The Mother of us all: Eleanor Flexner and the writing of Century of Struggle (1959)

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“The Mother of Us All:”
Eleanor Flexner and the Writing of *Century of Struggle* (1959).

By

Sarah Van Beurden

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the roots of Second Wave Feminism and aims to contribute to the rewriting of the history of the American Left. These goals are approached through the study of the life of Eleanor Flexner, writer of a groundbreaking book for women’s history, *Century of Struggle* (1959). Her past as an activist and Communist connected to the Old Left greatly influenced her perceptions on history and the ‘woman question’ as they are reflected in *Century of Struggle*. In this book on the women’s rights movement in America, she located this movement in the tradition of American reform, with attention for the roles played by working class women and black women. *Century of Struggle* provided a framework for the next generation of woman’s historians and helped pave the way for the emergence of women’s studies. Flexner’s life and writing help us construct a different story of the so-called anti-feminist Forties and Fifties by uncovering the link between the Old and the New Left and thus revealing real significance of these years for the women’s movements of the Fifties and Sixties.
In this paper, two roads will collide: the writing of women's history and the re-writing of the history of the American Left. More than ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the official end of the Cold War, the United States of America still struggles with the recognition of its own Left and its past. Connotation with the political Left is still feared for its discrediting effect by many scholars, activists and politicians. The collective case of amnesia when it comes to the recognition and validation of the Leftist tradition is very apparent in for example the standard history of the Left.

The New Left is to have emerged out of nowhere, its roots connecting it to the Old Left are difficult to find. It is generally considered that the conformity of the Forties and Fifties virtually wiped out any Left roots. But life-signs of those roots are there for those who wish to see them. While a start has been made in the re-writing of the general history of the Left in the United States and an element of continuity in its history was established, this thinking repeatedly ignores the role of women's movements in this play.¹

One of these historical myths relates the story of the women’s movements of the Sixties and their anchor, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan as born solely out of the experience of the bored housewife of the Fifties, who felt trapped in her suburban home. But as Dan Horowitz revealed in his book on Friedan; this little

story of the bored housewife is not what it appears to be. Friedan was firmly anchored in the labor press, with over ten years of experience as a journalist for union newspapers who had a vested interest in the women’s question.\textsuperscript{2} And there, the tip of the iceberg appeared: modern feminism and the Old Left were no strangers to each other.

Since the general scope of this thesis is too large to be considered here, the angle this paper will take to prove its thesis is the one of the history and history-writing of a remarkable woman: Eleanor Flexner. Her writing of her book \textit{Century of Struggle} (1959) on the history of the women’s suffrage movement in the US is important for two reasons: first because of the moment at which the book was written, being the Fifties, which made the book an absolute forerunner in women’s history; and second, because of who Eleanor Flexner was --her background and her motives for writing the book. The careful unfolding of her past, layer by layer, accumulating in her writing of \textit{Century of Struggle} (CS), will tell us more than one thing, not only about the woman’s movement she was writing about, but about the history of women and their struggles during the Thirties, Forties, Fifties and Sixties of this century. It shows us a very different story of the so-called anti-feminist Forties and Fifties, while uncovering the real significance of these years for the women’s movements of the Sixties and Seventies.

Flexner’s story is one of both the capture and the escape of history: she made it her job to capture the struggle of women that came before her but her own faith was to escape history --in many ways. Scholarly writing on Flexner, for example, is rare.

\textsuperscript{2} Horowitz, Daniel \textit{Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American}
Together with the entire undercurrent of women's activism between the first and second wave of feminism, Flexner has been "hidden from history," the same history she was so eager to document. Except for a handful of women's historians, very little attention has been devoted to her life and work. Gerda Lerner, in the introduction of her book *The Majority finds its Past* (1979), acknowledges the importance of Flexner for the field of women's history, but the general trend has been silence. Recently, Ellen Fitzpatrick wrote a short biographical introduction to the new edition of *Century of Struggle* (1996) and since her, both Dan Horowitz and Kate Weigand have used the Flexner collection at the Schlesinger archive for their books, on Betty Friedan and Left feminism respectively.

This paper will try to complete the work started by Fitzpatrick's introduction. It will reveal the extent of Flexner's involvement and education in Leftist circles during almost twenty years of her life. As a cultural product, *CS* reflects the values and attitudes of the context in which it was created, and so the writing and content of *CS* can be traced back to Flexner's experiences as a woman communist, union organizer, theatre critic, journalist, teacher and writer during the 1930s and 40s. As is turns out, her experiences as an activist with the CP and her friendships with many other communists who were engaged in the battle for recognition of the woman question were crucial for the birth of *CS*. A close analysis of the book and the context in which it was born will also reveal that despite Flexner's background as a Communist, she considered the rights these women demanded as quintessentially American, revealing a strong faith in the equality of American citizens that was
inscribed in the Constitution. Women deserved their vote because they had partaken in the building and defense of the country.

Furthermore, this paper will partake in the current scholarship that is uncovering the connections between the Old and the New Left. While anticommunism and antifeminism was intense and widespread during the Fifties, it did not entirely affect all segments of Left movements. A new body of research has emerged that challenges the discourse on the monolithic antifeminist Postwar culture. Examples are Kate Weigand’s recent publication *Red Feminism* (2001); the collection of essays *Not June Cleaver* (1994) edited by Joanne Meyerowitz; Sara Evans’s *Personal Politics* (1980); Ellen Kay Trimberger’s article “Women in the Old and New Left: the Evolution of the Politics of a Personal Life” and Leila Rupp’s *Survival in the Doldrums* (1987).

Weigand’s book *Red Feminism* divided the connections into direct and indirect influences from the Old on the New Left. Direct influences are most present in the so-called “red diaper babies,” the children of the people who had been members or fellow travellers of the CP or other radical organizations between the Thirties and the Sixties. As it appears, these children were present in large numbers in the New Left organizations. Many of these young women who grew up in these families knew there was something like the woman question, often from dinner table

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conversations! At the Red Diaper Conferences held in 1982 and 1983, many participants in the second wave feminism attested to the fact that they owed much to their parents, and especially their mothers, who had educated them with a belief in equality between man and woman.

Another way these direct influences worked was through real-life contact between both generations of feminists. Sometimes as mentors, sometimes as activists, they participated in the new drive for women’s liberation. Some older progressive feminists also influenced their younger followers more indirectly, through their writing. It is here that we should situate Flexner’s contribution to the new generation of feminists. Although she distanced herself quietly from the CP and its social environment during the Fifties, she continued her work in the field of women’s history and wrote a groundbreaking book that was heavily influenced by her Left background. This paper will bear witness to the final recognition of the book by later women’s historians who acknowledged Flexner’s crucial role in the progressive field of woman’s history that finally came to full bloom during the Second Wave of Feminism. By doing so, this paper will attach yet another string, leading from the Old to the New Left and thus help recognize the fundamental ideological connection between both movements, failing the dooming influence of McCarthyism.

Born in New York City on October 4 1908, Eleanor Flexner was the second daughter of Abraham and Anna Flexner. She grew up with not one, but two famous parents. Her Jewish father was a well known educator who helped establish the
Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton and the Lincoln school, a co-ed experimental school connected to Columbia University's teaching school. In later interviews, Flexner recalled how he worked as an advisor for one of "the great Rockefeller humanitarian foundations," or the "Rockefeller philanthropic apparatus," as she put it. 6 Both his parents were Jewish immigrants, his father from France and his mother from Germany, who established themselves in Louisville, Kentucky, where their son was born. Anna Flexner, on the other hand, was a woman who beat many odds in her life. She grew up in a Baptist family in Kentucky and was able to go to Vassar because of the financial support of an uncle. She formed part of America's first generation of college-educated women and went on to become a successful New York playwright. She took Eleanor to an endless number of plays and was thus responsible for Eleanor's life-long appreciation of theatre. Her financial success would later enable Eleanor to be free of other responsibilities and write *Century of Struggle*. But as a child "I had very little consciousness of other people's difficulties," Flexner recalled. 7 At home she and her sister never experienced any unequal treatment because they were girls and their parents stimulated their intellectual development and interests. When she was seven years old, struck down by a rheumatic fever that would leave her with a rheumatic heart disease for the rest of her life, she remembered her parents going off to the 1915 New York march for woman suffrage. Flexner recalled that this forced break from school was the beginning of her life-long addiction to books. She was still recovering when in 1917 the cruelties of World War I inspired her to her first piece of writing: a poem.

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Her nine year older sister went on to study at Bryn Mawr college but Eleanor, who, under the influence of her father, had had a non-traditional education which did not include Latin, went on to the liberal Swarthmore College, majoring in History and English. These two subjects would continue to be the red lines of her life.

While at Swarthmore, Flexner experienced an act of discrimination that would mark the start of her consciousness and sensitivity of injustice. Her college allowed the presence of Greek organizations and Flexner soon became aware that for some reason she was not ‘sought after’ by the sororities on her campus. All of a sudden she was an outsider. Weeks of agonizing over what might be wrong with her finally came to an end when a senior girl came up to her room and told her why she was not being rushed: she was Jewish. It left Eleanor shocked; she had never faced this problem before and had never looked at herself as Jewish: her mother came from a Baptist background and her father was not a practicing Jew. She went on to discover that there was exactly one Jewish girl in each class. Eventually, some of her girlfriends convinced one of the sororities to pledge Flexner, based on the argument that her mother was not Jewish. Afraid of the feeling of being an outsider, Eleanor pledged, but never came to feel comfortable in a group that so obviously excluded others. By the time she reached her junior year she returned her pin and she and some friends found the courage to openly revolt against the Greek system. Elizabeth Yard, her comrade in this battle, would remain a life-long friend and it would be Yard’s little sister, Molly, that led another uprising which eventually led to the abolition of the sororities at Swarthmore. College had introduced Eleanor to prejudice, but she could

7 Flexner archive, folder 6, interview Flexner- Jacqueline Van Voris, , may ’77.
8
not cope with rejection and had learned to fight back and organize for a cause, something she would never forget to do. In 1983, during an interview with women’s historian Jaqueline Van Voris, Flexner wondered if her experience with the sororities made her become more radical than she otherwise might have been.8

Something else Flexner took from college was a love of writing and history. She combined those in her first writing on the history of women: a thesis on Bloody Mary. Her honors at school earned her a stay at the university of Oxford. But her visit to the United Kingdom would turn out shorter than expected because upon Flexner’s arrival it became clear that Oxford was not such a progressive place as Swarthmore and did require its students to have full knowledge of Latin, something Eleanor lacked, thanks to the educational theories of her father.

