# DESTINED FOR EQUALITY

## THE INEVITABLE RISE OF WOMEN'S STATUS

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***Excerpts ...***

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CHAPTER FOUR

# INSTITUTIONAL INDIVIDUALISM

Modern economic and political organization fostered individualism, which stressed what people know and do over birth and status. Grades in schools, standardized entrance exams, rules governing promotions, no-fault divorce laws, and a belief that jobs should go to the most qualified applicants are all signs of individualism. Individualism applied impartial standards to people's performance, skills, and effort. As it permeated other social institutions, such as the educational system and the family, individualism subverted gender inequality, contributing to its decline, even as the institutions continued to discriminate against women.

Again, a paradox. Men have dominated these institutions, so we would reasonably expect they would consistently support gender inequality. Nonetheless, they adopted practices and ideas that effectively helped to undermine gender inequality. These institutions have been justifiably criticized for sustaining gender inequality by treating women differently from men. Yet these same institutions helped erode inequality over the long term, although few expected or intended this. Three institutional contexts that illustrate this paradoxical relationship to gender inequality are the modern educational system, the family, and, a context that cuts across institutions, the prevailing ideology about fair and effective ways to select people for jobs and other positions.

In each of these contexts, institutional individualism—individualism embedded in an institution's practices and ideals—generated inter-

ests, expectations, perceptions, and social conditions that favored increasing gender equality, although the men guiding all institutions believed they were preserving "traditional" distinctions between women and men. Modern schools steadily eroded differences between what women and men learned, although they were committed to maintaining distinctions. Similarly, meritocratic ideas made discrimination appear increasingly impractical and unjust, although the ideas were intended to legitimate existing inequality and rationalize organizational power. The modern family also produced individualistic parental and spousal interests that had a poor fit with gender inequality, although men clung to their role as head of the household.

As with economic and political shifts, the changes were diffuse, uneven, and gradual. The long-term causal processes created an expanding potential for actions benefiting women rather than directly improving women's status. Historical conditions decided the specific changes, when they occurred, and who induced them, as people adapted to spreading institutional individualism, each according to their circumstances. Over the long term, however, institutional individualism consistently degraded sex distinctions crucial to gender inequality's persistence, elevating actions, expectations, and ideals that ignored gender.

Institutional individualism emerged in the transition to modern society, and the concept of individual was created in the effort to understand that transition. Because it refers to important, pervasive, and complex phenomena, the term *individualism* has been used in many ways. Steven Lukes has shown that various thinkers have used *individualism* to refer to the right or the ability to withdraw to a realm outside civic control, the ideal of free citizens who grant legitimate sovereignty to a representative government, the ideal of free property owners and laborers who constitute an economy (either concretely in history or abstractly in theory), the belief that people may achieve legitimate moral judgments through critical thinking rather than through applying prescriptive rules, and other, sometimes more abstract, ideas.' In intellectual discourse and as an idea in popular culture, individualism largely refers to a set of beliefs. In contrast, here we are concerned with individualism as it exists in the pattern of institutional practices and ordinary people's lives, reflecting early social theorists' interpretations of the transition toward individualism as a defining characteristic of modern societies. These theorists emphasized

divergent causal processes and used different terminology, but all stressed aspects of individualism. Each sought to understand what made modern societies different from earlier societies. From their ideas emerges a sound theoretical conception of individualism.

The term *individualism* apparently first appeared in English in *Democracy in America,* a classic study by Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who visited America in the 1830s. This influential work tried to identify what distinguished the Americans' new democratic culture from backward aristocratic regimes in France and other European states. Tocqueville primarily identified individualism with a personal independence that gave people's self-interests precedence over their obligations to other segments of the community. Tocqueville considered individualism a singular product of democratic political organization. He contrasted it with aristocratic society in which everyone's identity derived from group membership. There, a strict hierarchy of relations connected everyone from the lowest peasant to the king. The lack of formal status groups and higher social mobility of democratic societies eradicated these connections, leaving everyone as an individual.

Other nineteenth-century theorists identified similar individualistic characteristics distinguishing modern society from those that preceded it, although their portraits varied in accordance with the historical and intellectual currents surrounding them. In Great Britain, Henry Sumner Maine claimed that *contract* had displaced *status* as freely bargained relations and individual obligation supplanted fixed ranks and family dependency. In Germany, Ferdinand ·Pinnies contended that *Gesellschaft* was displacing *Gemeinschaft* as the impersonal, contractual, secular relations of the modern economy superseded the intimate, constant, morally saturated bonds in families or small communities. In France, Emile Durkheim contrasted modern societies with primitive societies. In modern societies, Durkheim proposed, *organic solidarity* had replaced *mechanical solidarity,* so that people were conditionally linked through varied roles as a result of a high division of labor rather than unconditionally linked by sharing a common identity as a result of a low division of labor. Others expressed similar ideas about the individualistic transformation of social life.[2] In the twentieth century, these diverse theoretical oppositions were consolidated by the influential American sociologist Talcott Parsons, representing each with what he called a *pattern variable.*[3] Each pattern

variable defined a continuum, with modern and premodern societies at opposite ends. Modern society produced a new bundle of orientations that guided social action in a much more individualistic way than premodern societies.

These theorists believed the transition to modern society dramatically transformed human relationships, resulting in individualism. They each tried to characterize the differences between modern contractual, bureaucratic relationships and premodern ties characterized by kinship, fealty, and bondage. They associated enduring, multistranded, ascribed relationships with families and communities of the past. In the future, which they associated with modern economic and political life, they foresaw ever more temporary, limited purpose, voluntaristic (elective) relationships. Or, individualism.

Individualism, therefore, can be conceived as a characteristic of social practices, organizational rules, and relationships. This *institutional individualism* exists insofar as the relations between an institution and people are direct, consensual, and functionally circumscribed. Direct social relations are unmediated by any intervening personalities such as husbands, families, lineages, guilds, communities, or organized castes. For example, universal suffrage gives all citizens a direct relationship to the state. Consensual social relations operate within rules that proscribe coercion (except as a response to illegitimate actions violating the rules) and respect self-determination. For example, people are formally free to quit any job (unless bound by a contract freely signed). The rules, activities, and considerations legitimately active in a functionally circumscribed relationship are limited to its defined role in people's lives. For example, a bank's lending decisions are formally limited to the prospective borrower's economic circumstances and detached or isolated from such considerations as kinship ties or ethnicity. Practical considerations, conflicting claims of overlapping relationships, and the simple pursuit of power commonly restrict the attainment of institutional individualism.

Institutionalized individualism has arisen gradually out of modern political and economic organization, largely over the last two centuries. As it unfolded, individualism reinforced economic and political interests' disengagement from gender inequality, helping pave the way for women's rising status. This individualism diffused to other institutional contexts as they adapted to the transformation of political and economic organization.

In the political realm, modern citizenship's expansion was an inherently individuating process. As the state granted legal, political, and social citizenship rights, it broke apart ties of personal dependency. Earlier, people lacking these rights from the state had to depend on others to represent them, to defend their interests, and to provide them security. Mainly, families served these purposes. This dependency gave men, who controlled familial resources, a strong upper hand. Citizenship rights severed many of these dependencies, substituting direct relations between women and the state for relations mediated by men. The state also bolstered individualism in other ways. It tied its legitimacy to the claim that it represented all the people; it subjected all people to more shared standards as it gradually extended the scope of government activities; and it applied bureaucratic principles in its ever-expanding activities.

In the economic realm, expanding employment had a similar individuating influence. Paid employment necessarily displaced self-employment as economic production moved from families into firms. Separation of jobs from families exposed both sexes to more economic individualism, but the change affected women and men differently. Earlier, when families organized most economic activities, men controlled households while most women were directly dependent on a husband or father. The modern economy forced all people, male and female, to rely more on jobs for income. Men experienced this trend as a decline in economic independence. Women had the opposite experience. As jobs became available to them, women became more economically independent, because they became less dependent on individual men. Modern economic practices also promoted individualism in other ways. They stressed impersonal market criteria; they increased the role of temporary economic relationships between people; and they expanded anonymous, bureaucratic authority in large firms.

Because other societal institutions were highly integrated with and dependent on economic and political processes, they too became, to greater or lesser degrees, individualistic. In particular, modern education, meritocratic ideology, and companionable marriage all exhibited more institutional individualism. Modern schools placed children in a formal, bureaucratic setting to prepare them for the world beyond their family boundaries. Meritocratic ideas and practices promoted abstract standards, idealizing their justice and effectiveness. The modern family became loosely bound by sentimental ties that encouraged

autonomy. What we want to understand is just how these tendencies toward institutional individualism were induced by the reorganization of economic and political processes, and how these individualistic tendencies slowly created institutional support for gender inequality's decline.

## MODERN EDUCATION'S IMPLICIT CHALLENGE TO GENDER INEQUALITY

The educational system favored equality between the sexes sooner and more fully than did the men who ran it, the parents whose children were in it, or the society it served. Its aid to women's rising status is still often underestimated. In recent years, studies have shown that women long had less access to schooling and that what education they could get was different and inferior, reflecting and helping perpetuate gender inequality. Nonetheless, modern education has been a powerful and largely unintended force eroding the foundations of gender inequality. While women have had fewer educational opportunities than men until recently, the educational system incorporated women early, quickly, and soon began to lessen the gap between the sexes. Educators and parents did plan to educate women differently from men, but the core subjects and skills were largely taught in the same way. Somewhat better schools were available for males, but most education was coeducational and largely equivalent in quality. Unavoidable individualistic tendencies in modern education defied people's efforts to make it fit and sustain traditional gender roles.

Infused with individualism, the modern educational system is a defining invention of modern life that signaled a fundamental realignment of society's primary institutions. Indeed, by separating people from their families, the organization of modern education may have contributed more to individualism than all the new ideas arising from science, philosophy, or reforming religions. Modern education wedged itself between the private world of the family and the public world of the economy and the political order. The modern economy and government produced the needs and the resources that led to the extensive expansion of education. Before this, people learned their work skills from their parents or by working with others who had the skills. As the family economy disappeared, the state, industry, and families needed a school system to prepare young people for their adult roles.

