feminist courses" that the writers thought filled students' minds with the glories of careers and the drudgery of family life. Another nonalumna suggested, "Obviously your students have learned to be progressive and feminist and have not been taught values. My suggestion to you would be to review the courses you are offering and take a good look at the type of person you have shaped."

As with the comments on political voice, again many letter writers seemed concerned that for women to be valued for paid work and individual effort was to only accept materialist standards for success. As one nonalumna writer asked, "What level of arrogance has the Sisterhood of Wellesley College achieved with its latest pronouncement? . . . Is their measure of the worth of human life based on

the size of the paycheck, and are these truly the values that our institutions of higher learning foster?" Forty percent of the letter writers addressed the balancing of women's contribution to hearth, home, community, and paid workplaces. The value of "composing a life," as Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) dubbed it, that focused on spouse and children without mentioning career or paid employment characterized the majority of these letters. As another alumna writer declared, "If this is what Wellesley is all about (selfish, greedy, yuppies) then God help us all! They are probably the female Mike Milkens [*sic*] of the 90s."

A nonalumna equated the "closed minded behavior of students who don't want to hear from a housewife" as an example of what Allan Bloom (1987) identified as "the closing of the American mind." With a more conservative tone, ironically, these letter writers tended to emphasize "choice" and the need to "open" the mind by attacking the choice of the students for career as a value. Despite the use of the term *choice*, they assumed the students were being directed toward careers by the college's faculty and administration.

Many of the letter writers, regardless of their connection to the institution, were deeply troubled by what they saw happening at Wellesley and to its students. A letter writer summarized this dilemma rather inelegantly by asking rhetorically, "Are you stupidly teaching students or are you teaching stupid students?" The alumnae tended to focus on what they perceived as the college's shifting curriculum and institutional ethos, rather than the students' character. For a majority of the alumnae who wrote in, the institution became the surrogate for a feminist social change they perceived as detrimental to society. In this regard, these alumnae were attacking the institution as the agent of social change and the students' behavior became the product of this change. In contrast, the nonalumnae, with less personal ties to the college, did not separate out the institution from its students.

The social class makeup of the college and its students, and anger toward this, was also addressed in the letters. While Wellesley today has a class, race, and ethnically diverse student body, stereotypes of the college's students as eastern, white, Protestant, upper class, elite, and from money persist, as the nation's moviegoers and television watchers learned from *Working Girl*, *Designing Women*, *The Trials of Rosie O'Neal*, and *Housesitter*. The Bush controversy thus gave some of the letter writers a chance to vent their class anger. The class privilege of the students was addressed as when one 87-year-old nonalumna declared, "just because one can afford to go to Wellesley does that give them the right to be judge and jury about another person? . . . My granddaughters turned out to be extremely fine women as they had good 'home raising.' . . . I'm ashamed of a fine school—what do you teach the girls?" Others who felt that Wellesley should allow only "refined" women into it attacked the "ungrateful" students and used the non-American citizenship of one of the student protest leaders as a foil for a xenophobic and racist attack.

Ultimately, the arguments about Wellesley reflected the expectation that the college should "finish" its students into a molded set of proper ladies whose public behavior matched the expectations for womanhood of an earlier and class-specific

societal stratum. It was not just the alumnae who felt their Wellesley had been despoiled; Wellesley in the imagination of the majority of the letter writers required a kind of behavior and life course the students appeared to have violated.

NARRATING A LIFE

Forty percent of the letters directly addressed the generational conflict over the meaning and value of different definitions of womanhood. As one woman wrote:

> These young women are saying to those of us who do not fit their pattern that we are not producing anything of value. How sad. . . . I hope they understand that by saying Barbara Bush doesn't "qualify" is saying to most women in America that they don't qualify either. How sad. . . . Ah—does money put a value on our choices. How sad.

These writers wanted their own personal narratives validated more than expecting that the students would actually live their lives as the writers had. While the media stories saw this almost in Greek tragedy terms as the daughters turning on their mothers, the "mothers" who wrote primarily wanted the students to know it was possible to have a full life without a professional career. They communicated this through long narratives. These writers claimed their own experiences as their source of knowledge about women's lives—something social scientists are just beginning to admit and do themselves (Behar 1993; Fine 1992; Smith 1987).