By this time, the Thirties arrived and the United States had sunk deep into the Depression, and Eleanor had decided her place was not in Oxford (although she returned to England many times during the following years to visit her friend Eirene Jones, the daughter of a liberal politician,) but in New York City. Her own family was not really affected by the crash, thanks to the income her mother had from royalties and, ironically, thanks to the Rockefeller foundation that was able to continue paying her father! But she felt as if something was happening there that she needed to be part of, even if it was just to try and help friends that lost their jobs.9

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8 Flexner papers, interview Flexner- Jacqueline Van Voris, May 1983, p 96. This episode in Flexner’s life has a remarkable parallel in Betty Friedan’s experiences as a Jewish girl at college. She also was rejected by the sororities on her campus and seems to have experienced a reaction very similar to the one Flexner had. See: Horowitz, Dan. Betty Friedan and the making of the Feminine Mystique, chapter one.
Consequently, Flexner plunged into the harsh but exciting New York City of the Thirties. She continued to live with her parents and committed herself to volunteering for various organizations. At this point, it becomes more difficult to reconstruct exactly what Eleanor did during the next fifteen years of her life due to the lack of original archival material of the period. Flexner, like so many other former Left activists, feared prosecution for many years and became extremely careful when it came to revealing her past, even during the late Eighties and early Nineties. Many personal archives, as did Flexner’s, suffered the consequences of this constant fear. But luckily, towards the end of her life, Flexner realized the importance of this episode in her life for her work and the work of future women’s historians. She left us a memoir she wrote on the request of Patricia King, who at that point was head of the archives at Radcliffe College in Harvard and a personal friend of Flexner’s. In this memoir, and in the interview Jacqueline Van Voris conducted with her, some elements concerning those ‘dark years’ resurface that help complete the puzzle. And an important puzzle it is, because the Thirties and Forties were responsible for Flexner’s radicalisation and deepened awareness of woman’s issues, which would lead to her book that helped form the field of women’s history.

The first volunteer position Flexner took when back from England was as a reporter for the Welfare Council, but it did not take long before she shifted her attention to the field she had always been connected to through her mother and her own interests: theatre. She claimed she could not cope with the horrors of the Depression, so she “suddenly revolted and bolted into the nearest ‘hole in the ground’
that would take me far away from the realities of the present situation outside the hole—and that was the theatre.”

Although most historians look at her later involvement with the Communist Party (CP) and especially the Congress of American Women (CAW) for Flexner’s political radicalization, this is not entirely exact. While they might be responsible for her intensified interest in and knowledge of women’s matters, her radicalisation took place in an entirely different radical environment: the New York radical theatre scene.

Michael Denning states in his valuable book *The Cultural Front* (1997) that it was here that the New York City culture scene was at its most radical. Maybe it was not the most radical, but it was certainly a place that opened itself to the Popular Front culture. This prosperous time for theatre was closely connected to the Federal Arts Theatre Project, the theatrical branch of the federal aid projects for the arts by Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Depression.

At the centre of the radical theatre were publications such as *New Theatre* which was closely connected to the Group Theatre. During the early Thirties *New Theatre*, --which originally was called *Workers Theatre-- became more open toward a broader audience, while this, at the same time, became more receptive towards left-wing theatre. It grew to be a real ‘Popular Front publication’ with a generally radical view point on art, theatre, dance and later on, film. Like most Left-wing enterprises, it was never financially successful, which led to an irregular publication

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10 Flexner papers, memoir, II-b.
that was suspended first in November of 1936 and finally in April 1937, the same
time the Federal Theatre Project came under attack. The New Theatre’s attention was
devoted to work from the Federal Arts Theatre Project and theatres like the Group
Theatre, still know to us for productions such as Waiting for Lefty and Paradise Lost.

Flexner became involved in this world on several levels: as a volunteer, an
employee, a writer, and an activist. She would later recall that a feeling of guilt drove
her towards volunteering, because she was much better off than most people and was
not exposed to any of the problems they were struggling with. She started off with an
apprentice group at Repertory Theater, which would only last a year because the
theatre went bankrupt. After a while she landed her first real job, as an assistant to
Helen Deutch, the press agent of the Group Theatre. Deutch was involved with the
group from the very start and was responsible for much of their success in
commercial terms. Flexner’s work with Deutch did not last long either. Since she
did not need the pay check, she chose to intensify her writing for the New Theatre
Magazine. Writing was the greatest passion in her life. At the same time, her
fascination and admiration for the political and human struggles surrounding her
made her receptive to a radical ideology.

Not everybody that leaned ideologically to the Left was a member of the
Communist Party of the United States, though. There certainly were members of the
CP involved in the theatre world, but many people were what we now call "fellow-

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13 She became involved as a young writer and press agent, not only with the group but also on
a personal level with one of their main writers, Clifford Odets. Towards the mid-Thirties she
started to get fed up with the group, which continued to accept her services without offering
any pay for them and with Odets for his repeated affairs, which made her part with the Group
travellers,” ideological sympathizers. As Flexner put it very aptly: “Anybody who wasn’t, as I used to say, dead from the neck up ended in the ‘left’ movement or its fringes because the Left was the only organized movement that was trying to do something to break out of the dreadful morass that the American economy was sinking in.” But the CP members that were present, certainly in the Group Theatre often had a strong influence upon their surroundings. Wendy Smith, in her book on the Group Theatre, claims that “The discipline and solid organizing capabilities of party members won them a respected place at the Left end of a broad consensus of progressive opinion that encompassed everyone who believed fascism overseas must be fought, hungry people in America must be fed, workers had a right to trade-union representation, and black people deserved equal treatment. Few people were utterly apolitical in the Thirties, certainly not in the Group.”

The luxury of still living at her parents’ eight-bedroom NYC apartment and having the support of a family that respected her political views and repeatedly emphasized the importance of her intellectual development was a privilege that strongly contrasted with what real life was for the outside world that Eleanor was learning about. She succeeded in dividing her time between her own writing and an intense agenda of organizing, which reached a peak with the start of the Spanish Civil War.

Harold Clurman, one of the founding members of the Group Theatre recalled how during the Thirties, the tavern ‘Chez Firehouse’ on east 55th street was the center

14 Flexner papers, interview Van Voris, 60-61.
15 Smith, Real Life Drama, 159.
of New York's radical theatre and everything that revolved around it. One of the things connected to this scene that shows its social awareness and political involvement was the Theatre Arts Commission (TAC), which originated under the name of Theatre Committee to Aid the Spanish Democracy. Its involvement was not limited to foreign causes, they also campaigned for the persistence of the federal arts project, for example. But the Spanish Civil War was the focal point for everything the Left campaigned against; it was the symbol of the fascist surge that needed to be combated and many Left activists took their duty to defend the Left very serious, which resulted in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the volunteer army that crossed the Atlantic to defend the Spanish Democracy. Many activists connected to the theatre world joined in, as did Herbert Kline, the chief editor of the New Theatre Magazine.\textsuperscript{16} As the latter went bankrupt around this time, Flexner shifted her writing to the TAC magazine (where she was the drama critic) and her organizing to raising money for the Spanish Republicans --since her parents resided in their Princeton home for most of this period, she even used their apartment to organize fundraisers for the cause!\textsuperscript{17}

Flexner had picked up a job as a an apprentice organizer with a Textile Union in Lawrence, Massachusetts (which was probably directed to her through the CP.) This was her first and would be her only direct experience with the organizing of workers. She felt like a "designing debutante" in an environment with union people


\textsuperscript{17} When she told her mother that there would be black people present, her mother responded: "Good heavens, please put the silver away"- "She was from Kentucky," added Flexner some years later. See Flexner papers, interview Van Voris, p 64.
who weren’t exactly keen on communists. “Not a woman on the local staff, what a horror,” she wrote to her sister.18

Her creative writing and correspondence of the time show a young woman trying to understand and deal with a world of injustice in a constructive and profound way. During the Thirties, she wrote her own play, entitled *No Abiding Place*. It told the story of a young couple, Elsa and Hans, in the Vienna of 1934. They became confronted with an old love of Elsa, Anton, a pianist who grappled with the reconciliation between his duties as a socialist and his artistic drive. The play has a deeply political theme with the struggle of Austrian socialism against fascism, but the woman’s role is rather subdued, which shows us that Flexner’s awareness of the role of women in the history of struggles was not yet fully developed. To her great disappointment, she was not able to interest a theatre in the play. The reason might have laid in the fact that Eleanor was not so much a creative writer as a reporter and historian, something she still had to discover herself.

Since the theatre seemed no option for her as a playwright, the following literary project Flexner embarked upon was a novel. Again, the theme of the book was a young professional grappling with the possibilities of combining a career as a press agent with the drive of an activist, working with strikers. Both play and novel reflected something Flexner was deeply concerned with: how could one combine one’s abilities as an artist or professional with ‘doing the right thing’ and helping others with their struggles through activism. She wanted to write, to reflect, to think,

18 Flexner archive, box 1, folder 8, letter to Jean Flexner, July ’39.
but was also pointedly aware of her responsibility to a less favoured world than her own. But did she belong in the type of activism she experienced as a labor organizer?