Families felt the need for schools most directly, as with each passing year fewer parents worked at home or had the skills their children needed. Families relied on schools to watch over their children, to instill morality, and to prepare them for their adult roles. Businesses turned to schools to instill skills and discipline, hoping to ensure an adequate supply of productive employees. The government relied on schools to generate loyalty and consent to its rule. Schools thus arose as a functional response to the needs of both the public realm—the economy and the state—and the private realm—the family. Organized bureaucratically with meritocratic standards and rational procedures, modern education increasingly linked private institutions to public institutions and older generations to younger ones.

The division between schools and households marked the emergence of modern social organization, much like the more commonly cited division between work worlds and households. When viewed from afar, using a long-term historical perspective, what could be stranger or more dramatic than modern education? People send all their school-age children into the arms and ideas of strangers, for a duration almost equaling the work week, from a very young age until they are young adults. Most have little influence over which school their children attend, and even less influence over who teaches their children or what they are taught. Schools teach children how to think, how to succeed, what is true, what is right, and what is wrong. By the time children reach the age when they can assimilate moral ideals, they spend most of the work week away at school even if their mothers stay at home. "Traditionalists" arguing that working mothers plunge their children into moral deprivation have been blind to historical realities. Women's modern employment has *not produced* significant changes in childrearing. Instead, women's employment, in part, has been *produced by* the changes in childrearing that have moved so much of children's upbringing outside the household.

The egalitarian bias of the educational system developed in fits and starts through a complex process lasting two centuries. The changing treatment of women was intermingled with the perpetual expansion and transformation of schooling. Primary schooling became standard during the late nineteenth century, high school became standard during the first half of the twentieth century, and college education has now become a middle-class standard. At each level of education, private schools for boys helped start the process, but state-controlled,

coeducational public schools soon developed to serve the majority.[4] Girls' schooling first caught up with boys' at the lowest level. The equalizing process repeated itself at each successive level. Not only were women gradually given similar amounts of education; the education at each level also moved toward a similar curriculum and quality of education for girls and boys. For this to occur, the parents' and girls' demand for female schooling had to rise, schools' and colleges' willingness to educate females had to increase, and male resistance to women's improved education had to fall. This powerful equalizing trend in education reflected the power of institutional individualism both in education and in the surrounding social environment.

The American commitment to public education and coeducation exceeded that of most other industrializing countries, although similar developments were widespread. Exactly why the United States was a leader is not certain. Probably the greater purity of capitalism and representative government in America rendered the inducements to modern education more intense and the limiting conditions less problematic than in other industrializing nations. The most comprehensive historical account, David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot's *Learning Together: A History of Coeducation in American Schools,* offers some evidence about what people involved in these developments thought they were doing.[5] These illustrate general concern for the higher costs of separate education, some school administrators' interests in teaching girls in order to sustain enrollments, and some middle-class families' commitment to educating daughters. Costs and enrollments were also issues in countries less open to coeducation, however, so some other causes must have also made a difference. The early extension of suffrage to working-class men was probably one influence. Once the working class had membership in the polity, government provision of public education was difficult to avoid. Middle-class politicians and administrators probably valued issues of cost and control higher when designing education for the working classes than they did when setting goals for their own children's education. No illusions that working-class girls were being prepared to become ladies guided their decisions. The early development of public education, cross-class conflicts, and the absence of any competing educational traditions probably all contributed to the coeducational bias.

Secondary schools first revealed an egalitarian potential for women in American education. Just one of fifteen young people completed high school in 1900; receiving a high school degree at the beginning of

the twentieth century was about as common as receiving a master of arts degree today. When high school education was still a privilege enjoyed by only a few, we might particularly expect that the privilege would be reserved for men. Yet in the decades preceding World War I, for every two men who earned high school degrees, three women graduated. Later this gap narrowed, until women received only 10 percent more than men by the beginning of World War 11.[6] Where secondary education remained sex segregated, these numbers probably masked inferior schooling for girls, but as coeducation became widespread, girls and boys gained similar (though not equal) educational opportunities.

Apparently, more women than men received secondary education because schooling had a different relation to women's roles than it did to men's. High school education had considerable practical value for young women, whereas it served mainly as a path to college for young men. At the end of the nineteenth century, a high proportion (according to official statistics, as many as 90 percent) of all men who finished high school also finished college.' In contrast, only 15 percent of women completing high school received higher degrees. Instead, women's high school degrees let them enter several expanding occupations, including teaching, sales work, library work, nursing, and clerical work. The hope of becoming a school teacher, in particular, probably spurred many women to get their high school degrees.[8] More than half a million women were teaching in public elementary and secondary schools by 1920.[9] No similar spur to high school education existed for men. High school degrees did not yet play the same role in men's occupational pursuits. Boys not aiming for college probably left school for a job more often than girls, because they could find work more easily than girls could and were more likely to face demands that they contribute income to their families. Nonetheless, while these considerations may explain why proportionately more women than men completed secondary school, this differential favoring women shows the educational system operating almost at odds with gender inequality.

In contrast to their edge in receiving high school degrees, women gained only limited access to college in the nineteenth century and did not attend with the same regularity as men until the end of the twentieth century. Even affluent women had much less chance to go to college than men. (See Figure 4.1.)[10]
Nonetheless, for a society that generally treated the sexes so differ-

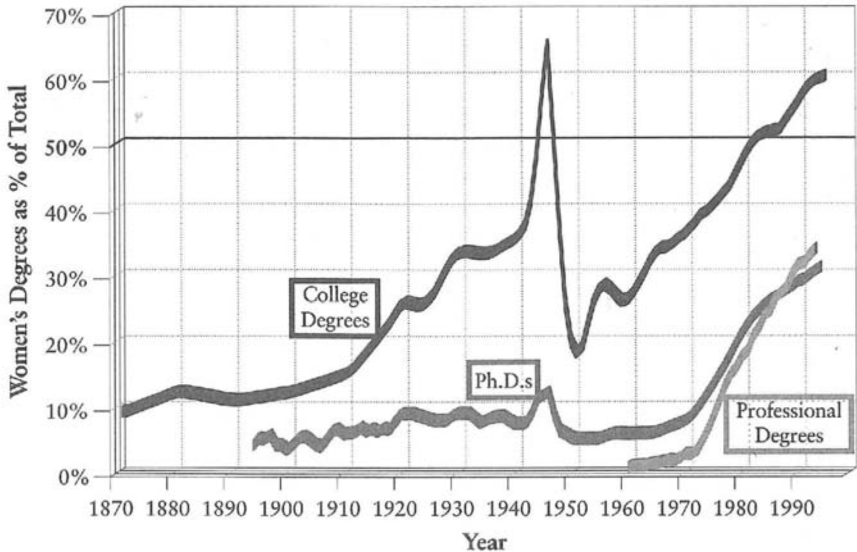


*Figure 4.1.* Women's share of higher education, 1870-1994
*Sources: U.S.* Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, vol.* 1, pp. 379-380, 385-386; U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education: 1984,* pp. 58, 88, 98; idem, *Digest of Education Statistics,* 1996, pp. 253, 281. Data include both public and private institutions. College degrees = bachelor's or first professional degrees. To lessen data peculiarities of particular years, before comparisons the data were converted to three-year running averages centered on the reference year.

ently, women's access to college also progressed at a remarkable rate. By the Civil War, only a few private and public colleges admitted women, and all kept the female students in a separate and secondary status. In response to the resistance of private male colleges, some affluent supporters of women's education founded women's colleges, with Vassar (1865), Smith (1875), Wellesley (1875), Bryn Mawr (1885), and Mount Holyoke (1888) leading the way. During this same period, public universities throughout the Midwest and West adopted coeducation and increasingly admitted women to the same program of studies as men. By the end of the nineteenth century most public universities admitted women, although most also still restricted their number. In 1890, 20 percent of all colleges were women's colleges and 43 percent were coeducational, although many of women's degrees were from inferior "normal schools" or teachers' colleges.[11] By 1900,

over two-thirds of the women attending college were at coeducational schools. By the end of the nineteenth century, women received one-fourth as many college degrees as did men. This proportion rose to one-half by the conclusion of World War I, to three-quarters by the beginning of World War II, and to equality by the 1980s.

In a culture ruled by sexual inequality and distinctive sex roles, it was not surprising that women went to college less often then men. It was surprising that women's educational opportunities steadily increased, seemingly defying the logic of their inferior status. (See Figure 4.2.) Comparing the college-graduation rates of women and men over time shows that women have been little more than a decade behind men since the mid-1920s (except for a few years in the 1950s that reflected postwar effects).

Given the much lower employment rates of middle-class women in relation to men and powerful cultural beliefs about sex differences, this outcome is remarkable. Because the overall rates for obtaining college degrees rose rapidly over the twentieth century, the ten or so years that women's progress lagged behind men's sustained a signifi-

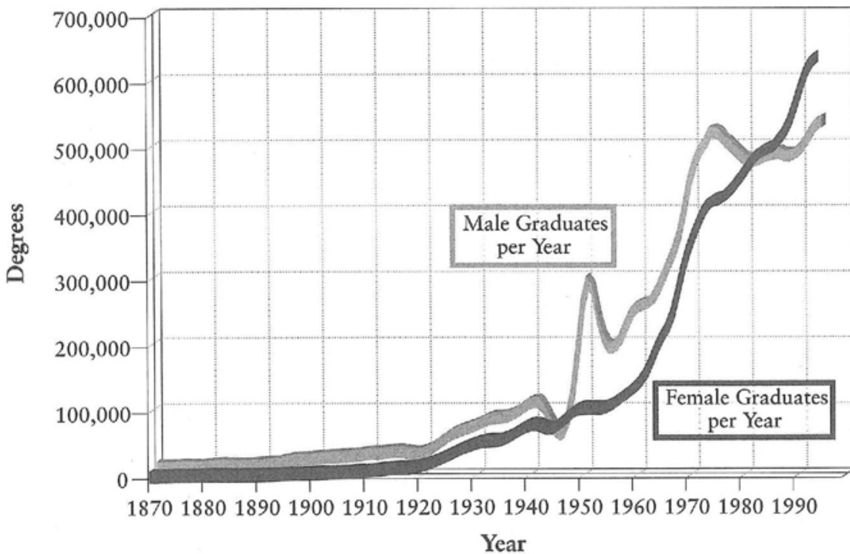


*Figure* 4.2. College degrees, by gender, 1870-1994
*Sources:* See Figure 4.1.

cant difference in their concurrent college attendance rates until recently (see Figure 4.1). From a historical perspective, however, the temporal lag was more telling than the difference at any particular point in time. The brevity of this temporal lag was exceptional. Women's access to higher education fell short of men's access, but, being only a decade behind, women's treatment by the higher-education system was more egalitarian than their access to good jobs, organizational authority, or political influence.