The writers were conveying to the students through their own personal narratives the belief that women who are caregivers and place the needs of other family members first, like Barbara Bush, are appropriate role models. As one woman wrote:

> This [the student rejection of Barbara Bush] implies that Mrs. Bush, because she did not have a career of her own, is therefore a lesser person. Young women who are graduating from college today view the immediate future. However, they neglect to realize that they, too, may one day be wives and mothers and may have to sublimate their own desires for their families.

Or as another woman lectured the college, "Being wife and mother is not a dishonorable occupation. Or perhaps you made no effort to teach it. More's the pity!" Another nonalumna, who mentioned her age as 52, wrote her letter on her husband's professional letterhead and added:

> I take great offense at the stand you have taken regarding Mrs. Barbara Bush and the manner in which she has chosen to live her life. She, like many others of us, received our educations but chose, instead of making our "mark" in those professions, to instead "stay home" and raise our families. . . . I do not feel as if I have taken a secondary role but instead feel I have been an adjunct to my husband professionally and socially. Mrs. Bush did not become President of the U.S.A. but she, by her example and efforts, has added greatly to her husband's elections. To casually brush away all of the great work Barbara Bush has done is totally unfair on your part.

The theme of generational issues in the letters ranged from the point that women are not a uniform group to the necessity to understand a different generation's

options. Almost a third of the writers chided the students for their ahistorical understanding of women's lives; many wrote poignant statements of their own experiences and the situations they faced in the interwar years. One nonalumna, who pointed out the importance of historical context, wrote, "Please explain to those rebelling students that times were different back then. For many men it hurt their egos to have their wife work if they didn't need to. I'm not saying that's right. It 's just the way some men were." Other letter writers clearly saw the effort they had put in to make their marriages survive and their children prosper as publicly acknowledged hard work. Rather than accept the label of "victim" they perceive to be handed to them by feminism, they used this debate to claim their societal position as subjects, if not heroes, of their own lives (Gordon 1988).

FEMINISM

While the term *feminism* or any vague reference to it appeared in only 17 percent of the letters, questions about what feminism is supposed to be figured saliently. The students were accused of taking a narrow feminist position that equated women with men. To simply be like men is not the point of feminism, as one woman explained:

> To me feminism is more than just finding the women who succeed by male standards: it is also about redefining what is important. It is not, or should not be, about rejecting motherhood and family, but about rejecting the notions that motherhood is all we are capable of and that family is all we should care about. Otherwise, all we have done is trade one set of constrictions for another.

Such letters reflected an effort to elevate the value of caring, mothering, and other forms of unpaid "women's work." These writers accepted an understanding of equal as different that rejected the standard of the paycheck as a measure of all things, but they attempted in many cases to do more than cloak women's lives in the sentimentality of Ozzie and Harriet. As social scientists Marjorie DeVault (1991) and Micaela di Leonardo (1987) have argued, the work of raising a family and keeping it connected to kin and friends cannot be analytically understood in the same terms as paid work or love. While the letter writers are obviously not creating categories of analysis, the content of the letters points toward the continued need to create a language that better captures both what women do and how they experience it. Ironically, both the academic and public focus on caregiving occurs at a time when fewer and fewer American women can afford to be outside the paid labor force and more American families do not have two parents living in the same household.

However, the letter writers do use the liberal feminist language of "choice" to deride the students for limiting other women's choices. One young nonalumna wrote:

> It is my choice at the moment to be a houseperson and to actively support my husband's career. I have been unable to understand the amount of disapproval coming from many of my peers because of this decision! Isn't feminism about providing choices? Choices about the way you live, when you have children, to marry or not to? How do people like Mrs. Bush fail because they choose to live the way they do? I don't think they (we—because I do this) fail at all. Is the choice to volunteer a betrayal of the women's movement? Does it say that the woman who chooses a more "traditional" way of living doesn't value the years of struggle on the part of the women who worked to give her this choice? I don't think so.