It was during this period of time that Flexner took the step of becoming a member of the Communist Party of the United States. Among the many people she met over the years were various communists who had impressed her thoroughly. They convinced her that she, as an individual could make a difference. Especially, there was Maxine Wood, a young writer who brought Eleanor into contact with Marian Bachrach, a communist and party legal aid that Eleanor became very close friends with. It is she who deserves a lot of credit for introducing Flexner to certain aspects of the woman question. It was through her that she met, among others, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Claudia Jones, women with whom she would come to work together in the Congress of American Women (CAW) later on and who would have a tremendous influence on her thinking.19

Even though she might not have realized it, the party probably did more for her in terms of education in the language and tools of Marxism than Flexner ever realized. Although most of the letters of the early Thirties and most of the Forties are missing from her papers at the Schlesinger library, the fact that her language became more and more politicized is obvious from the limited correspondence with her sister

19 Bachrach became one of the CP members indicted under the McCannon Act for activities against the American government. At the time of her trial she was severely suffering from rectal cancer and Flexner used her family’s connections with Evans Clark, who was on the editorial board of the New York Times to draw attention to the inhumanity of Marian’s situation. Shortly afterwards the Times ran an editorial on Bachrach’s situation, urging for her case to be dropped, which happened. See: Flexner papers, memoir, III-5. Bachrach died in 1957.
because they often debated their father's views on politics. 20 In '37, she wrote to her family while on a visit in London: "I fear I am lost to liberalism." While explaining the concept of communal ownership in communism and assuring her readers that it did not mean that nobody could own their own books anymore, she urges them to subscribe to *The Nation* to get a clearer view on politics. 21

With already an unpublished play and novel on the shelves, Eleanor decided to approach the literary world from yet another angle: the academic scholarship. She combined her skills as a scholar with her interest as an activist and wrote her first publication: *American Playwrights 1918-1938: The Theatre Retreats from Reality* (1938). In the book, she reacted against what had become the role of theatre as a luxury commodity. She accused the theatre world of having become a business geared towards profits, ignoring its ability to communicate a vision of life, something that was honoured by small alternative theatres like the Group Theatre and the Federal Theatre Project, which writers she elaborately praised.

With the turbulent Thirties coming to an end, Flexner had found a spot amidst people closely connected to the CP. Her involvement had evolved from volunteering to a life of intense political activism. But nonetheless, despite several different occupations as an activist and writer, she had still not found a spot where she felt fully in her place.

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20 In a letter to Patricia (Pat) King, head of the Schlesinger archives at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, MA, (where Flexner's papers are), dated May 13, 1983, Flexner reveals that she still has certain valuable material in her Communist past and the CAW, which she does not yet wishes to turn over. (see: Flexner archive, box 2, folder 29) Since these papers, which are likely to be very interesting, are currently not in her archive, somebody in her family—probably relatives of her sister—might still have these in their possession.

21 Flexner archive, MA, box 1, folder 8, letter June 24, '37.
The CP she entered had undergone tremendous changes over the course of ten years. It had evolved from a partisan group of a few thousand people to a party of over 55000 members by the end of the Thirties. At least 22000 of these members were women, compared to a less than 25% of the membership some ten years earlier. The reason for the jump in active interest the party underwent lies partly in its Popular Front action and its move towards the New Deal politics of Roosevelt, which made it more accessible to middle-class, intellectual and even black working constituencies. Consequently, its position on various points changed under the influence of these new groups, like African-Americans and women. The first changes took place in the area of race-consciousness. Slowly but surely the party adapted its Marxist analysis in acknowledgement of the special situation black workers were in. A rising recognition of broader social, economic and even cultural issues led to the recognition of 'white chauvinism,' or the existence another barrier than the class-related one. As Kate Weigand points out in her recent book on feminism and the Left, some of these 22000 women were paying very close attention to the discussion of the ‘Negro question.’ If there was such a thing as white chauvinism, why couldn’t there be something like ‘male chauvinism?’ But the official standpoint of the party was somewhat unclear. On the one hand, they had activated the woman’s commission, which had been existent only on paper up till then. So by the mid-Thirties, the women of the CP started to have some leadway and some space to debate, think and even act. The ‘woman question’ was reborn, but this time in an environment that used a Marxist theoretical framework to approach their situation.22

22 Weigand. Kate. Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s
On the other hand, the party was not all that enthusiastic about the re-emergence of what some saw as a bourgeois ‘feminism,’ as became clear in for example the Mary Inman controversy. The main party line continued to consider the woman question as a vitally less important issue. But this also meant that women who continued to debate and construct amongst themselves were not stopped, as long as their duties to the party first were not endangered. The main trend seemed irreversible and going towards a greater understanding of the ‘double burden’ of the working class woman.

The coming of World War II brought considerable change for the women of America. All of a sudden, the jobmarket opened itself for them and so the employment rate for women sharply increased. For Flexner, it meant the return to a paying job, this time with the United Office and Professional Workers of America. Again, her job entailed organizing offices, but this time in the publishing business, an industry she was more familiar with and which consisted of more educated workers. As she later recalled, the hardships of picketing at 7 am on winter mornings made her more receptive to the descriptions of such activities suffered by the suffragettes! It was in this position she was confronted with the problem of women’s employment after the war. In this situation, the practical complexity of the ‘woman question,’ of which she had learned so much on a theoretical level with the party, became clear to her. She recognized that these women were being put out in the cold again, because many of them worked out of necessity, not luxury. On the other hand, she did think

the men should have their jobs back (but she thoroughly disagreed with them having veteran’s priority until their retirement.)

Her paying job led Flexner to greater independence from her parents, which resulted in her finally moving into her own apartment at the age of 34. Moreover, as she claimed, it gave her “a base for membership” (in a union) in which to continue activity. The latter becomes more clear if we consider the circumstances of the time: the CP was less and less able to function in the open, something that fundamentally frustrated Flexner, since activism was what drew her to the party in the first place. The same urge “to do something” led her to join the American Labor Party and campaign for Roosevelt’s fourth term candidacy in 1944.

Flexner fondly recalled the picketing, handing out of leaflets, organizing, and protest meetings of those years. The one event that stood above the rest out in was an effort to try to hold a concert with Paul Robeson, sometime during the late Thirties. Initially it was broken up by vigilantes but it eventually did take place due to the effort of trade unionists, communist sympathizers, the American Labor Party and veterans of the Abraham Lincoln brigade to protect the audience by forming a ring around it. Later on, the crowd noticed that their busdrivers had disappeared and on their way home they ran into an angry mob and had to be helped out by the state troopers.

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23 Mary Inman was a member of the CP and outraged many of her fellow members with her daring analysis of the woman question. Her relationship with the party worsened and she eventually was evicted, See: Weigand, 33.
24 Flexner papers, interview with Van Voris, 18.
25 Ibid., memoir, III-8.
After the war, Flexner took up the position of executive secretary of an organization called the Congress of American Women (CAW).\footnote{According to Flexner, she got 'drafted' for this job by the CP. (Flexner papers, memoir Flexner, II-e)} CAW was the American branch of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), an organization established in the aftermath of World War II by Communist resistance leaders Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier and Eugenie Cotton.\footnote{According to Flexner, she got 'drafted' for this job by the CP. (Flexner papers, memoir Flexner, II-e)} The American branch was established in March '46 by the American participants of the founding congress of the WIDF, a wide variety of women, among whom were communist Mary Van Kleek, Muriel Draper and Gene Weltfish.

Just as Flexner, the CAW has received relatively little scholarly attention. But recently, women's historians have began to discover the importance of the Congress for the history of Left feminism in the USA. Especially Amy Swerdlow, in her article "The Congress of American Women: Left-Feminist Peace Politics in the Cold War" broke new ground when she drew the attention to this organization which managed to struggle through five years of Cold War climate. Kate Weigand was the first to really research the CAW and place it in the larger context of the evolution in the CP's approach to women's issues. What made the CAW so important as a women's organization was that, first, it took place in a period of time during which the general atmosphere towards women's issue's reversed into a more conservative corner. Secondly, although the influence of Communist activists was strong from the beginning, it started off as a group of women from broad progressive backgrounds with determination and commitment to the equality of women. Both Weigand and
Swerdlow see the existence of the CAW during an antifeminist and anticommunist era as an important sign for the persistence of a progressive feminism during the Fifties that helped carry some of the Old Left's agenda towards the New Left.28

The importance of the CAW for the history of American feminism cannot be underestimated: it kept the discussion alive and elevated the Marxist analysis of the woman’s question considerably. The importance of the CAW for this paper lies in the influence it had on Eleanor Flexner’s thinking and writing, not only during the period she was affiliated with it, but also her later writing, especially CS.

The organization had three active committees: one on child welfare, one on international peace, and one on the status of women. Although it never reached the large membership it envisioned, branches developed in New York, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles and other large cities. But it would be the New York City chapters, especially those in Queens and Brooklyn, which became the most active. The core of active members included people like Muriel Draper, Mary Van Kleeck, Susan B Anthony II, Claudia Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Betty Millard. It seems that the commission on child welfare was the largest, but it was the commission on the status of women that was important for feminism. Susan B Anthony II, led this commission until 1948, when she was followed up by Betty Millard. At a moment when American women were being moved back to their homes, federal childcare was being closed down and mainstream feminism was

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27 Story of CAW based on: Weigand, 46-64., Mary Van Kleeck papers, SSC, communism files, SSC, CAW papers, personal possession of Kate Weigand and Catherine Campbell.
fading, Anthony wrote a report on the status of women that was used at the WIDF convention in Paris by the American delegation. The report analysed the position of American women in the American economy as one of a “double burden” both the work at home and in the labor force was placed on their shoulders. Discrimination was not limited to the workfloor, but also affected women who worked as unpaid housewives. And for most women the work outside the home was not a luxury --as the myth goes-- but an economic necessity. Anthony proposed a number of measures for which the CAW needed to campaign: equal pay for equal work, more education for women, the organization into unions of women workers, equality in the treatment of black and white women on the jobmarket. The attention she devoted to the status of black women in the American society is remarkable for the time and formed a presage of the concern for the role of black women displayed by Flexner and other members of the CAW. Anthony’s language and analysis of the situation of American women is clearly influenced by Marxism, which is especially visible in her description of the “double burden.” It is clear, though, that the report was written by a professional, middle-class woman: it concentrates on working women, not necessarily working-class women. This would prove to remain a weakness of the congress: despite its appeal to various ethnic women’s organizations, most of its leadership remained in the hands of educated and professional women, who should be credited for their attempt to analyse the situation of working-class women and organize them, but the membership of the CAW never really reached this group as much as it had hoped to -- despite its connection to the CP.
The solutions suggested in the report include a vast array of government and community services like childcare and housekeeping services. Clearly, Anthony saw the status of women as based upon the economic system of the nation, without really considering the issue as something that went beyond ideological borders.