The reason that women attended college in ever-increasing numbers was that several individualistic trends in modern society converged. Economic success and status increasingly depended on personal credentials and skills. Families treated daughters and sons more alike. And schools were increasingly indifferent to the gender of their students.

The pioneering women who first attended college came predominantly from affluent middle-class families. Barbara Solomon explored the social origins of these women in her study of women's higher education.[12] Extremely wealthy people did not perceive education as a means to advancement and continued to tutor their daughters at home. Working-class families could not afford to send children of either sex to college. Only middle-class families regularly had both the means and the belief in the value of higher education. This was especially true of socially mobile families. Women attending college often had fathers who had climbed the social ladder to their middle-class status. Consistent with this portrait, Susan Ware found that the majority of women who became prominent in Washington during the New Deal had attended college, but those who had not usually had upper-class or working-class backgrounds.[13]

In the late nineteenth century, college degrees, not family lineage, were becoming the tickets to travel the track to success. Middle-class people in business and the professions were the first in line. For them, economic activities decisively defined status, and college gave practical advantages of credentials and useful knowledge.

Parents' increasing support for their daughters' college education was part of a more general shift toward equal treatment of daughters and sons. Since early in the nineteenth century, middle-class families also increasingly bequeathed to daughters significant, sometimes equal, shares of the family wealth.[14] The wish to give property to daughters was one source of support for the Married Woman's Property Acts. As college education became a bridge that ever more men

traversed on their way to prosperity, colleges became advantageous places for young women seeking competitive advantages in the marriage market's A college education gave a woman status and marked her as a worthy marital prospect for a young man with aspirations. It also put her in the right place at the right time to find a husband. Whether or not parents saw a good marriage as the highest goal they could hope their daughters might achieve, they believed higher education was inherently valuable. It functioned as a practical safety device if death or divorce left a woman to fend for herself. College education became a means to endow a daughter. In a society in which women still had little hope for positions in commerce or public institutions, higher education was something special that parents could give their daughters.

In the twentieth century, daughters of wealthy and working-class families also took advantage of expanding opportunities to attend college. The brighter and more ambitious daughters of the upper class probably talked their families into college for its merits. Over time, other wealthy families came to believe that college improved their daughters' marital prospects. As financial assistance programs became more common, working-class families also began to send some of their daughters to college. They were pursuing social mobility strategies like those common among middle-class families of the nineteenth century.

These patterns accelerated during the twentieth century. Both parents and daughters became more concerned about education, especially in the managerial and professional middle classes. A college education was becoming more decisive for career success. More middle-class women took jobs. More found their husbands either through their college experience or through a job that followed college. And more divorced and returned to jobs. As a result, young middle-class women who did not go to college seemed increasingly disadvantaged by comparison with those who did.

Women striving for access to these educational opportunities, particularly college education, initially had to force the issue by agitating and accumulating supporters among reformers. As colleges grew, however, they became more bureaucratic. Regardless of college administrators' prejudices, their interests became indifferent to the sex of students, even prompting some to recruit female students eagerly. As these conditions advanced, colleges, particularly public universities, increasingly accepted women. Colleges' willingness to accommodate

the rising aspirations of young women and their parents probably developed similarly to employers' willingness to hire women. Higher education had its ideologues and moral leaders—both supporting and opposing women's education. Like employers, many had prejudices against women. Also like employers, however, pragmatic goals often guided educators, administrators, and trustees, who wanted to enhance their personal and institutional statuses. If those who were making policy in colleges believed that female students presented a valuable opportunity, some would be ready to suppress their biases to get a step up. The need for schooling outside the family made education an industry. It socialized the young to standardized specifications, preparing them to be useful, conforming adults. As organizations needing a market for their product (education), colleges had straightforward interests met by accepting female students. Most public universities enrolled only men when they began in the nineteenth century, but they admitted women more rapidly and flexibly than private colleges. By 1900, 70 percent of women enrolled in college were in coeducational colleges.[16] Prompted by funds available through federal land-grant policies, midwestern and western states inaugurated many public universities. These new institutions were responsible to their state legislatures rather than to a controlling network of wealthy alumni.

Often, some faculty members, administrators, trustees, or students initially resisted women's entry, but this fluttering resistance was usually more consistent with generalized anxiety and bewilderment than with entrenched opposition. Commonly, women were first accepted on a separate track or were first admitted to a normal-school program to prepare primary and secondary teachers. Once these experiments showed that no dangers lurked behind the female invasion, the public colleges adopted coeducational policies (with rules to protect the young women's moral standards that all concerned seemed to expect and support).

When the issue of coeducation in colleges became a public controversy during the 1870s and 1880s, educators claimed that their experience showed higher education for women had been almost universally successful. A letter written by James Angell, president of the University of Michigan, in 1884 is a typical assessment:

> Most of the evils feared by those who opposed the admission of women have not been encountered . . . We made no solitary modification of our

> rules or requirements. The women did not become hoydenish; they did not fail in their studies; they did not break down in health; they have graduated in all departments; they have not been inferior in scholarship to the men; the careers of our women graduates have been, on the whole, very satisfactory.[17]

By 1900 the state universities were open to women everywhere except in four southern states."

Reflecting the circumstances of three key masculine roles, male students, fathers, and college officials might have found it in their interest to oppose women's college education. None did. Prejudice still motivated men to resist women's education, but an absence of consistent self-interest robbed the opposition of sustaining force. Students had temporary, isolated, and dependent roles. They were students only a few years, they did not share a future fate, and they lacked ties to male students in other schools. Therefore, male students had no real interests in opposing female students, no practical means to repel them, and often enjoyed the availability of female companions (although bigotry sometimes prompted young men to taunt, ridicule, and shun female students, especially the pioneers). Fathers had less reason to fear or oppose their daughters' advance than they did the advance of women in their own generation. A father had always expected to lose authority over his daughters when they married. He had little interest in trying to preserve control. Usually, a father could expect to gain more than he lost if his daughters bettered themselves. Similarly, college administrators and faculty generally could expect to profit if admitting women increased enrollments. The administrators did voice fears that female students might unsettle the male students, alienate male alumni, or perform poorly. Only the fears about male alumni proved valid, and those largely concerned the older, private eastern colleges which had no need to attract more students (and which did hold out much longer against women).

To some degree, curricular segregation by sex reduced the motives for opposition in higher education, much as occupational segregation reduced opposition to women's taking jobs. To the degree that women and men pursued distinctive educational programs, the competition between them was reduced. However, while this eased women's assimilation, it also threatened to isolate them in lower-status programs.

As colleges shifted toward a model in which students chose a major that was expected to relate to their future occupation, women's and

men's disciplinary choices came to reflect the occupations available. Disciplinary segregation reflected the sex segregation of occupations. In the nineteenth century, colleges generally did not offer practical or business-oriented preparation; they followed a "classical" model. From the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, colleges dramatically revised their curricula by introducing many practical studies and moving toward an elective system giving students wide-ranging choices. When engineering and agricultural training emerged, they became male bastions. As coeducational colleges widened their acceptance, perhaps two-thirds of female students studied education to prepare for teaching as a possible occupation. Coeducational colleges introduced "home economics" just for women early in the twentieth century; these programs, however, also aimed largely to prepare teachers, not to help women become good wives and mothers.

The differences between "feminine" and "masculine" college curricula should not be exaggerated. Often, much of the basic curriculum followed by women was not very different from the "masculine" curriculum. In most colleges, women were largely absent from engineering, agriculture, professional programs, and graduate programs." Because such programs were conduits to exclusive male occupations, they faced only occasional challenges by unusual women, and this fact made it easier for them to resist women. Women were also sparse in undergraduate science and math programs. Still, women had fairly routine access to most other undergraduate specialties.

The uneven pattern of women's assimilation by higher education crudely resembles the pattern of women's assimilation by the economy. While women's general access to college education was high, until the 1960s they received only about one-tenth of the doctorates granted in the United States and even fewer professional degrees, less than one in twenty-five, which were mainly in law, medicine, or dentistry. (See Figure 4.3.)

Conditions in doctoral and professional programs reflected those of high-status jobs, including insulation from the processes motivating women's assimilation to lower-status programs. An excess of potential students and the closer links between education and professional activity prevented the development of interests favoring women's entry (as occurred elsewhere in the educational system). So long as these occupations remained male monopolies, they gave a loose rein to many men's personal bigotry about women. The direct discrimination result-

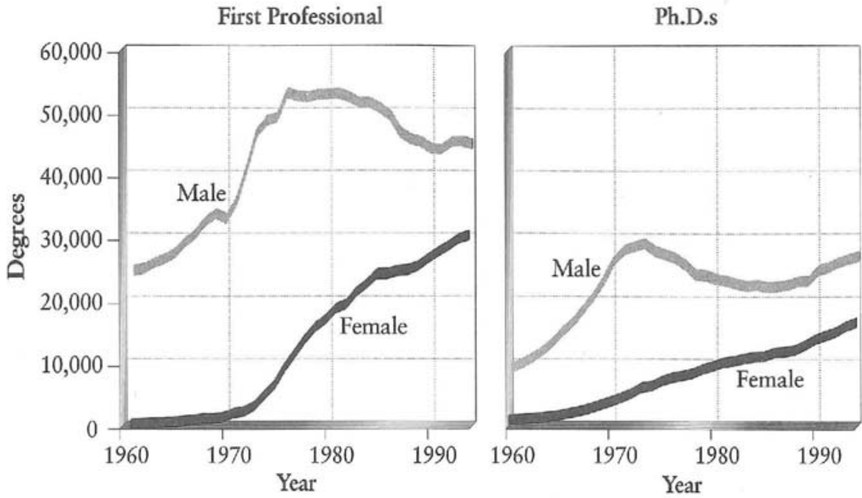


*Figure 4.3.* Advanced degrees, by gender, 1960-1994 *Sources:* See Figure 4.1.

ing from this bigotry, however, would still have left significant opportunities for women in programs guided by men less prejudiced or more motivated by other goals. A secondary effect of prejudiced discrimination cut off such opportunities. Everyone administering these academic programs had to contend with the reality that occupational discrimination against women made them poorer bets to succeed. With an excess supply of young men competing for entry and advancement, few could convince themselves or others that it was in their interests to admit more women.