As numerous feminist theorists have pointed out, of course, there are social class, sexuality, and race assumptions built into the very use of the language of choice. Many of the letter writers assume that women choose to be mothers, choose to be helpers to their husbands, choose not to participate in the labor market. While many of the writers understand that historical circumstances shape the possibilities for women, almost none of the writers concern themselves with the other constraints that make "choice" either a privilege or societally determined (Hurtado 1989; Petchesky 1990).

Only a small percentage of the letter writers opposed Barbara Bush as the commencement speaker (10 percent). Reasons for this opposition were either because she was not a good role model or because of her connection to the Reagan/Bush administrations. These letter writers agreed with the students that Barbara Bush was not a good role model as a commencement speaker since she had no career of her own. Echoing the students' arguments, these letters were typified by a young nonalumna who wrote to the students: "The inarguable fact is that she was selected because she is sleeping with a very highly placed official on Capitol Hill. To value a woman by her husband's accomplishments is a pre-1950s notion that is better left to that era. You did right to question it." Another writer, who noted she grew up "without alternative role models to wife/mothers," pointed out the underside of marriage for women: "I can attest to the frustration of a life where, because of gender, role is predetermined, options are closed off, freedom is denied, dependency is praised—and loss of self-worth is inevitable."

Other letter writers understood that politics did constrain "choice" and it was for this reason that they supported the students. An alumna from the Class of 1929, writing after the commencement, declared:

> She [Barbara Bush] said your success depends "not on what goes on in the White House but what goes on in your house." This antithesis sounds impressive, but it expresses a blind oversimplification. What goes on in the White House (and in Congress) often determines what is feasible in the home. Without day care for the working mother, parental leave, sound public education, and adequate health care, women who work both in and out of the home are manstrung, that is, all except those protected by wealth.

The link between the harshness of the Reagan-Bush policies toward women and children and the necessity to cover this with a "kinder and gentler" face was angrily decried by a nonalumna who saw through the facade of family "values":

> How ironic that the protesting Wellesley students were labeled "anti-family" at the same time that George Bush prepared to veto the child care and family emergency leave bills in an atmosphere of almost complete indifference. . . . Barbara Bush is not

> only associated with two administrations that have savaged families for the past decade, she is an important part of their attempt to put a human face on the savagery. . . . Barbara is the kind grandmother who clearly loves children, while behind the scenes George pursues policies that will increase children's misery. The issue isn't "career women" versus motherhood. It is that Barbara Bush represents an administration that continues to make life infinitely more difficult for mothers and most women and children.

These letters that sought to link the protest to the Bush administration's family policy were only a handful. Unlike Barbara Bush's defenders, they did not separate Barbara Bush from her husband and his policies. They could not discuss her as a good mother or volunteer without thinking about the policies her husband stood for. For these women "supporting your man" or children was not a value in and of itself. Pitting career women against mothers, while useful political rhetoric in a society that appears to enjoy simple truths, forgets that most career women are mothers too and that a generation of feminist theory has exploded the assumed dichotomy between the public and private realms (Evans 1993; Hansen 1994; Helly and Reverby 1992; Pateman 1989).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Finding a political voice remains troubled water for women. The letters from individuals to Wellesley College revealed a societal schism between elite women as citizens and as members of families. Despite suffrage, the problematic of women's full citizenship rights continues to emerge and take various forms for differing classes of women. The assumed social class character of an educational institution that serves the elite circumscribed what was expected of the students in their political lives. When the majority of letter writers wrote to voice their opposition to the student protest, they were also claiming that silence—in the face of political or personal difference—is the appropriate political voice for elite women. While modern feminism might see this kind of "voice" as false consciousness, the letter writers saw this silence as a form of political language, perhaps the only appropriate language available to elite women.

When the students showed what one letter writer called "ill-breeding," the meaning of ill-breeding went deeper than lack of politeness. It questioned the older meaning of elite women's place in the civic culture through their manners, their examples of refinement and behavior, and their power to persuade with politeness. The students had indeed acted as liberals (in the old-fashioned political theoretical meaning), but as liberal men, not women; they allowed their seemingly "ungovernable passions" to be expressed, and demanding to be seen as individuals. Their argument in the petition became one more example of the threat that feminism is perceived to have on beliefs about womanhood.