During its short existence, the CAW’s attention to the problems of black women would only grow, especially under the influence of Claudia Jones. Jones was a black communist leader, born in Trinidad, who devoted her life to the battle for recognition of the multiple oppression of black women, not only within the USA, but also within the Communist Party of the USA. Eleanor Flexner remembers clearly that “the few evenings that [I] spent at long intervals with Claudia made an enormous impression on [me]....Claudia taught [me] an enormous amount.”29

Another influence surrounding Flexner was Betty Millard. She was active in the commission on women’s status, and had been editor of New Masses. Millard was very aware of the importance of the knowledge of the past of women’s struggles in America for the current struggle and in accordance with this vision, she organized an anniversary celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Seneca Falls convention of 1848.30 During 1948, she also published an article entitled “Woman against Myth” in New Masses, which took the debate on women’s issues yet another step forward.31 In this article, she seriously complicated the idea of women’s oppression as just another side-effect of the economic struggle. Millard’s understanding of the oppression of women leads to the idea that woman’s inferiority went far beyond the suppression

29 Flexner papers, interview Van Voris, 68.
30 Weigand, 63.
31 Communism files, SSC, ‘Woman Against Myth’ by Betty Millard.
caused by the capitalist system. Millard recognized that there was a problem in the mentality towards women that might not only be caused by class suppression and solved in a socialist society.

By this time, the Communist Party tightened its grip on the CAW and the congress was added to the government's list of subversive organizations, which scared off members and potential members. The organization was doomed to disappear in the turmoil of the fiercely anti-communist years that were to follow. In 1949, the HUAC published its Report on the Congress of American Women, which condemned the organization as a Soviet weapon to destabilize the American society. Its members were asked to register as foreign agents and in the face of yet another expensive legal battle the CP decided to abandon the organization -- it had its priorities elsewhere.

Although the life of the CAW was short-lived, the lives of people like Flexner show us that its efforts were not in vain. The influence it had on the thinking of some women about their own situations and the circumstances of women's lives through the centuries went beyond its initial set-up. Today, it represents the continuity of independent, organizing women through the generally anti-feminist Forties and Fifties, finding its way to the Sixties. Although the main stream of progressive feminism seemed to have disappeared, there were a few 'small rivers' that went underground and surfaced again years later, in various places. And Flexner would be one of them.

Flexner, in her turn, moved on with more union work. As a Placement Service Director in the publishing business, she focused on the placement of black people and
women. She remembered this period of her life as deeply instructive as far as blacks and women is concerned. “It helped me to see the two problems as related,” Flexner told Jacqueline Van Voris later. Eventually she decided to take up a job of her own again instead of continuing to help place people. She took a position at the Foreign Policy Association, where she worked as the assistant of the head of the Speakers Bureau. The FPA was known for its support of suffrage and pacifism in the past. But on the other hand, as a union organizer, Flexner had experienced quite some difficulties with the Association when they tried to make them hire their first black secretary. “We were on the verge of picketing the place when they hastily hired a very attractive and competent black secretary,” she recalled.

But employment was not the only thing she was involved in, during the Forties her activism also included the Communist-led struggle for housing for black people in NYC. Stuyvesant town was just being built and the matter of admittance of black tenants was high on the agenda of many Leftist organizations in the city. Flexner, who lived only two blocks from the complex participated in the sit-ins. “The aim was to get as many Communists into Stuyvesant town as possible so there could be pressure from the tenants in order to admit these [black] people. And [the activists] did get some black families into Stuyvesant town. [It was a] Big victory.”

While working for the Foreign Policy Office that Eleanor met Helen Terry. She would become Flexner’s life-long partner. The women shared an apartment in

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32 Flexner papers, interview Van Voris, 65.
34 Flexner papers, interview with Van Voris, 63.
NYC --they “shacked up together”, to use Eleanor’s words 36-- and later on a house in Northampton, MA, where they lived until Terry’s death in 1983, something which Flexner never fully recovered from. She was never really clear on the nature of the relationship, but it is obvious from the little correspondence between the two that is left to us that, although there is no direct proof of a physical relationship, they were extremely close to each other. It would probably be inappropriate to label the couple as “lesbians,” due to the fact that they themselves would most likely never have accepted such a categorization, although the term certainly existed during the Fifties. The description “couple relation,” as suggested by Leila Rupp in her article on same-sex relationships in history “Imagine my Surprise,” might be the most suitable in this case. Flexner did not elaborate on the subject of the type of relationships the women in her book might (or not) have had and she resisted the idea of Carrie Chapman Catt being a lesbian, as it was put to her by Ellen Dubois. 37 It is possible though, that Flexner only developed her aversion of the term during the Sixties, through her sometimes resentful relationship with the women of the New Left, who experienced and proclaimed their sexualities in ways Flexner often disapproved of and certainly did not want to be associated with. On the other hand, the association between lesbianism and feminism was not new, but Flexner was not too fond of the latter term.

35 Ibid., 66.
36 Ibid.
37 Flexner papers, interview with Ellen DuBois, S.
either, due to her 'communist schooling.' In fact, she never used it throughout the entire *Century of Struggle*.  

The last few jobs Eleanor held in New York point towards an ever growing consciousness of the struggles of women --white and black. One of the most stimulating jobs she ever held was for the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN). At the time, she needed a paying job to maintain herself because her mother was in a nursing home and working with the Association enabled her to both earn some money for herself and still continue on the road of activism. With the organization, she struggled to have black nurses admitted to the nurses associations in the South.

All the while, Flexner continued her writing in the form of journalism. After the abolishment of the TAC magazine, she moved her theatre and book reviewing to magazines like the *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker* and *The Worker*. One change she made was to start publishing her articles under synonyms. Two of the ones she used most frequently were Betty Feldman and Irene Epstein. Most of the articles she wrote after the mid-Forties reflect her declining interest in theatre issues and her growing concern with woman’s issues. Her topics ranged from the Equal Rights Amendment, black women and the exclusion of women from sports to union workers.

A few years later, in 1953, Flexner, moving yet another step closer to women’s history, tried her hand at teaching a class on the woman question at the Jefferson School of Social Science in New York City, a party-supported school for Marxist

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education. This course was another example of a broadened interest in the woman question that Left circles displayed, despite the heightened anti-communism from the American state and often also from the public (the Jefferson School would have to close doors just a few years later, in 1956.) To accompany the course, Flexner published *Questions and Answers on the Woman Question* with Doxey A. Wilkerson, again using the name of Irene Epstein. In the introduction, it was perceived that the “tremendous importance of women as a political force [made] it especially urgent for the labor-progressive movement of [the] country to organize powerful and sustained struggles against the special oppression of women. Only thus [could they] sweep away the obstacles to the full participation of women in the liberating struggles of the working class and its allies.”

Explained, in the form of answer and question, was the Marxists theory on the woman question, the solution of which was placed within the development of the entire society. This included education on the “double burden” of the female under capitalism and on how real liberation of women was only possible under socialism -- as was clear from the comparison to women in the Soviet Union. The paper also emphasized that the term “working class woman” was not limited to women who work for a living, but included all other women who were wives, mothers or daughters of working class men. Further, it details the situation of working women in America: their numbers, occupations, wages (compared to those of men) and --here we see Flexner’s influence-- the special condition of black and Puerto Rican working women. Her special mentioning of Puerto Rican women probably resulted from the

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39 Flexner papers, folder 29.
experience Eleanor had in the New York neighbourhood she lived in. In one of her letters to Margeret Grierson, her friend and curator of the Sophia Smith collection, she wrote about how these women’s lives reminded her of the women she wanted to write about.40 A whole separate chapter was devoted to the struggle of black working women and their “triple oppression.” Flexner already had compiled a bibliography on “The Negro woman in the United States” a few years earlier, in 1951. She recognized race as an extra factor in their oppression and thus she emphasized that the liberation of black women required extra efforts from labor organizations.

In the next chapter of the course, students at Jefferson School learned about the traps of the bourgeois ideology. “Feminism” was criticized as a concept of bourgeois ideology, in which it was stated that men were the cause of female oppression, which, Eleanor warned her students, distracted the attention from the fact that real liberation lay outside of the capitalist system and concealed the real class basis of women’s oppression. Eleanor based her analysis of bourgeois “feminism” on Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), which she used to explain the concept of “male supremacist ideology.” She did state though, that it was possible to win important advances in the status of women through struggle in the capitalist society. To explain what this meant in concrete terms, she quoted Claudia Jones: “It means above all fighting for the economic equality of woman, because her economic dependence on men in our society, her exclusion from production, makes for a double exploitation of women (and triply so for Negro women) in present-day society. It means support to her special demands, for child-care centers, health centers, etc. It means elevation of

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40 Margaret Grierson papers, SSC, letter from Flexner, October 26, 1956.
women to leadership on all party levels." By quoting Jones, Flexner not only made her own ideological education on the woman question clear, but she also exposed her students to the fact that within the Left movement, male supremacy had not yet disappeared.

Connected to this traditional communist explanation of the woman’s question was a chapter devoted to the history of the struggle of US women. It is here Flexner managed to create space for the narrative she was interested in. It shows the seeds of what would become *Century of Struggle*. In this chapter, Flexner introduced the role of women in the American Revolution, their importance in the struggle against slavery, women in the Knights of Labor, the WIDF, International Woman’s Day, the Seneca Falls convention (which she called “revolutionary”!) and strangely enough -- for a communist, although maybe not for a Popular Front Communist-- about the fight for woman suffrage. Flexner already made the connection between the fight for the abolition of slavery and the fight for women’s rights and she obviously saw the suffrage movement as a radical movement, since she asked her students to ponder the comparison between “the persecution of women leaders in the fight for suffrage with the persecution of progressive working class leaders today.”