Since the 1960s, the remaining barriers troubling women's access to professional programs, graduate schools, elite private schools, and male-dominated disciplines have fallen to more or less the same processes that have given women entry to high-status jobs. As a direct offshoot of the activities surrounding women's political and economic assimilation, the state has intervened through antidiscrimination and affirmative action policies, and organized women's groups have engaged in direct political agitation. Simultaneously, women's assimilation into high-status occupations removed the essential support for their exclusion. Programs competing to raise enrollments or to improve their academic standing suddenly found women an opportunity

rather than a burden. When private male colleges such as Yale and Dartmouth opened their doors to women, they were responding, in part, to practical issues about enrollments and getting the best students. Those who admitted young women not only immediately doubled the pool of good candidates; they also increased their attractiveness to young male students. Most doctoral programs and professional programs already admitted women. Other than some men's prejudiced wish to avoid contact with women in their professional world, men in these arenas had little to fear from women's entry. Few college administrators wanted to jeopardize government funding or risk lawsuits for the dubious goal of discriminating against women in admissions, financial aid, or other activities. Under a legal prohibition against discrimination and the scrutiny of activist women (and nervous college administrators), most of these programs quickly removed overtly discriminatory policies. Programs in higher education also reduced residual discriminatory practices, such as teaching and advising practices, that reinforced unequal role stereotypes.

Bureaucratic rationalization of admissions and grading processes had largely prepared the ground for eliminating residual discrimination against women. By the 1960s standardized examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test were standard for college admission. Graduate and professional programs used more advanced and specialized standardized tests.[20] For schools with thousands of applicants and programs with hundreds, facing records from diverse colleges that defied direct comparisons, standardized procedures and standardized tests were godsends. Similarly, the need to give grades in classes that could have hundreds of students induced considerable use of tests easy to score and standard grading scales. In this institutional environment, the removal of residual barriers to women seemed an obvious completion of the rationalized practices already in place.

Once schools opened their doors, women's presence unleashed an added individualist impulse that reinforced and accelerated the decline of gender inequality. Schools exposed women and men to a much more egalitarian experience than would fit their adult roles, preparing women to take part in the worlds of business and politics as they prepared men.

Schools and colleges, with rare exceptions, did not aim to change women's status or the relations between the sexes.[21] Most educators shared popular beliefs about the differences between women and men.

They believed that the education they offered fitted popular mores. Somehow, they were wrong.

Unquestionably, teachers treated male and female students somewhat differently, reinforcing the expectations that male students would eventually hold jobs and compete for success while female students would stress marriage and households in their futures. However, so did parents, peers, churches, the media, and almost everyone else. How much effect teachers added to this general cultural orientation is difficult to know. While they sustained stereotype expectations about gender roles, they largely taught girls and boys the same material and exposed them to the same standards. We have some reasons to expect that school teachers would reinforce sex-role expectations less than other people would. Female teachers, who dominated the lower grades, gave all children a model of employed women that contradicted stereotypes of female domesticity. Female teachers, who were employed women, seem less likely to have shared popular expectations about women's roles. Teachers also generally favored quiet, studious children over noisy, unruly ones, thereby generally rewarding conformity to female stereotypes more than male ones. For these reasons, school teachers were likely to treat boys and girls more similarly than were their parents or others.

Undoubtedly politicians and vocal interest groups affected what was taught and how it was taught through their control over funding. Their efforts could influence how much time each subject received and even the textbooks used in lower schools. Yet even these actions depended on educators' advice and had limited effects on the organization and primary aims of education. Most of these efforts were concerned with the education of all children and did not produce significant differences in the education offered girls and boys.

Even as schools consciously tried to provide distinctive educations for women and men, they largely failed. Early in the twentieth century, public schools added vocational courses to their curricula, home economics for girls and mechanics for boys. These courses remained sex segregated until the 1970s. While often cited for their obvious differentiation by sex, these courses were never more than a minor part of the curriculum. They, and similarly segregated physical education courses, may have effectively reinforced the distinction between male and female identities (although adolescents never seemed to need reminding), but they had little impact on the schools' main educational

activities. Colleges experimented with distinctive curricula for men and women when they first admitted women to coeducational programs, but most soon dropped this strategy because it had little value. At all levels, girls and boys faced a similar core curriculum, and they commonly took these courses together.

Schools had organizational needs and limits that directed or overcame everyone's goals. The effects of these constraints made the content of modern education considerably different from the learning experiences children used to have. Like government bureaucracies and large capitalist enterprises, most schools and colleges had all the defining characteristics associated with bureaucratic organization. In addition, schooling produced knowledge, an exceptional commodity. Education's focus on learning gave a privileged place to expert knowledge and rational assessment, key elements of bureaucratic organization. The organization of modern education impelled schools to stress standardization. Every college and school had to adapt to the definitions of acceptable curricula accepted by other schools. Shared standards first became common because schools competed for students and financial support. As credentials became more important, the state and educational organizations systemized the process. The state imposed requirements that schools had to meet to gain financial support and legal recognition for degrees and to avoid taxes. Professional organizations demanded conformity to normative standards as accreditation processes spread.

Additionally, schools could not easily adapt to variations among students. Running a college with 15,000 students or a high school with 2,000 students is like running a town in which most people are temporary migrants. Such schools have had to regulate courses, curricula, and evaluations through rules and standards, or chaos would have overwhelmed the enterprise. The history of American public schools in the nineteenth century shows that the administrators of growing urban school systems recognized their organizational imperatives. They consciously experimented with standardized methods to meet these needs.[22]

The educational system treated women and men differently, but it long treated them much more similarly than other institutions. Outside the classroom, women and men consistently occupied distinctive social roles. Inside the classroom, they pursued the same goal. Bolstered by the inherently abstract precepts of modern science, schools

and colleges adapted to organizational pressures for standardization. Teachers, like businessmen, were prone to prevailing prejudices, and few were morally or intellectually committed to gender equality. Still, because many teachers in the lower grades were women and because many observed female and male students competing directly, more teachers than businessmen were likely to recognize and to value women's potential. More important, however, the educational process—presenting standardized material and applying standardized assessment procedures—created a common learning environment for much of the educational experience.

The educational experience helped unleash women's aspirations while eroding people's belief in the ideas that had once made women's exclusion from the world outside their families seem fair and beneficial. The first generations of women attending college furthered both political and economic change. From these women came many of the agitators who sustained and expanded the women's suffrage movement. For example, the reference work *Notable American Women: 1607-1950* includes biographies of eighty-one women who had some significant involvement with the suffrage movement. More than 40 percent of these women attended some college (at a time when less than 1 percent of adult women had a college degree), and most of the rest graduated from a secondary academy or had private tutors.[23] College-educated women also made the early inroads into white-collar careers, for example as social workers, educators, or librarians.

The women's movement that erupted in the 1960s and 1970s owes much of its origins and fervor to higher education. Almost 2.5 million American women received college degrees in the two decades following World War II. These educated women were mainly between their early twenties and mid-forties in 1965. They provided most of the leaders and followers who began the modern women's movement in the 1960s. Some had long experience of employment discrimination. Others were still immersed in college. Women holding middle-class jobs formed an older, more conservative wing of the women's movement. Women recently graduated or still in college formed a younger, more radical wing.

College-educated women had limited hope for sailing a smooth course between the Scylla and Charybdis of bad jobs and confining domesticity. Their increasing college education made affluent women more tempting to employers for varied white-collar jobs. Yet most

educated women who joined the labor force garnered more resentment than promotions. Too many barriers still prevented fair treatment and advancement. Equally, many educated women who had forgone employment to raise children must have harbored their own resentments, part of a bitter legacy for their daughters. Many young women graduating from college in the 1960s were daughters of these frustrated women and had good reasons to avoid repeating their mothers' experiences.

By admitting women, the higher education system unintentionally inflated the pressure against other social institutions that discriminated against women. Colleges have received and deserved much criticism because they often succumbed to gender bias. They typically favored male students, they discriminated against female professors, and their curricula were riddled with the bigoted assumptions of sexual prejudice. Still, they moved toward gender equality faster than most other societal institutions and played a leading role in women's rising status.

Propelled by the modern economic and political orders, the educational system fostered individualism. As schools and colleges grew, educational credentials supplanted family trees as the master keys giving access to high-status positions. Educational credentials became a primary means of legitimating authority in organizations, required even of those with property.[24] This change ultimately favored women's advancement.

## MERITOCRATIC NORMS

Arguably, the most important ideas benefiting women's status were ideas embedded in the dominant ideology. The economic, political, and educational systems each fostered meritocratic ideas. Meritocratic ideas comprise the assumptions, beliefs, and arguments suggesting that advancement and rewards are and should be based on people's skills and achievements. What you do, not who you are, decides what you get. These ideas are the moral embodiment of institutional individualism. They are also logically and practically inconsistent with the practice of status inequality.

That ideas and practices produced by the those controlling the primary institutions in society should largely contradict a primary form of social inequality seems paradoxical. It has become a commonplace

assumption that the dominant ideology in a society reflects the interests and understandings of the dominant groups. Meritocratic ideas fit this expectation. They did not arise from the system of sex inequality or from a reaction against it. They grew from the new economic and social order that developed in the nineteenth century. Yet they inherently clashed with gender inequality.

The word *meritocracy* was born in a book of satiric science fiction written by British sociologist Michael Young and published in 1957.[25] The term quickly entered the popular lexicon and won a special place in the social sciences. Its meaning broadened, however, from the book's concern with a ruling class chosen by merit (an aristocracy by achievement) to mean a system in which able and talented people are rewarded and advanced.