The criticism of liberal feminist behavior masked a larger danger that the Bush controversy at Wellesley College made public. Simply put, the students crossed social class lines, not merely gender ones, when they sought to use a public petition

as their political voice and dared to criticize the president's wife as a relic, not a role model. By showing a lack of political decorum, the protesting students foreshadowed a future where women might no longer be the keepers of the class system. Simultaneously, the institution that was expected to teach these women how to be these keepers had failed, raising unconscious fears on the part of letter writers about the crumbling of the cultural underpinnings of the class structure.

The Bush controversy revealed the intertwining of education, class, and citizenship. Barbara Bush was the prototype of upper-class womanhood. Wellesley students who protested were not rejecting their (hopefully) eventual social class positions; instead, they were rejecting a way of assuming this gendered social class position where they would be helpmates to men and their families. They wanted visible not "invisible" (Daniels 1988) social and economic power and gender equality. This was the heart of the petition. The students believed that they were taught to be judged on their own accomplishments. Herein lies the great contradiction between the ideology of liberal arts education for women and the eventual gendered lives the culture still expects such women to create as family members not individuals. Their education instills women with rewards for critical thinking and technical skills; it is this very drive to compete, speak out, and take charge that is expected to be tailored, toned down, and submerged for the good of others (Hertz and Reverby 1992).

Women's "private" activities and efforts are crucial for the maintenance of the upper class (Ostrander 1984). Our analysis of the Barbara Bush controversy extends the meaning of private behaviors for upper-class life: The students' actions were perceived as undermining the proper ways in which elite women maintain the social class structure. Indeed, seemingly private actions and behaviors are culturally assumed to be necessary in the public/political arena as well, providing yet another example of how the public/private dichotomy is conceptually interesting but sociologically and historically problematic.

Even in the supposedly gender-neutral arena of citizenship, elite women's political behavior is expected to be different from men's. When women gained the vote, many thought that the battle for women's full citizenship had been won. Theorists still discuss the limits of this victory by counting the number of women in political office, the "gender gap" in voting, the differential bargains for men and women in what is left of welfare state social policy (Gordon 1990); however, an analysis of the controversy surrounding Barbara Bush suggests that we will have to examine the contours of this battlefield more fully in what was once a seeming "no woman's land" that links public and private; manners and education; and ultimately gender, class, and politics.

How women participate in that civic culture, even 70 or more years after the granting of suffrage, is still tied to how women are educated and how they gain voice. If, as Jurgen Habermas has argued, citizenship "means participation in political debate and public opinion formation," what words will women use and how will they find the place to state them if cultural norms still contain their behaviors and voice (Fraser 1991, 263)? As feminist theorist Nancy Fraser (1991, 263) has argued, we will have to understand the "implicit gender subtext" that

makes citizenship not merely a political but a "gender-political concept." There is another subtext as well: Class in its gendered forms, as well as the institutions that reproduce it, will have to be added to our understanding of the construction of citizenship.

NOTES

1. While Wellesley remains an elite women's institution, the demographic makeup of the student body is no longer so uniformly Protestant, white, and upper class, but has become racially more diverse and somewhat more so economically.

2. We are not analyzing the political division over the controversy on the campus itself; however, student responses on e-mail, in the student paper, and in class discussions were divided. Some were mortified by the drubbing Wellesley appeared to be getting in the press; others felt elated by the experience and the attention it brought. Ironically, controversies surrounding commencement speakers are not unusual at Wellesley. Two years earlier in 1988, an *identical* number of students protested when feminist writer and *MS.* editor Gloria Steinem was selected as commencement speaker. This, however, did not make the national news.

3. The president told us that her office screened calls, but no log was kept. People she did know personally she spoke to on the phone. Among the letters we coded, there are none from the college's trustees or from major donors of the last capital campaign.

4. This approach was not common, however, and was reflected in only five of the letters received. We do not know if more of these letters went to the newspapers or to Mrs. Bush directly once Raisa Gorbachev's presence was publicly announced.

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