The final chapter of the course consists of a list of names of woman leaders together with short biographies. It is strongly oriented toward politically active women, including women union leaders like Sarah Bagley and Leonarda Barry, women abolitionists like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, suffragettes like Alice Paul and Mary Elizabeth Lease, leading woman communists like Claudia Jones and

41 Flexner papers, folder 29, *Questions and Answers on The Woman Question.*
Ella Reeve Bloor and international woman communists like Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg.

It is clear from this course that Flexner did not consider the fight for woman suffrage to be just another bourgeois whim, like other communists did. In fact, she saw the struggles of working class women, black women and communist women as related, since they all found their place next to each other in this introduction to the woman's question. Exactly these convictions, which she obviously already formed in 1953 under the wing of the CP, later formed the basis of her book.

Flexner's use of aliases when it came to her writing and teaching at the Jefferson School for Social Sciences symbolized the changing atmosphere in the USA towards Left organizations and activists. Already in 1939, she wrote her sister about her concern of prosecution. She was worried about membership and mailing lists getting out and being published as the names of 'reds' and "[then] the hell with the Bill of Rights, [because] then it seems we've really got something to worry about... all better go underground together. If this red scare gets going enough any one who wants to stay out of war will be a red." Eleanor tried to explain her sister that she didn't believe the real threat came from Stalin, but instead from the inside of the country, from the people that could destroy organizations and people by labelling them 'red.' Unfortunately, this would not be the last time Flexner was confronted with anti-communism.

The repressive atmosphere of the Cold War and the prevalent anticommunism in the USA made the CPUSA lose ground on all levels. It had been the institutional

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42 Flexner papers, folder 29, course 29, 'the woman question'.

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core of a Left movement broader than just the party membership, which enabled it to
dominate the US Left. But the loss of members and the disappearance of these 'front
organizations' during the mid-Fifties was great. Communism became so discredited
that individuals associated with it could not partake in public life. The party was
forced to take much of its action underground, losing its fierce activism that had
attracted so many, including Flexner. Instead, the party retreated into a revolutionary
orthodoxy, which resulted in a rupture of alliances with New Deal liberals, among
others over the party's opposition to the Marshall plan. All this provided the CIO with
an opportunity to expulse unions and members too closely associated with the CP,
completing the isolation of the party. 44 Among the people indicted under the Smith
Act were Flexner's friends Claudia Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Marion
Bachrach, which brought the witch hunt frighteningly close to her doorstep. She
herself was never really harassed about her past by state officials and she did not
appear in the FBI report on CAW, although there does exist a FBI file on her, started
in 1944, in which she is listed as a member of the CP. 45 But Flexner, like so many
others, was strongly affected by those years. At the time of an interview with
Jacqueline Van Voris, when talking about the influence of the Communist Party on
artists and writers, she cuts off the conversation by stating that "the last thing one

43 Flexner papers, folder 8, letter to sister, sd ('39).
would want to do at this time [1983!] is to start another round of ‘Naming Names.’ All this explains her efforts to systematically isolate her desire to write the CS from her experiences in the Left in later interview and writings (she tends to date her hearing Elizabeth Gurley Flynn speak on a meeting ‘during the Fifties), although it is clear that the real origin of her interest in and search for woman’s history dates back to her years as an activist for the CP.

It might have been while preparing for her course on the woman question that Flexner noticed how few sources on women’s history were available. The bibliography of her course shows predominantly Marxists works on the woman’s question, like Clara Zetkin’s *Lenin on the Woman Question*, Nina Popova’s *Women in the Land of Socialism* and Betty Millard’s *Women on Guard*. While Flexner’s interest in woman’s history crystallized, she noticed how few books were available on the subject. Most books on woman’s history had been the work of participants, which often disqualified them as scholarly work. Examples are Alma Lutz’s *Created Equal*, the biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a biography of Susan B. Anthony by Ida Husted Harper and a few histories of the suffrage movement like Inez Irwin’s *Angels and Amazons*, which Flexner complained, ‘excluded black and working women completely’ and Abbie Graham’s *Ladies in Revolt*. When *The Life of Mary Woolley* by Jeanette Marks was published in 1955, Flexner exclaimed: “Horrible, there ought to be a law forbidding leading women’s biographies to be written by their best friends!” At the time Flexner started writing, there were only very few professional historians in the USA that occupied themselves with the specific topic of the history

46 Flexner papers, interview Van Voris, 69.
of women and their movements. There was the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker, who had done some work on women in the US and who was in definite support of Flexner’s work. And of course, there were Charles and Mary Beard. Especially the latter did some groundbreaking work in the field of woman’s history. Although the couple’s work and convictions were of a progressive nature, Flexner felt Beard was ‘more of a feminist’ than she was, obviously referring to Beard’s ‘bourgeois’ background (although Flexner herself came from upper middle-class backgrounds!) and judged her work as ‘too partisan,’ probably because of Mary’s involvement with the suffrage cause.\(^{48}\) (One wonders how she would have defined herself?) But Aptheker and the Beard’s work shows us how woman’s history was a field born under a progressive star, one Flexner certainly followed.

With *CS*, Flexner wrote a scholarly book on women’s history that nonetheless had its intellectual and social roots in the Left. Her own experiences as an activist were immensely important to her understanding and interpretation of the actions of the suffragettes. She identified her own struggles with theirs. At various times during later writings and interviews, she compared her own feeling of empowerment and strength during actions such as picketing or protesting with accounts such as, for example, Carrie Chapman Catt’s work in the Dakotas. At one point, she compares the violence she experienced during a protest meeting on Madison Square against the Korean war with an event she wrote about: “This certainly must have been in my

\(^{47}\) Grierson papers, College archives, Smith College, letter from Flexner, October 4, 1955.  
\(^{48}\) Flexner papers, interview with Ellen DuBois, 1988, 11.
consciousness when I wrote about the violence at some of the early abolition meetings such as that addressed by Angela Grimke in Pennsylvania Hall."\textsuperscript{49} These experiences helped Flexner to see the actions of woman abolitionists and suffragists as radical, although in truly Marxist vision they might be considered bourgeois. And although the element of struggle in her own life was very real, Flexner did realize she “could not put myself completely in the shoes of a working class woman, because [she] always had a home, [she] knew [she]’d never starve to death.”\textsuperscript{50} If it had not been for her knowing and appreciating woman like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Mary Van Kleeck, she might never have developed her critical and independent sense of awareness of woman’s struggles. And if it had not been for Claudia Jones, Flexner might never have realized the depth of the neglect black women had and still suffered. Which brings us to the main reason Flexner wrote the book she wrote: “because I couldn’t find anything like it.”\textsuperscript{51} With the writing of CS, she had finally found her own kind of activism, one that satisfied both her personal urge to write and her commitment to activism. Flexner’s approach, including the role black women and working class woman played in their own organization and in the fight for women’s rights, convinces the reader of the radical nature of a century of struggle for woman’s rights.

As could be expected, Flexner’s search for primary sources was a crusade in itself. One of the first people Flexner turned to, while looking for material on African-American women, was W.E.B DuBois himself. The visit did not turn out as Eleanor

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., memoir, II-3.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., interview DuBois, 19.
\textsuperscript{51} Flexner Papers, memoir, II.
expected, because this champion of African-American activism was dismissive of her idea and goals. Her research on working class women started off with the enormous (nineteen volumes!) Report on the Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the United States, which was published by the U.S. Congress. Its reading convinced her even more of the necessity to include working class women in the story she was about to tell. But how to find their material traces?

Through an archivist at her old school, Swarthmore College, she discovered the collection at the Sophia Smith College in Northampton and its curator Margaret Grierson as well as the collection became invaluable to the growth of her book. It got her "plugged in." Margaret Grierson and Flexner got to know each other through the passion they shared when it came to rescue women from the obscurities of the past and over the years, the two women developed a close friendship. After her first visit to the collection, Flexner wrote Grierson: "Silly as it may sound, I felt I was plunging away at something no one else knew very much about or cared less- and now it seems quite a lot of people are deeply interested and I feel all perked up!"

Grierson provided Flexner with a list of contacts, including many old participants of the suffrage movement and referrals to other archives that might be of use and Flexner, on her turn, tried to collect as much material as possible for the Smith Collection, a for example the papers of Mary Van Kleeck. She provided Grierson especially with contacts to unions and organizations that could provide her with

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52 Ibid., interview with Ellen DuBois, 2.
53 Ibid., interview Van Voris, 69.

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material on working class women, a group that was underrepresented, even at archives like Smith.54

It was through this list that Eleanor solved her lack of archival sources on African-American women when she contacted Dorothy Porter, an archivist at Howard University. Her work to create the Spingarn Collection, together with Jean Blackwell Hutson's efforts at the Schomburg Collection (the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library) enabled Flexner to pursue her interest in the role of black women and include them in their work.