In modern American culture, meritocratic practices and ideology are so pervasive that their predominant influence is self-evident. While it is difficult to trace the spread of meritocratic conventions, some practices institutionalized during the past 200 years clearly illustrate the change. In business, the adoption of rule-governed promotional practices signaled the victory of meritocratic standards. Often accompanied by the creation of personnel departments, promotion standards considered such criteria as seniority, job performance evaluations, examinations, and credentials. Since the early twentieth century, when these were being championed from diverse sources, they spread steadily throughout the economy, instilling in all the expectation that expertise and experience were the legitimate criteria for promotions. The government civil service systems begun around the turn of the century were a self-conscious and highly public effort to instill meritocratic standards by the state. The American military's use of tests and their efforts, often faulty, to apply meritocratic standards became particularly well known during World War II. The accumulation of various entitlements from the first pension programs to the expansion of the welfare state from the Great Depression onward embraced meritocratic standards in a quiet way. The educational system's adoption of grades, a standardized means of comparatively evaluating students' performances, signaled their meritocratic leanings in the nineteenth century. The spread of standardized tests and particularly of college admissions examinations in the twentieth century accompanied a complete embracing of meritocratic standards. In universities, the gradual shift toward highly competitive hiring and tenure-review

practices, stressing strict evaluation of scholarly accomplishments, erected one bridge between the meritocratic procedures in education and those in the economy.

By exhorting those controlling opportunities and rewards to treat everyone equally and impartially, meritocratic ideas conflicted with sex inequality in two ways, making it harder, both practically and morally, to justify refusing women the opportunities granted men. As pragmatic guides, meritocratic ideas promoted a belief that organizations became more effective if they hired and advanced people who did jobs best. They altered how people framed organizational interests in ways that made gender seem increasingly irrelevant. As moral guides, meritocratic ideas promoted a belief that personal merit should decide who wins good things in life. They altered how people judged the allocation of positions and rewards in ways that made discrimination against able women seem increasingly unfair.

Those who fostered meritocratic ideas within the evolving organizational contexts did not intend to influence beliefs about sex inequality or to benefit any lower-status group. On the pragmatic plane, they used merit as a tool for rational, efficient administration. On the ideological plane, they advocated meritocratic norms to legitimate their authority. Yet, once unleashed, meritocratic beliefs took on a life of their own, leaping over their original boundaries. Rather than being a tool wielded by administrators, they became imperatives limiting their actions. Rather than legitimating authority, they questioned inequality. Under the strong, critical light of meritocratic standards, the justifications for restricting women's opportunities seemed unconvincing facades.

The rise of meritocratic ideas did not eliminate the ideological defense of gender inequality, but it transformed and weakened it. Ideas legitimating gender inequality had to explain why women should take most responsibility for children and caring for the home, why women should not hold positions with status and power, and why women should defer to male authority. To survive, the rhetoric legitimating sex inequality had to adapt to meritocratic premises. Rather than simply declaring that the gods willed women and men to do different things, the ideology legitimating inequality in a meritocratic environment had to say something about women's and men's abilities and aspirations. A revised rhetoric suggested that women and men had different roles because they had different skills and desires. Women

were not being denied positions they deserved. Either they did not want men's positions, or they were not as good as men. For example, some ideas claimed that women were better at mothering and enjoyed it more than did men while men were better at the impersonal or mechanical activities of employment. Such ideas implied that a sexual division of labor was both practical and fair.

While this perversion of meritocratic ideas could be a powerful tool for justifying the common difference in women's and men's roles, it foundered when it tried to justify aspiring women's exclusion from good positions. Once merit became a criterion, legitimating arguments became vulnerable to pervasive evidence that many women had merit but were still rejected. This Achilles' heel impaired every effort to legitimate status inequality through meritocratic ideals.

The significance of meritocratic ideas to gender inequality's decline rested in part on two special characteristics. Unlike many other ideas that would favor more egalitarian practices, meritocratic ideas achieved almost universal acceptance. In this overwhelmingly capitalist nation, the idea that opportunities should go to those who were most talented and who made the greatest effort gained near reverence. Of course, talent and effort were open to dispute. Every time women sought to improve their circumstances, they made meritocratic arguments. Every time, those opposing them largely accepted the validity of meritocratic criteria but challenged women's suitability. However, once merit was reduced to specified talents, achievements, or efforts, it was often possible to assess empirically in ways that were hard to control through ideology. Of course, gender bias could be integrated into what purported to be the most impartial tests, standards, or means of assessment. Still, in most arenas even the most biased means of judging merit were hard pressed to show that most men were better than most women. Moreover, some men with economic or political power fully accepted meritocratic standards as a pragmatic guide to effective action, committing themselves to a perceptual framework that could challenge their prejudices.

The predominance of meritocratic principles in modern society is irrefutable. The contradiction between those principles and discrimination against women based on status inequality and prejudice is self-evident. The paradox to explain is why and how the major structures of social power created the ideological doctrines and practices challenging exclusionary status rights of those in power.

Businessmen adopted meritocratic ideas with considerable enthusiasm, believing them an ideal fit to their ideological, social, and practical circumstances. Initially, private property's inviolability within capitalism ignored merit. Capital produced more capital. Wealthy men begot wealthy sons. Those owning the capital could do as they wished with it. Nonetheless, merit-based claims crept into businessmen's beliefs. Appeals to the role of merit arose from businessmen's efforts to elevate their social status and to control their employees. The dogma legitimating the modern economy built on a claim for unfettered liberty to use and transfer privately owned capital. Successful businessmen needed to justify their accumulation of wealth through the market. They sought recognition for their accomplishments from others with status. They also wanted secure, stable control over their employees. Over time, businessmen found that principles of merit seemed to help solve all these needs.

As parvenus in a market economy, the rising class of businessmen naturally favored ideas that associated success with merit. A successful class lacking an honored status, rising businessmen tried to translate their economic achievements into claims of moral worth. Meritocratic ideas supplied businessmen with just what they needed to stake a claim for acceptance in society's higher circles when old wealth still regarded them as upstarts. In their clearest ideological formulation, these claims coalesced to defend a perspective known as social Darwinism in the second half of the nineteenth century.[26] Society, according to this world view, was a competitive struggle in which people's fates were determined objectively and fairly. If one man had more talent and drive than another, then he would gain more power, status, and privileges. The competitive struggle was an impartial judge, and its decisions were inherently fair.

Social Darwinism's contribution to critical or subversive thought is easily overlooked. When it was directed at lower-status groups, it was largely used to defend the status quo. According to social Darwinism, all people had to bear individual responsibility for their fate. Since social selection processes accurately and consistently rewarded the deserving, those with less money, particularly those in businessmen's employ, should accept their circumstances without rancor or dispute. If they railed against their fate, they were denying the truth that they were inferior. In particular, social Darwinists argued that women's inferior status revealed their inferior abilities. However these ideas

were used, they always implied that rewards *should* equal a person's abilities, effort, and contribution. Social Darwinists abused science and truth by claiming that the social order always did award merit where deserved. Still, their moral claims implied that the distribution of rewards could be fair if, and only if, merit decided who got more and who got less. Having hinged their authority and the validity of their policies on the rule of merit, social Darwinists found they could not dictate how others evaluated worthiness. More than this, many of those who influenced the allocation of positions and rewards truly believed the meritocratic assumptions and were placed in a quandary if evidence seriously challenged the accommodation they had between their prejudices and their meritocratic principles.

Social Darwinism was an upstart's ideology, and its idealization of merit served every successive wave of upstarts. The moral standard promoted by social Darwinism was a profound belief in the justice of rewarding merit. Ultimately, social Darwinism withered, poisoned by the false claim that the most successful people were also always the most deserving. Yet its moral ideal, tying rewards to merit, flourished.

Businessmen's affinity for meritocratic ideas reflected not only their common acquisition of social status through economic success, but also the practical and political strategies induced by their common administrative goals. In the first half of the twentieth century, as businesses grew larger, they adopted rational hiring and promotion practices. They sought to impose administrative rationality. They aimed to reduce conflict, lessen disorder, and increase control over workers. Capitalists won tangible profits by using these rational standards to boost their employees' productivity.[27]

With hundreds, even thousands, of employees, an employer could hope to retain control only by installing a system of rules. These rules had to govern the relations between supervisors and subordinates. The rules also had to define the relationships between rewards, sanctions, and actions. Rules governing hiring and promotion sought to protect employers' interests. The rules generally balanced two criteria: merit and seniority. Employers relied on seniority, which rewarded loyalty and experience, to resolve choices when the candidates were equivalent from the employers' perspective. Seniority was a safe criterion for positions that had little discretion and little impact on the quality of work done in other positions. Employers stressed merit much more when filling higher-status positions in which a poor employee could

prove costly. By asserting merit's role in deciding promotions, employers and others running organizations promoted competition among aspiring employees, each of whom sought to show that he (rarely she) could further the organization's interests better than others could.

These administrative innovations promoted meritocratic ideas even when they embraced discriminatory practices, which were ubiquitous. The rules governing promotions and job evaluation systems introduced by employers commonly incorporated gender biases, both flagrant and subtle. For example, they openly assumed that the existing segregation between male and female jobs was natural, good, and unavoidable. Less obviously, but potentially more problematically, they assumed that skills associated with male jobs were inherently more difficult and more valuable. These assumptions meant that promotion procedures were normally discriminatory. Even when biased, however, such practices established the legitimacy of meritocratic principles and opened their own discriminatory assumptions to criticism.

Businessmen promoted meritocratic ideals both through their ideological claims for legitimacy and status and through their practical strategies for bureaucratic control. Although market capitalism sustains economic inequality while expanding material wealth, it breeds an ideological commitment to meritocratic standards. Successful people and dominant classes must try to legitimate their ascendancy. In market capitalism, the competition for success is so pervasive that appeals to meritocratic ideals are almost unavoidable when businessmen justify themselves. Large, complex organizations also induce businessmen to adopt strategies for control that have similar, possibly more important, influence. To meet this goal, organizations commonly have to rely on merit in allocating positions and rewards.

The state's contribution to ideals of merit paralleled the influence of business. The government was concerned with legitimacy and control. By extending citizenship status, the state added weight to the idea that all people should be judged by the same standards. By intruding more into people's lives through government bureaucracies following rationalized and legalistic principles, the state reinforced the idea that uniform rules should guide institutional behavior.