The sources Flexner discovered at Radcliffe college (now known as the Schlesinger archives) included Inez Irwin's papers and the Lillie Deveruex Blake papers. The Library of Congress provided her with access to the diaries of Susan B. Anthony. But it was private collections that provided Flexner most of the material she was looking for. There was the collection of books and pamphlets held by Miriam Holden. Holden had been a member of the National Woman's Party up till the fifties and was a friend of women like Alice Paul, Margaret Sanger and Mary Beard. Together with Elizabeth Schlesinger she worked hard to introduce woman's history courses into university curricula, which first succeeded in 1952 at Radcliffe College.55 She was kind enough to let Flexner take whichever material she wanted to

use, although Flexner seemed to think she was a horrible person that just rambled on and had no understanding of the material she held.\textsuperscript{56}

By 1955 Flexner’s mother had died, which financially enabled Eleanor to devote all her time to the writing of her book. Around that time, she discovered the main treasures of information for her book through her contacts with some of the old suffragettes. Her greatest quest had been for the papers of Carrie Chapman Catt, but eventually she got a response to her letters from Mrs. Peck, an admirer, friend and former biographer of Catt about Mrs. Catt’s letters, which confirmed Flexner’s worries that “Those girls must have dealt them out, year by year, like a deck of cards.”\textsuperscript{57} According to Peck they were partly in the care of the NY Public Library (which would only open them in ‘65), partly ‘at the states’ where campaigns were held (at which Flexner desperately exclaimed at Grierson “Where!? The State capitols? University Libraries? On a telephone booth?”\textsuperscript{58}) and finally a part of them was in the care of Ms. Stantial. “And why didn’t they also send some of the stuff to Hawai and the Phillipines?”, wondered Flexner!\textsuperscript{59} Since she took a special interest in the figure of Carrie Chapman Catt and thus had an extra disdain for Peck’s ‘adulatory’ biography of her, Flexner went through extreme lengths to look at the papers in Stantial’s possession, but unfortunately, Ms. Stantial was about as accessible as Mrs. Peck. She told Flexner she was sorting the material in her possession, which gave Eleanor “nightmares, in which she figures, with a large pair

\textsuperscript{56} Grierson papers, letter from Flexner, December 5, 1956., Flexner Papers, interview with DuBois, 1-9. Gerda Lerner would certainly not agree with Flexner here; she held a great admiration for Holden’s collecting efforts.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. November 7, 1955.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. letter November 21, 1955.
of scissors, cutting unladylike paragraphs out of Alice Stockton Blackwell’s and Mrs. Catt’s letters. Eventually, in March 1956, she was able to visit Stantial’s attic, where she discovered a ‘heavenly’ collection, including the correspondence between Catt and Peck, part of the National American Woman Suffrage Association minutes and the Blackwell papers.

While she undertook this enormous task of writing a book on American women and their struggles, Flexner entered a pivotal phase in her personal life in which she distanced herself from the CP and the New York Left community she had lived in for most of her life. It is important to see the writing of CS against the backdrop of these years of doubt and decisions. Already during her conversations with Claudia Jones during the late Forties, Flexner learned a lot about the downsides of the CP: the prejudice in its hierarchy, its commitment to other issues than the woman’s question that was so dear to both women. As mentioned earlier, the anticommunist era was in full swing during the Fifties and the CPUSA retreated into a more orthodox ideological position, something that was not good for the people who’s primary concern (like the woman question) was not where the party’s was. Flexner’s personal disillusion with Marxism and the CP’s activism started around 1953 and burst in 1956 with Kroetsjek’s revelations about Stalin. A few years later, she wrote to a former fellow member how she was “baffled at people’s inability to examine, test, search—and communicate. Everybody holed up in their own private den of ‘hurt’.”

The drive to organize and act was something she would never lose, but she entrusted

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid. s.d. [early 1956]
61 Flexner Papers, memoir, II-h.
Grierson that she quit ‘that kind of life’ because it did not work and she could not take that anymore.⁶³ The decision to let go of a political movement entailed more than just that for CP members, as Flexner would come to realize. The New York community of Left activists was a very tight-knit one. It was not just a political but also a social group, and when the persecution hardened, the relations tightened. Flexner tried to get away from this environment, even physically. She had come to hate NYC because of its noise, its boxed-in apartments and “the ever-present problem of trying to reconcile a mass of fragments into a meaningful whole existence”⁶⁴ So she and Terry moved to Northampton, MA, the home of Smith College with its rich archive and home of her close friend Margaret Grierson. Flexner eventually had to seek therapeutic help to aid her work through her loss of community and activism. She once wrote to Margaret that she needed several lives to do all she wanted: “I want to write and I want to organize; I want to record the woman’s movement and get into the fight against discrimination, I want to fight and I want to meditate and read. I want to soak myself in American History. and I want to read lyric poetry; I want people, and I want to be alone.”⁶⁵ Flexner would never loose her drive for activism and the sense of justice that fueled it, but never again, despite her searches would she find the right environment for this. Because she matured in a Communist community that thrived upon activism and had a more hesitant attitude when it came to intellectuals, Flexner would never feel entirely comfortable devoting all of her time to writing. And while she missed the close Leftist New York community, she also knew

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⁶² Berta Reynolds papers, Sophia Smith Collection, letter from Flexner, February 4, 1961.
⁶³ Grierson papers, letter from Flexner, November 3, 1956.
⁶⁴ Ibid. letter from Flexner, August 30, 1956
how suffocating it had become and why she had left it. She had left their barricades to
man her own, something she would never have been able to do without them.

Around the time of her moving, Flexner started on the long road of finding a
publisher for the book. The publisher of her first book was not interested, which in a
way relieved Flexner because her relations with Simon and Schuster was not ideal
since they added a preface by John Gassner that was meant to ‘take the edge’ off her
thesis, but in reality, Flexner complained, must have been the first preface trying to
apologize for the book it introduced. The first problem Flexner encountered with CS,
was that publishers were looking for something like a “combination of Marynia
Farnham and Simone De Beauvoir on the problems of the emancipated woman, and
this is NOT my dish.”66 Harper’s told her that ‘a lighter touch’ would do the book
good and, yes, they wanted a concluding chapter on women today. Flexner tried to
convince them that the real value of the book lay in its merit as a historical work. She
admitted to Grierson that is was “highly comical that I, who have spent so many years
battling for this and that cause, should try to eschew controversy at this point!”67 But
she was sure of what the book had to be: a history of the woman’s rights movement.
And although it certainly showed where the sympathies of the writer were, she was
not writing a political pamphlet. Plus, she was afraid that some measure of
‘reassessing’ the women she wrote about from the advantage point of that time might
boil down to less stress on their pioneer courage and more on their foibles.68 Finally,
Harpers rejected the book because they did not want a history. After their refusal,

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid. s.d. [early 1956]
67 Ibid., October 16, 1956.

42
Flexner spoke to Oxford University Press because her father had published his books with them, but disillusioned she wrote she would not be the least surprised “if they turned it down because it was not rhymed couplets.” Unfortunately, it would be the material on Negro woman that she was asked to cut this time, because ‘it would not sell.’ Yet Flexner was determined to include this section, so continued on the search for a publisher. Finally, an offer would come from an unexpected corner: Harvard University Press was willing to take a look at the manuscript and it was evaluated positively by historians Arthur Schlesinger and Oscar Handlin with the remark that Harvard UP had been looking for exactly such a book. Only minor revisions were required and CS was published in 1959.

The book was and still is a comprehensive, readable narrative. It starts off with a chapter that briefly surveys the situation of women in the Colonial period, in which Flexner already devoted attention to the situation of the female slave. This attention for white as well as black women is characteristic for the book. The second chapter starts another topic that forms a steady thread through the book: educational opportunities for women. Flexner was convinced of the importance of knowledge and education in the battle against all forms of ignorance, and especially in the struggle for women’s rights. She credited efforts to take education out of the realm of the privileged daughters of the rich, like for example Emma Willard had tried to do.

The main component of the story is the growth of women’s organizations that fuelled the struggle for suffrage. Flexner recounted how women in the abolition movement first learned to organize and speak out. She saw a close connection

68 Ibid.

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between the movement for the abolition of slavery and the movement for women’s rights. Both involved the struggle for an equality embedded in the American constitution. It is also in this chapter that the reader becomes aware of Flexner’s deep belief in political action as a way of bringing about change.

From the beginning on, it is clear that Flexner was not writing about the struggle for the vote as the undertaking of the liberal middle and upper class women. Instead, she reclaimed this struggle as one of all women, regardless of class and race. She traced how they spread awareness of their identities as women through organization, political action and education.

Her story only really starts with the first major organizational effort in the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, which she saw as the birth of the movement for women’s rights. But nonetheless, she argued that “birth is a stage in a whole process of growth. In this case the process had begun almost half a century earlier.” Although Flexner devoted a lot of attention in the book to the leaders of the movement, she was equally committed to demonstrating that it was not just them who carried the movement. It also lay in the “dogged devotion it was able to instill in countless individuals.”

The attention for Southern women in the book is only marginal. Flexner was of the opinion that they were isolated by a slave society from the movement for greater equality that emerged among Northern women. What she did credit was the determining influence the American frontier had on the character forming of the
American women, and thus ultimately on their struggle. By doing so, she inscribed the struggle of the women in the greater American narrative, which legitimized its appeal to the equality of all American citizens and heightened its appeal.

The second part of the book treats the period from the Civil War until the beginning of the Twentieth century and records the split and reunification in the women's rights movement as well as the first attempts at unionisation for and by women and the entrance of women into higher education and the professional world. In almost every chapter she first discussed the efforts of white women, followed by the achievements of black women. This structural separation, apart from indicating a certain reality also illustrates the divorce Flexner herself saw between their situations, despite their common interest in the equality promised in the American constitution. The vote was often far removed from the minds of African-American women because of the multiple burden they faced in real life by being both black and female. Flexner was well aware of this double oppression, thanks to her friend Claudia Jones and her own work for the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses.

It must be said that despite Flexner's theoretical belief in the importance of working class women in this struggle, they do occupy considerably less space in the book. According to Flexner, the main reason for this was the poignant lack of sources in this area, which is undeniably true. But it was also true that the narrative of movement for women's rights just drew Flexner in. She was fascinated by their actions and held some of its leaders in great admiration. She was captivated by the tireless efforts of women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the
state campaigns and countless legal efforts to obtain even the smallest change in the women's status. Her sympathy for Carrie Chapman Catt is also more than obvious. Flexner elaborately described the elements involved in the split and reunification in the women's rights movement between the National Women's Suffrage Association and the American Women Suffrage Association.

The last third of the book closely follows the last decades before the achievement of the women's right to vote. In this part, the attention is more narrowly focused on the movement itself, with a detailed account of tactics, state campaigns, smaller defeats and victories up to the great victory of the nineteenth amendment. Again, Flexner often interrupts her greater narrative in order to pause upon the women involved: she chronicles their lives, ambitions, achievements and failures.