Like other modern states, the U.S. government promoted meritocratic ideals by extending citizenship. The government enlarged citizenship and extended it to more people to satisfy the needs of business, to preserve its own legitimacy, and to ease the discontent of potentially

disruptive subordinate groups. The men who designed the American system of government did not want universal equality; they envisioned a nation of independent property owners and businessmen. In successive phases, however, the logic of modern political organization induced the state to extend to other groups legal equality, the right to vote, and guarantees of social welfare. By giving citizenship rights to more people and enlarging the scope of citizenship, the state directly promoted the individualistic tendencies of modern society. As they became full citizens, wage-earning men, women, and minorities gained individualistic legal, political, economic, and social rights.

As the state enacted policies enhancing citizenship, it also created an ideal that implicitly promoted merit. This ideal of citizenship grew by reducing civil inequalities and by spreading rights and opportunities more equally among people. As citizenship evolved, the culture presented to the public mind ever more colorful images of individual rights. The symbols accumulated over time, as generations of Americans reread key passages from the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and the twentieth-century Pledge of Allegiance. These sacred texts evoked the goals of liberty, justice, and equality. Individualistic symbols were central to the doctrines legitimating the American state. People often disregarded the contradictions between these ideas and discriminatory practices, but their disregard did not abolish the contradictions' effects. Expanding citizenship rights made it progressively tougher to convince most people that the nation's historic ideals justified castelike inequality.

As it grew, the state produced large bureaucracies to administer its programs. These organizations created and applied what Max Weber long ago termed rational-legal principles.[28] Law defined the organization's mission, for example to promote commerce or education. Bureaucratic officials then elaborated its mission through rules. These rules governed each state organization's relations to those that it regulated, helped, or otherwise affected. As bureaucratic government activities grew more extensive, increased exposure to bureaucratic rules swayed people to believe that universal standards should govern opportunities and rights.

Civil service systems embodied rules that served as prototypes. In the United States, governments at all levels established merit procedures during the Progressive Era to stop political influence over hiring

and firing in government agencies. These civil service systems employed ever more people over time. They wielded power through the law's force and the state's moral influence. In harmony with citizenship and bureaucratic rationalization, civil service systems added the state's considerable authority to the growing importance of ideas promoting meritocratic expectations.[29]

The government's influence on people's lives grew steadily. People had contact with government rules and government officials ever more often—when they paid taxes, when their jobs became subject to laws about overtime or minimum wages, when they received a traffic ticket, when their children attended school, when they served on a jury, when they served in the military, and when they collected benefits for the unemployed, the elderly, or the poor. As the state expanded its activity and its powers, it extended its application of rational-legal principles. Even as people learned to disdain bureaucratic rules and behavior, they also came to expect that people working in and representing state bureaucracies were bound by those rules.

The state fostered meritocratic ideals both through its extension of citizenship rights and through the expansion of government bureaucracies. The modern state promoted ideals of merit because it instituted rule-bound relations that applied to the whole populace. These replaced the casual, personal, or family relations of property-owning men. The state grew in parallel to the economy. As that wage economy grew, the state assimilated ever more people into the polity by widening citizenship rights. People gained a sense of membership and entitlement that enlarged as government activities grew. The ideas of membership and entitlement made violations of meritocratic principles ever harder to defend.

The educational system directly influenced people's ideas about merit only when they were young, but it potentially had a more intense influence than either the economic order or the political order. Schools followed merit equally as a practical strategy and as an ideal. Meritocratic standards gave teachers (and schools) an expertise they could hold over parents and children. They also served both to motivate and to control children. Meritocratic standards combined with standardized curricula allowed educators to avoid chaos.[30] Once schools grouped children together, teachers displaced tutors. Soon educators faced a need to organize schooling so they could teach many pupils effectively. As the state became involved in education, especially

through the creation of public schools, pressure increased to give education a common content across schools. In response, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, educators gradually standardized what students were taught, defined standards for adequate scholastic performance, and adopted standardized grading schemes to label varying performances.[31]

The meritocratic aspects of modern education met opposition from the prevailing cultural biases of sex-role stereotypes. While education had a general meritocratic orientation, educators consciously and unconsciously treated boys and girls differently. As diligent substitutes for parents, schools selectively reinforced children's conformity to these stereotypes. Educational materials portrayed *good* men and women faithfully following the stereotypes. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, secondary school images depicted boys seeking to be star athletes while girls hoped to become popular cheerleaders. In the background, however, girls and boys still vied to prove themselves in never-ending competitions over the same grades in the same classes. Indeed, we can wonder if the stress on male high school athletics did not, in part, develop to compensate for boys' inability to dominate scholastic activity.

Schools encouraged meritocratic beliefs as they used standardized grades applied by impartial criteria. Usually, teachers applied standard criteria to rank students' work. Better work got better grades. Grades won advancement. These methods for evaluating school work instilled meritocratic ideals in both sexes. These effects were all heightened when boys and girls went to school together, so the general acceptance of coeducation in America increased education's meritocratic impact.[32] Even when teachers' biases corrupted their assessments, so that they applied different criteria to girls and boys, they could not hide two fundamental truths from children. First, many girls could equal or surpass boys in competitions decided by academic prowess. Second, schools' reliance on grades, tests, and formal standards conferred legitimacy on meritocratic judgments.

Schools, particularly coeducational schools, put the idea of male intellectual superiority to the test. It failed. In schools, girls and boys' experiences vividly belied beliefs in unequal intellectual potentials. Contradicting myths, girls did as well as boys. Often girls did better. These experiences did not prevent people from claiming that men were smarter or better at mental tasks. As these claims gradually became

more inconsistent with people's experience, however, they became more vulnerable to challenge. The more that selection processes in firms and other organizations emphasized schooling, the more that women's educational achievements challenged the legitimacy of discrimination.

The meritocratic ideals developed in the economic, political, and educational systems did not supplant the ideas linked with women's inferior status (or other forms of inequality) but grew up inexorably alongside them. Meritocratic norms did not cause privileged people to reject their self-interested beliefs and justifications for inequality. They did not end people's efforts to evade meritocratic standards that would penalize them. Nor did they cause the economic, political, and educational systems to dedicate themselves to realizing a meritocracy. Many people, particularly men, argued that women were inherently less able than men. All women, they suggested, were less intelligent, less rational, poorer leaders, and less dependable than all men. Meritocratic ideals did not sap men's motives to pursue and justify their self-interests. Nor did they turn men's interests upside down.

Nonetheless, meritocratic standards (bolstered by rationalization and egalitarianism) *did* increasingly influence ideology. They helped shift men's and women's interests by altering both the practical and moral terrain. One hundred fifty years ago, most people found women's dependent status obvious, natural, and unexceptional. People candidly affirmed women's inherent inferiority to men. They openly, casually declared women's rightful place in the home. They spoke of men's patriarchal control as we might discuss parents' authority over young children.[33] Discrimination against women was not hidden, defended, or even given much thought. The rise of meritocratic principles helped change all this. Meritocratic ideals gave women ideological symbols to which they could attach their discontent arising from discrimination and unequal opportunity. Meritocratic ideals also weakened men's belief that discriminating against women was just. Weakening that belief lessened the likelihood that men's actions would consistently, unthinkingly reinforce women's secondary status.

Meritocratic doctrines came from institutions whose leaders explicitly embraced male dominance but unwittingly set loose ideas that contradicted status inequality. Following their inherent developmental logic, the educational, economic, and political systems marched dog-

gedly down a road toward meritocratic ideals. The men who led this advance commonly used corrupted interpretations of merit to justify continued discrimination against women. Yet meritocratic norms were weapons that could easily fall into the hands of the enemy. Like scientific processes, meritocratic processes have empirical tests that prejudiced practitioners found hard to deny continuously. At this meritocratic road's end, ideas useful for building a case for keeping women in their place were hard to find.

## FROM THE AUTHORITARIAN FAMILY TO THE INDIVIDUALISTIC FAMILY

The family may be the last place where most people would look for signs of individualism or for sources of women's rising status. Often, social practices and relationships seem defined as individualistic to the degree that they are unlike family relationships. Over the past century, most critics of women's lower status have cited the family as one cause, sometimes as the principal cause. Unquestionably, women largely experienced gender inequality through their family roles. Nonetheless, over time the family has become more individualistic and, through this transition, more conducive to gender equality.

The family as we understand it today, bound mainly by sentiment and governed by mutual consent, is a recent historical creation. We now think of the family as a private place of intimate relations, in contrast to public domains, with their formal distant relations, such as economic arenas where we hold jobs or buy goods.[34] The economic and political changes that permeated society were the root causes of the family's altered role in social organization.[35] While the family has shown considerable capacity to adapt to a changing social environment, it has little capacity to induce changes in that social environment, and it has not been an engine of change in the manner of the economic or political orders. The family has been limited to a small group of people associated by current and past reproduction patterns, by personal intimacy, or by common residence and communal sharing.[36] With its limited scope, the family could not independently generate a path of cumulative change. Yet, as the family adapted to the powerful forces transforming society, its increasing individualism made it, too, an instrument of change.

Although individualism is often conceived as arising in opposition

to the family, both theorists and the popular press have long recognized an individualistic transformation of the family institution. Sometimes this shift is characterized in negative terms, as in studies exploring the specter of the "decline of the family."[37] This negative perspective focuses on the family's *loss* of functions, activities, and usefulness. It portrays the modern family as a partial remnant of some richer, earlier institution. Alternatively, the family's transformation is sometimes characterized as a positive development. Characteristically, those adopting this viewpoint suggest that the family has become more egalitarian, more democratic, or more companionate. Whether they view the changes through optimistic or pessimistic lenses, most commentators believe that the modern family is more specialized, that it exercises less control over people's lives, and that individual interests have become more important at the expense of family interests.

Individualism embodies abstract relational characteristics distinguishing modern economic and political institutions from their predecessors. *Institutional* individualism occurs insofar as people's relationships to the institutions impinging on their lives are unmediated, consensual, and functionally circumscribed. While the family has not come to look like a formal organization, it has become more individualistic in each of these ways.

Family relations have become more direct, as they are less likely to be mediated by relations to a wider kin group or the surrounding community. In an effort to symbolize this change, Talcott Parsons characterized the modern family as "isolated." With some justice, other authors widely criticized this terminology for overlooking the continued importance of extended kinship and community ties. Parsons was correct, however, to suggest that the relations between spouses and children in modern families had become increasingly private, in both practice and ideals.[38] The family gradually became less extensive and less enduring as the unpredictable relationships between two spouses and their children defined its boundaries and existence.