Although suffrage is at the center of this book and Flexner obviously agrees with 'her women' that it represented far more than just the right to cast the vote. It was the result of the efforts of women to organize themselves. Flexner knew all too well that the right to vote did not solve the inequality between men and women, but she nonetheless saw it as a great achievement.

Why did she choose to write this story? It proved the effectiveness of consistent political action and organization, something Flexner firmly believed in. Plus, the story had a good ending: the vote was won. It formed the kind of triumphalistic narrative that was popular in communist literature. And of course we should not forget that Flexner was trained as a traditional historian, way before social history became popular. Political history was the only history. In the end, the book demonstrates
Flexner's belief in breaking the silence: that is what the women she wrote about did and that is what she did.

For reasons not entirely clear, maybe because of her use of pen names, Flexner escaped being labelled a communist and thus her book got some fairly objective reviews, although it did not receive a great amount of attention when it was first published. Most reviews use adjectives such as passionate, well documented and interesting to describe the book. Helen Henley from the Christian Science Monitor grasped the importance of Flexner's representation of the woman's movement, not "as a separate shred torn from history, but as part of the warp and woof of national progress."  The book was even reviewed by Alma Lutz and it passed the test because Lutz praised it for its impartiality and for the attention it devoted to black women. She did admit that some of Flexner's valuations, like her strong admiration of Catt, were open to discussion.  While many reviewers liked the book for the amount of information it disclosed, the Library Journal criticized it as 'crammed with names' and too dense for the general reader.  Ishbel Ross, reviewer for the New York Times Book Review, while writing a generally positive critique, had some problems with Flexner's emphasis on struggle. She obviously saw the situation of women in the American society in a more positive light than Flexner and wondered how it was

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74 Library Journal, July 1959, 2200.
possible that Eleanor failed “to make much of the bright and shiny army of business
and professional women in America.”75

The book also received a moderate interest from academic journals, which
resulted in three enthusiastic reviews, all by women. Mary R. Dearing, in the
*American Historical Review* praised Flexner for her objectivity and hoped “that this
excellent survey will inspire studies in special areas of the topic.”76 Both the
*American Sociological Review* and the *New England Quarterly* drew a parallel
between Flexner’s topic and current situations. Elizabeth K. Nottingham in the *ASR*
compared the opposition to woman’s suffrage with the opposition against integration
and the extension of the vote for black Americans, hoping that people would learn
from Flexner’s account.77 The *NEQ* equally praised Flexner for her ‘sympathetic
imagination’ that brought the emotions of the past vividly to life. While Janet Wilson
did criticize Flexner for a lack of attention for immigrant women and the fact that her
research became thin in some areas, like the colonial and early national periods. But
these remarks are made up for by the conclusion, in which Wilson hopes that “In a
day indifferent to causes, *Century of Struggle* may serve as a timely reminder of the
idealism of the great American reform movements and in particular of the service and
devotion to a deeply felt purpose of the now-unfashionable feminists.”78 Most
academic reviewers recognized the marginality of the topic but nonetheless sensed
the importance of CS.

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76 Dearing, Mary R. *American Historical Review*, 65, April 1960, 620-621.
The book did not become a real success until its discovery by the early Second Wave activists, which was symbolized by its appearance in the ‘notorious’ footnote in Betty Friedan’s famous *The Feminine Mystique*. Chapter four of Friedan’s book, ‘The Passionate Journey,’ presented a reflection upon the cliché of the early feminists as “neurotic victims of penis envy who wanted to be men” Friedan fulminated against this perception and revalued the experiences of these women in their passionate search for identity: “Their was an act of rebellion, a violent denial of the identity of women as it was then defined.” Friedan not only relied on Flexner’s information for this chapter, she also understood the parallel between her own crusade and the struggle of the woman Flexner wrote about. Friedan thus urged that the book “should be required reading for every girl admitted to a U.S. college. The reason the mystique prevails is that very few women under the age of forty know the facts of the woman’s rights movement.” This footnote, small as it was, nonetheless represented a link to the past for many readers of Friedan’s book. Although they thought that with reading Flexner’s book they were looking to the early years of the woman’s movement in America, they were also looking at their immediate past, a past that was not necessarily visible to many of them at the time. This short footnote represented a root of the new feminist wave, a root connecting them to the Old Left, an episode America was taught to forget.

While her book came out, Flexner’s process of parting with the CP did not go as easy as wanted. She dearly missed the feeling of fellowship and community that

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the party provided, it was the absence of human relationships that hurt the most. Her disappointment was more with the failure of Marxist thought than with the failures of a number of Marxists, although she said there were many of them. She would remain in contact with a few of her old friends, among which Mary Van Kleeck, Bertha Reynolds and Marion Bachrach. It was especially Bertha Reynolds she would confide in about her emotional struggle and therapy, which eventually led her to conversion to Christianity. Reynolds (who actually herself converted, later on), attributed Flexner’s conversion to her emotional instability caused by her loneliness. She identified herself with Flexner and described how living in outside of NYC felt as if belonging to an ‘invisible host’, longing to see and talk with comrades. She tried to win Flexner over for a new generation of Marxists theory, headed by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Flexner’s problems, she thought, were due to her forsaking of a ‘materialist’ position for an ‘idealist’ one. But Flexner wasn’t receptive to Bertha’s explanation and tried to clarify that she was “confirmed yet not confined.”

Eleanor entrusted her friend Margaret with the fact that she would never deny the essential convictions and enthusiasm of ‘those years’, “as some folks have been at pain to do in latter days. It was a time of enormous fertility and promise and excitement and it will come again…” Her social responsibility would continue to manifest itself in many community actions, although on a smaller scale, like the

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81 Flexner Papers, folder 8, letter to sister Jean Flexner, October 1, 1961.
83 Grierson Papers, February 20, 1957.
keeping big developers out of her neighbourhood, making the public library accessible for handicapped and campaigning for local community housing projects.  

Around the time she published CS, Flexner wrote a poem that assessed her feeling of arriving at this point in her life, carrying a past from which she was turning away, although with some nostalgia and sympathy:

**Mid-Century Heritage**

The undivided mind, the heart secure  
Against all loss, these we may never find  
Ours the adventure of an unchosen quest  
For clarity and certitude of mind.  
Out of a forging long and difficult  
Shall grow the living self that, in the end,  
Tempered by fears, schooled in uncertainty,  
Withstands the hardest blow that doubt can send.

And if we never quit outgrow our past  
Of false immunities, still, ours the dream:  
The melody unaltering and true,  
The plumbless well that yields the undying stream,  
The lifelong struggle safe beyond recall,  
The singing heart, that knows no fear at all.  

For this fifty-year old women, there was no longer the security of a close-knit ideological community. But she could never desert her beliefs and convictions, although she knew that much of the certainties that she once had were false. Her ‘living self’ would cope with these blows. She might have lost a belief in communism, but she would never desert the principles that drove her to it in the first instance: her belief in equality and justice and her courage to stand up for these.

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84 Flexner Papers, memoir, III-9-13.  
85 Flexner Papers, folder 28.
Although CS was not an immediate success, it did elicit a new job for Flexner in the field of historical writing. She was invited to become a co-writer for the work of reference *Notable American Women*, for which she researched and wrote the entries for Mary Nutting, Kate O’Hara, Mary O’Sullivan, Anna Shaw, Antoinette Rogers Schuler and Leonarda Barry Lake. After the NAW project, she would embark upon a new historical book on Mary Wollstonecraft, published in 1972.

A real audience for CS only developed with the re-emergence of a women’s movement with the New Left during the Sixties. When these women started looking for a book on their own past -- just like Eleanor had done some twenty years earlier -- they found CS. Many of them came to the book through the reading of *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, which is generally credited to have ‘started off’ the second wave of feminism, as the resurgence of the women’s movement during the Sixties is generally called. Friedan used -- and some might say abused -- Flexner’s book on the woman’s rights movement as source of information for her own book. In a letter to Gerda Lerner by Linda Kerber, a fellow women’s historian, she complains that much of Friedan’s “borrowing is unacknowledged and unfootnoted; she comes awfully close to plagiarism.” Kerber continues to state “at least we should make sure that people know that Flexner’s work made much of Friedan’s attack possible.”

As Dan Horowitz revealed in his book on Betty Friedan, it was not such an unlikely connection, since Friedan, like Flexner, had been connected to labor radicalism during the Forties and had written about the CAW in her function as a labor

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Despite Friedan’s reliance on *CS*, though, her book lacks the attention Flexner’s devotes to working-class and black women.

What many of Flexner’s other readers might not have realized while reading *CS* was that they were holding a book written on an unlikely moment by an unlikely—and yet likely—person. Likely, because of her participation in movements like the CAW and the CP, where she met and learned from people like Mary Van Kleeck, (who was involved in the ‘First Wave’ and who, along with Grierson and Bachrach, was one of Flexner’s readers of the Ms) and Claudia Jones. And unlikely for exactly the same reasons. *CS* forms part of a small body of work that quietly continued the tradition of Left thinking on the woman’s question through the McCarthy years and paved the way for the Second Wave of feminism. And thus its intellectual roots refer to the intellectual roots of the ‘new’ progressive feminism of the late Sixties.

Apart from the above, *CS* had an extra significance as one of the founding works of the discipline of women’s history. This late success certainly made Flexner happy and was responsible for a second edition in 1975. Already in a sketch for a preface to the first edition, Flexner had expressed the importance of the knowledge of the history she wrote as a social fact because “by knowing it and understanding it can we face the problems women—and men—confront today.” This preface shows her intense connection to activism and although she did not want the book to be a pamphlet, it could be read as one. Flexner professed her belief that even the most unbiased and objective historian must have a point of view implicit in his work, and hers was the belief in equal opportunities for everybody but she also wanted to show

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87 Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*, 125 and 204.
her readers that change is always accompanied by new challenges and that it was still
too soon for women to give up the battle. In her preface to the 1975 edition Flexner
repeats these concerns, but her approach to some of the woman’s issues changed
considerably. In the first edition, she had not used the term feminism, as it constituted
a bourgeois concept for her and neither did she support the ERA, since it was
considered harmful for working class women. But this had also changed by the mid­
Seventies, when Flexner became an advocate of the ERA, believing that legal action
would still pave the way to change.