Family relations have become functionally more circumscribed to stress concerns directly relevant to people's more limited family roles. Husbands and wives commonly both have jobs and often have separate memberships in other activities. Even children have parts of their lives at school, in organizations, or with friends that are private. Parents and siblings usually intrude little on these private aspects of a child's life. In the midst of these complex connections between people

and the outside world, family relationships and familial interactions concentrate on the activities and concerns recognized as directly and intrinsically relevant to the family. The important ones include sustaining sentimental feelings between kin, rearing children, operating a joint household, and controlling joint assets. Family relations have remained more diffuse than typical organizational relationships, but they have been increasingly focused on concerns identified with the family.

While family membership has not achieved the voluntary or contractual character of membership in formal organizations, it has become progressively less confining and less compulsory than it was 200 years ago. Husbands and wives can divorce their spouses and now regularly do. Children can seek their fortunes as adults without relying on their parents. Once they leave their parents' home, children can easily limit or end their relationships with parents or siblings. They often do. Aging parents can find means of support and care without relying on their adult children, and often have to do so. People need not remain in the families to which they are born or into which they marry. Similarly, people cannot count on others to remain within their families. These changes have occurred gradually, with each generation experiencing more freedom from family ties than the last.

As family relationships have become more discretionary, more consensual, and more narrowly defined, the modern family has become more individualistic without becoming a formal organization. The family has not succumbed to unlimited individualism. Throughout all these changes, permanent family ties have remained a common expectation. Even more important, however much familial individualism has grown, families continue to treat their members according to their membership, not according to their achievements. Still, the modern family is much more individualistic than was the family of two centuries ago.

As part of this individualistic trend, the family has lost importance in the shaping of individual interests. Families have lost their centrality to people's lives and to social structure. Families were once the units from which societies were built; they were at the center of most people's lives, every day, all day. Now people spend much of their time outside families and conceive their long-term goals as individuals, not as part of a family. Society is built from individuals and organizations, with families being only one of many important social organizations.

This individualist restructuring of family life has reduced men's motives and their capacity to obstruct their wives or to favor their sons over their daughters. Families cannot guarantee their children occupational or organizational success (unless they own the organization and perhaps not even then). Each organization has mechanisms, usually standardized practices, by which it recruits and promotes people. To gain entry, a person must have the required credentials (usually appropriate education and experience). Anyone wanting to get ahead must advance through the stages demanded by the organization. The separation of kinship from employment made industrial labor markets possible. Both Karl Marx and Max Weber, though analyzing the rise of modern societies from divergent perspectives, emphasized the importance of this separation. Wealthy, prestigious families can do a lot to improve their children's chances for success. They can furnish education, ensure economic security, and exercise influence through personal networks. Still, they can neither guarantee nor prevent a child's success. Because families do not control the resources for earning a living, a man can neither pass such resources onto his sons nor deny his wife access to them.

Equally important, men have less reason to want control in modern families. In the past, the family controlled the means to gain an income. This family capital conferred status on present and future generations. Authority within the family then had considerable worth and meaning. Everyone in the family worked at the enterprise; all depended on its productivity. Running such a family gave real scope to the one in charge. In contrast, most income in modern families comes from external employment. Children leave once they become adults. Through these changes, the scope of family authority has dwindled steadily.

Perhaps this shrinking family authority explains William Goode's observation that men have resented their loss of *centrality* more than anything else, when confronted with women's self-assertion in modern families.[39] Men had been used to being the center of family life, to their well-being, their preferences, and their interests being given priority within the family. This centrality was a residue from an earlier age. Even though the circumstances supporting male family authority had dissipated, families still deferred to the man who was husband and father, and they showed him special regard. This centrality was precarious, however, and it came under direct attack by modern feminism. Still, to a surprising degree, the upsurge of women after the

1960s did not wrest family authority from American men, because they had already largely lost it." Men still wanted to be central, and they still had more resources than women, but families were a weakening restraint on women's aspirations.

Unlike those in the past, families in the twentieth century were not inescapable prisons. Women seeking to better their status found that their husbands' opposition represented increasingly fewer resources and declining resolve. Rising divorce rates and less restrictive divorce laws both reflected and fueled growing familial individualism. The practical availability of divorce affects all marriages, not just the unhappy ones. When it is easier for women to leave a bad marriage, the balance of marital power is more nearly equal, and the standards governing acceptable behavior by husbands are higher.

As leaving a husband becomes both legally and practically easier for women, they become less dependent on men and more equal to them. In a male-dominated society, marriage can easily become an instrument of women's subjugation. If women can choose to leave bad marriages, they have an escape from some of inequality's worst circumstances. More divorce means less dependency. Of course, marriage can also give women security and protection. Divorce allows men to abandon women just as much as it allows women to abandon men (although the acceptable grounds for abandonment may differ). It is hard to say precisely what alternatives must be available to women for easy divorce to benefit them. Theoretically, women should benefit from divorce when marital inequality within families exceeds sex inequality outside families. We can safely say that the better the alternatives appear, the more women seek divorce. We do know that women have shown the value of divorce by their willingness to pursue it when the alternatives were still bleak.

The divorce rate has risen almost continuously for the last 150 years, roughly doubling every half-century, then leveling off during the last two decades.'" Divorce ended one in twenty marriages by the end of the Civil War era. Around the turn of the century, early in the period of egalitarian illusions, divorce ended about one in eight marriages. In the 1930s about one in four marriages ceased with divorce. As many as half of all people marrying today will eventually leave those marriages through divorce. Today's divorce rates also mean that somewhere between one-third and one-half of all children will experience the end of their parents' marriage while still living at home.

Many changes in divorce law over the past 150 years made the

rising divorce rate possible.[42] In the early nineteenth century, the law only marginally tolerated divorce, regarding it as an extreme measure suited only to circumstances so extraordinary they warranted an act by the state legislature to end a marriage. During the nineteenth century, the states created a standard judicial process for divorce. They shifted jurisdiction over divorce from the state legislature to the judiciary and made it a legally recognized alternative, although it remained morally objectionable. Most states recognized a variety of grounds for divorce, often including bigamy, adultery, impotence, desertion, a husband's refusal to provide support, imprisonment or conviction for an "infamous crime," and extreme cruelty. They implied that a spouse had a responsibility to stay sexually faithful, abide laws, be civil, forgo drug addiction, and live at home. A person should no longer have to stay in a marriage if his or her spouse seriously violated these marital responsibilities beyond limits allowing redemption. (Notably, the explicit grounds allowing divorce emphasized transgressions by husbands. This probably reflected the presumption that wives were dependent and husbands were supposed to be responsible.) Some states, particularly those in the West, generalized this standard by including "omnibus clauses." These gave courts the discretion to grant divorces under any conditions causing the court to conclude that the marriage was a complete failure.

Over time, divorce continued a meandering course away from moral restrictions and toward practical responses. Pioneering social scientists who began studying divorce clearly attributed rising divorce rates to social and economic conditions rather than to moral flaws. By the 1930s, American movies often depicted divorce as a straightforward, if unfortunate, solution to marital discord. Still, the law and social opinion persistently regarded divorces as failures that raised serious questions about the character of the women and men who had made such a mess of a grand institution. Divorce laws kept gradually shedding moral strictures in the second half of the twentieth century. An acceptance slowly emerged that marriages regularly fail because two people proved overwhelmingly incompatible. More and more people petitioned for divorce not because a spouse had violated his or her fundamental obligations, but because the marriage was a miserable experience. Finally, during the 1970s, states began to accept the policy of divorce without fault. In 1969 California led the great break with the past by adopting a law allowing divorce on the grounds of

irreconcilable differences. Other states soon followed with a variety of laws that, in their strongest form, ensured that either spouse could divorce the other simply by asserting a wish to do so.

In principle, these laws transformed marriage into a private contract that two spouses could end just as readily as they began. The state's role in divorce became similar to its role when a business partnership ended. It certified the dissolution and, when needed, resolved competing claims over joint assets. The new laws shunned moralistic attribution of blame. When both spouses agree to dissolve a marriage, the courts merely ratified their decision. If one spouse rejected divorce or disputed the division of property, custody of children, or future obligations, proceedings could still be complicated. The thrust of the law, nonetheless, converted divorce into a right. This added to the transformation of marriage from a legal bondage to a conditional partnership. As a partnership, marriage need endure only so long as both spouses wished to preserve it.

Divorce has gone from an extraordinary to an ordinary event. In the middle of the nineteenth century, divorces were unduly hard to get, people considered them scandalous, and they were rare. By the first half of the twentieth century, people found divorces moderately available if they had money or endurance. Most people disapproved of divorce but accepted it as necessary yet repugnant, and it became increasingly common. During the past few decades, popular opinion has accepted divorce as an unfortunate but normal part of life. Divorce has become easy to get. Today, marriage is as likely to end through divorce as through death.

The progress of divorce laws both reflected and reinforced the other changes in women's status. As women's opportunities grew, so did the likelihood that a woman with a bad marriage would prefer to end it or that she would act in ways that would motivate her husband to end it. As ending marriage became a more feasible alternative for women, men's superior bargaining position within marriages also declined.

Though increasingly individualistic, families did not become romantic, egalitarian oases. They remained battlegrounds for influence in which most men had sufficient resources to gain the advantage.[43] With this advantage, men have held sway in family decision making and presumably extracted a better balance of rewards from family life compared with their contributions. Over time, however, men's family power declined in proportion to their declining overall status advan-

tages in society. As a result, men's family power has dropped considerably over the past 150 years, although husbands still typically have more authority and centrality than their wives. Family power has not been a stable foundation of men's dominant social position. Instead, family dynamics have sustained a continuous pressure toward more egalitarian family organization as the external alternatives available to women and men shifted.