The reviews for the paperback edition compared to the reviews the original
edition received reveal the long way women’s history had come since 1959. CS was
still praised as a piece of solid scholarship, but sadly the bibliography was not
updated, which did diminish the value of the book for researchers. Neither was the
book significantly revised, which disappointed reviewers because this made it rather
out of date in some of its analysis. A new generation of women’s historians did not
share all of Flexner’s viewpoints. They did not agree with her that strikes or the
alumnae club were all that successful in heightening awareness and militant demands
and they were not as optimistic about the real impact of the vote for women. The
focus on political history also had to make place for a more social history oriented
scholarship. While Flexner had believed in the power of political change, due to her
experiences with the Old Left, the new generation of women activists were
disillusioned with the lack of real change political struggles like the right to vote had
brought about for women. These changes were of no importance, these women

88 Grierson Papers, draft of a preface, 1957.
54
argued, if they were not accompanied or preceded by changes in consciousness. This was argued by a reviewer who stated that “Ms. Flexner does not question whether it is valid to measure achievement in a framework of accomplishment defined by men; whether women who gained recognition by succeeding in overcoming institutional obstacles are the only women whose lives are worth recording.”90 This critique is not entirely just, because it was Flexner who first drew attention to those women that did not play major political roles, like for example the young working class women who gathered in the settlement houses in Chicago.91 But as Carol Lasser points out in her article on CS, a new paradigm entered the world of women’s history, symbolized by the publication of Caroll Smith-Rosenberg’s essay “The female world of love and ritual’ that drew the attention to the private and domestic worlds of women for the understanding of their lives.92 However, not every woman’s historian followed this path. Ellen DuBois’ viewpoints and work, for example, can be clearly situated in the same trend of Flexner’s, which combined activism and a focus on political history. In opposition to the scholars of ‘women’s culture,’ DuBois stressed the importance of a feminist perspective in women’s history and argued that special attention to the history of the feminist movement was necessary. Mari-Jo Buhle agreed, but took an

90 Vassar College Miscellany News, October 10, 1975.
91 Flexner, CS, 209.
92 Lasser, Carol. “Century of Struggle, Decades of Revision: A Retrospective on Eleanor Flexner’s Suffrage History,” Reviews in American History, 15-2, June 1987, 349. The debate around women’s culture and the viewpoints of leading women’s historians can be traced in the Feminist Studies symposium on ‘Politics and Culture in Women’s History’, which was published in Feminist Studies, 6-1, Spring 1980, 27-64.
intermediary position by emphasizing the use the knowledge provided by the students of women's culture might be to understand the history of feminism.\textsuperscript{93}

Despite the possible differences in approach and opinion that might have existed, the praise from women's historians for CS is ample. Ellen DuBois expressed her admiration for Flexner's work, although she admits they "simply absorbed her work without fully appreciating how original and innovative it was."\textsuperscript{94} Jacqueline Van Voris and Carol Lasser, women's historians, interviewed Flexner for the same reason. But Flexner's attitude towards the New Left was one of ambivalence. In 1968, on her sixtieth birthday, Flexner felt the gap between herself and the young people of the day but she still believed she could reach them, if she would just listen to them and earn their attention.\textsuperscript{95} But only a few years later, she seemed embittered by the lack of respect her book had received in academic circles (Flexner did not hold a Ph.D. in history) and she also felt that recognition from the new progressive feminists had been slow and small, which grieved her. During an interview with the local \textit{Daily Hampshire Gazette} in 1972, she admits being bothered by the fact "that many woman liberation spokesmen don't give any credit to the people who laid the foundation for them."\textsuperscript{96} And she is especially upset because she tried to go back to the sources for the writing of her book while Friedan and Millet constantly use her as a source, which she was not.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{93} 'Politics and Culture in Women's History,' \textit{Feminist Studies}, 6-1, Spring 1980, p 28 and 37.
\textsuperscript{95} Flexner papers, box 2, 'My Sixtieth Birthday', 11.
\textsuperscript{97} Flexner papers, interview with Van Voris, 90.
In the autobiographical notes preceding her book *The Majority Finds its Past*, published in 1979, woman’s historian Gerda Lerner commemorates Flexner’s contribution to the field of woman’s history and particularly to her own work, which benefited from Flexner’s essay and notes when it came to pointing out research directions. Anne Firor Scott from Duke University and Patricia King from the Radcliffe archives had similar high opinions of Flexner’s work. They had the visionary persistence to convince her to write a sort of a ‘memoir’ of how she came to write *CS*. After the death of Helen Terry, when she had moved to a retirement home, Flexner took them up on their request and wrote the piece, which was only opened for the public after her death in 1995. It forms the core of her papers at the Schlesinger archive and is of invaluable importance for anyone interested in the history of feminism during the Forties and Fifties.

Flexner’s active life as a woman’s historian did not end after she wrote *CS*. It was Gerda Lerner, whom, from the late Sixties until the early Eighties, corresponded with Flexner and convinced her that interest in and appreciation of Flexner’s work was genuine. She told Flexner: “I hope you realize that you are one of the heroines and spiritual mother figures for the eager young feminists of this generation.” Flexner’s reaction is one of gratitude mixed with bitterness: she writes she is happy that her book helped open the door, although she does not believe that many people

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99 Although Gerda Lerner denies this, it is possible that the two women had met earlier, in their ‘old lives’ as Leftist activists. According to Dan Horowitz, Lerner had been affiliated with the CAW. (Horowitz, *Betty Friedan*, 213.) This might help to explain Lerner’s interest in honouring Flexner as an accredited historian, since it might have reflected her own anxieties about her own past.
100 Lerner Papers, box 1, folder 36, letter to Flexner, January 29, 1971.
perceive it like Lerner does. Lerner made an effort to involve Flexner in the current academic scene and with the woman’s liberation and although Flexner responded with cautious interest, it took until 1974 before Lerner got her to participate in a conference. This conference was the second Berkshire Conference of Women Historians that took place at Radcliffe college in Cambridge, where Flexner was honoured during the opening session for her work as a bridge between the generation of Mary Beard, Miriam Holden, Elizabeth Schlesinger and Alma Lutz with the present.

At the 1976 Berkshire conference in Bryn Mawr, Flexner herself took the stand and talked about her experiences of writing a book on woman’s history in loneliness, without a Ph.D. and without the women’s support networks-like the Berkshire conferences- like they existed at the time of her speech. Her words expressed the anxiety she felt at the 1974 conference when many of the pioneers in woman’s history had been categorized as ‘traditionalists.’ While defending her own work, she does admit that she does not agree with the new woman’s movement on all levels: “I happen to be one of that small number who believe that there will always be some degree of diversity in the lives of women and men.” When she goes on to criticize the language usage of young people, it becomes clear to the reader –or listener- that Flexner was becoming an old lady that had led her life in a world that no longer existed. The demands and behaviour of the ‘woman’s lib” as she somewhat denigrating tended to call it, where often shocking to her and although they respected

101 Ibid. letter from Flexner, February 8, 1971.
102 Ibid., Box 5, folders 199-200.
103 Flexner papers, box 1, folder 30 “Come let us write history together.”
her work, she felt increasingly isolated from the contemporary woman’s movement. She did not believe the leaders of NOW were handling their cases well. She was convinced that a more organized and disciplined movement should go for one general amendment and then fight the other issues one by one. Flexner was not comfortable with the ‘controversial stuff, like homosexuality and abortion.’

She felt that tactics including “building up dues-paying membership clubs, organ in the community on the ward or election district level, paid full-time leadership, trained or at least maturely experienced organizers, lobbying of congress and state legislators, money!, a ‘master-plan’…” would be much more effective, which showed her own roots probably more than she realized!

Flexner had expressed some of these opinions earlier on to Lerner in the privacy of their correspondence. Already in 1971, she wrote she was concerned about “the blind spot that the “lib” crowd is developing where history is concerned—our history, woman’s history…they really want to write the record to suit themselves…they are building up a mythology”

When, in 1979, she was invited by Linda Kerber to chair a session on woman’s history at the Conference of the Organization of American Historians, she refused. The burden of caring for her partner and the earlier isolating experiences with the contemporary academic world made her retreat from public life.

She would not be forgotten though. In 1980, Gerda Lerner conducted an overview of woman’s history courses from all over the country and from the answers

104 Ibid. interview with DuBois, 5.
105 Ibid. folder 30, “Changing tactics in the Woman Suffrage Movement”
106 Lerner papers, folder 36, letter from Flexner, february 8, 1971.
she received, it is apparent that CS and even Mary were still valued as reading material, among others by Lerner herself, Mari-Jo Buhle at Brown University, David Allmendinger at Smith College, Linda Kerber, Linda Gordon and Kathrine Kish Sklar. In her report "Teaching Woman's History", Lerner consequently lauded CS: "The most important work of historical scholarship on women in the transition period '20-'70 was authored by a non-academic feminist." Its innovativeness lay in the locating of the woman's movement in the tradition of American reform and the struggles of labor movement, with which it provided a framework for the next generation of woman's historians.108

From the Thirties to the Sixties, Flexner represented the progressive feminists. She was educated in an Old Left environment but carried this inheritance with her in work and thus made her contribution to the New Left that helped pave the way for the emergence of woman's studies. With the knowledge and understanding of her life, one comes to reconsider the importance of the Old Left in the now dwindling image of the self-invented New Left feminist. A fish escaping through the maze of fiercely anti-communist decades, she went on to become a mother: one of a generation of critical and independent woman scholars.

107 Flexner Papers, folder 16, letter from Kerber, July 20, 1979
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