The data on family power are not precise. Even with direct and intensive research on people living today, family power is difficult to assess. For past periods we will never have more than crude estimates. Nonetheless, the rough outlines of changing family power seem fairly clear. In the early nineteenth century, people took men's family authority for granted. By the early twentieth century, commentators were beginning to talk about the companionate family, in which sentiment and mutual respect between husband and wife tempered men's authority. Today, principles of family democracy and equality have much more legitimacy than masculine claims for deference from wives, especially among young adults. While men may still commonly have the upper hand in families, the average power of husbands over wives has become much less than it was 150 years ago. The expectation that half of all marriages will end with divorce is powerful testimony to this change.

In the nineteenth century, analytical women and men saw women's legal disabilities and political exclusion as the principal source of spousal inequality, as portrayed in John Stuart Mill's influential essay, *The Subjection of Women.* Yet even after married women gained property rights (and other legal rights) and the vote, men seemingly retained authority within the family. The durability of husbands' authority and privileges suggested that the problem was more complex and difficult to solve than nineteenth-century thinkers had realized.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Mirra Komarovsky did a classic analysis of familial inequality, called *The Unemployed Man and His Family.* This considered the possibility that a husband's authority depended on men's near monopoly of paid employment. To test this possibility, Komarovsky studied families in which the husband had been continually unemployed for several years. She found that men's authority broke down in one-fifth of the families. According to Komarovsky, the loss of work weakened men's capacity for

economic coercion, lowered their prestige, and created new tests of authority and role performance under the austere circumstances. Men's job loss did not change their wives' sentiments, but made explicit the already existing negative sentiments.

Komarovsky's finding that husbands' authority broke down in one-fifth of the families enduring prolonged unemployment leads to two dramatically opposing inferences. The finding that the wife continued to defer to her husband's authority in four-fifths of the families suggests that something other than men's current employment or economic resources must be decisive. The finding that a wife rejected her husband's authority in one-fifth of the families after he failed to provide income for only a couple of years suggests that the pattern of male family authority can begin to unravel quickly if certain sustaining conditions are lacking. While the second point better fits the analysis developed in this book, the first point aims more directly at the immediate question that Komarovsky could not answer. Why did men without jobs remain dominant in the majority of these families?

The answer seems to be that the crucial alternatives affecting family power concerned the availability of jobs and the obligation to care for children. Husbands' higher earnings gave them influence, while wives' inability to earn a decent income made them dependent. Men's income gave them domestic power over their wives because they had the capacity to give or withhold the money women needed and wanted. Women had less attractive choices outside marriage than did men. Women usually had to raise the children a couple had. They found it harder to support themselves. They usually also had a harder time finding a new spouse. Women, who had few opportunities for independence, therefore deferred to their husbands.

An idea termed *principle of least interest* specifies a key link between differential opportunity and power within families. The sociologist Willard Waller identified this connection a half-century ago.44 Waller contended that the party who cared less about preserving a relationship would have a strategic advantage. The less important a relationship is to a person, the lower the threshold at which the person will withdraw or use threats of withdrawal as a strategy. During disputes, the less committed person will commonly start to withdraw or threaten to withdraw sooner and more freely than the other. This withdrawal or threat can take varied forms, such as an impassioned argument, a refusal to talk further, a symbolic departure, or an explicit

threat. At this point, the more committed person often capitulates because sustaining the relationship is more important to her or him than the issue under dispute. The more indifferent person therefore has won.[45] More generally, withdrawal can be manifested through a spectrum of possibilities, including permanently abandoning the relationship, temporarily abandoning the relationship, a refusal to fulfill obligations, or a rejection of the rules and understandings governing the relationship. Any act that seems destructive to the relationship implies withdrawal. Even a small difference could give the less committed person the upper hand. The power induced by unequal dependence in a relationship often grows over time as people adapt to it, although it also could decline if its use (or other things) diminished the other person's commitment.

Applied to Komarovsky's study, for example, the principle of least interest suggests that most women in the study continued to defer to their husband because women's inferior alternatives seemed an unquestionable, permanent fact of life. However long the husband was unemployed, these women could anticipate that when jobs eventually became available, the openings would go to the husband, not to them. If they forced a split in the family, the women also knew that they would retain the responsibility for raising their children. Even long without a job, therefore, men had a considerable advantage. Realistically, most of these women faced two alternatives: they could defer enough to gain the husband's acceptance or they could reject the husband's authority at the cost of seeing him leave. For most women, deference was less risky. (Presumably, some women simply preferred a husband exercising family authority, but no evidence suggests that this feeling was widespread.) In a minority of families, women abandoned their former deference, as they discovered that they could defy the husband's authority without risking his departure or the balance of interests favoring the wife's deference when the husband provided an income too small to sustain his power without that income.

More generally, according to the principle of least interest, circumstances altering women's and men's relative dependence on marriages explain the historical shift in power between spouses. The growing use of divorce gave concrete evidence of expanding alternatives to staying in unhappy marriages and people's willingness to carry the strategy of withdrawal to its extreme. Neither wives nor husbands could rely on threatened withdrawal as a strategy to gain family power, how-

ever, unless family relationships were discretionary. The more discretionary family relationships became, the more important threatened withdrawal became.

Women also made gains as daughters through rising familial individualism. What parents did for their children always reflected the combined influence of parents' interests, sentiment, and impinging circumstances. Before the modern era, parents' interests and social conditions left daughters in a secondary status regardless of parents' sentiments. Over the past two centuries, daughters have gradually gained ground on their brothers in the United States. The restructuring of family interests has made the particular characteristics of children more important to parents and their sex less important. This change has resembled organizational interests' increasing indifference to sex.

Daughters' rising family status owed much to the decay and ruin of the family economy. When families had owned the means of making income, they had felt obliged to keep the family property intact.[46] They did this by passing the family business from father to son. Before capitalism emerged, a need to keep family capital intact decisively shaped inheritance patterns. How to pass control over their family property to the next generation was the most important inheritance issue facing families who controlled productive property such as a farm, a manor, or a shop. How to divide their family wealth among their heirs was a lesser concern. Before the transition to the modern economy, society was organized around a fixed set of productive properties. Over time, the people controlling these properties changed, but farms, the fields, the craft shops, the markets, and the hostelries remained unaltered.[47] As those controlling one of these properties grew old, they had to decide to whom they would pass control. The property was not liquid wealth they could divide at whim. Even more than a family business, it was the foundation on which a family was built.

In a world in which only men held political power and legal rights, passing control of the family property to a son served family interests most dependably. As well as they could, families tried to help daughters on their way with dowries and additional sons with gifts or bequests to start their own family properties. Preserving the family capital was usually a decisive goal, however, and people would disperse funds or wealth to their departing children only within limits avoiding threats to that goal.

These circumstances were reversed in the modern family. Enter-

prises ceased to be family concerns. More men earned their income through employment. Those who still owned businesses found their wealth much more fluid and unstable than in the past." Favoritism for sons became a less attractive investment as the family capital fell. Without a family business, parents' interests were better served by the promise that all their children or the children who were most responsible to their parents would inherit property, whatever their sex. Even families who had a business often found children would seek opportunities elsewhere, forcing the parents to treat the business as an asset. Fathers probably still regularly gave sons more economic support than they gave daughters. Nonetheless, they commonly tried to take care of their daughters and to guard their well-being.

Declining family size forced more parents to focus their dreams and aspirations on daughters. The new economic conditions led to smaller families. As a result, more families had no sons (and more had no son they regarded worthy or reliable). Among families who had five children, only about 3 percent had no boys. When families had two children, about 25 percent had only daughters.[49] During the nineteenth century, the proportion of families who had daughters but no sons probably rose from about 5 percent to above 15 percent as the average number of children declined from more than six to about three. These proportions were higher in urban areas.[50] Many others with daughters had only one son, who might prove to be untrustworthy, unlikable, or who migrated away. Over time, therefore, a growing minority of parents had every reason to give all their love and pride and wealth to their daughters.

In short, parents became more likely to give equally to their daughters and sons. If advancing the quality of parents' later years dominated the interests influencing support for children and inheritance patterns, children's sex gradually lost a role in assessing those interests. A good daughter was at least as likely to reciprocate a parental investment through caretaking, respect, and monetary assistance as was a son. Without a need to preserve the family enterprise, families, and fathers in particular, had more room to treat both sexes sentimentally.

The individualistic family arose through a series of related changes, both external and internal. As it gradually became independent of economic and political organization, the family gave men progressively less authority to secure women's intimate subjection. Increasingly, government and business treated people as autonomous indi-

viduals rather than as members of a family. Men lost their position as intermediaries linking women to productive property and the state. Sentimentality's growing role as a binding force of family life improved daughters' standings and wives' resources. The transition to employment in jobs and professions, the dismantling of family enterprises, the increasing importance of education, and the declining size of families combined to alter family interests. Parents' interests became better served by supporting all children without regard to their sex. Men's interest in sustaining their family power declined as the value of that power diminished. Simultaneously, through the principle of least interest, family dynamics rapidly adjusted the power of women and men to the changing alternatives available to them. The rising availability and use of divorce reflected and magnified the voluntaristic interpretation of marriage. This complex transformation toward an individualistic family occurred slowly and unevenly. It is not complete even now Nonetheless, the authoritarian family as an instrument of male dominance has become a declining remnant.

## THE RISE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Modern individualism arose from the reconstruction of economic and political life. The economy and the state gradually absorbed the mechanisms of power. Pursuing their organizational interests, the economy and state increasingly treated everyone as individuals, eliminating the family's role as a mediator. Economic and political individualism led to individualism's expansion into other institutions and into ideology.

When guided by their interests, those with influence in these institutional contexts responded to gender inequality almost amorally and impartially. They pursued their organizational interests without significant concern if their actions aided, complemented, or subverted gender inequality. They rarely treated women and men equally. Because men ran them, they paid greater attention to men's interests. Yet modern organizational interests did not include gender inequality, and the men in charge did not spend much effort considering it. When it suited their organizational or positional interests, they adopted policies and ideas that benefited women over the long term. Often no one realized that new policies or ideas would eventually affect sex inequality. Even when the effects were predictable, they became subsumed in the calculation of institutional interests.

The history of the public school system typifies these discrepant

effects. Schools were largely bureaucratic workplaces for the young, who labored competitively for grades, promotions, and credentials. Schools openly treated the sexes differently. They promoted sex stereotypes and channeled girls and boys toward divergent goals. Schools offered somewhat different curricula for girls and boys. A few courses teaching vocational skills such as cooking or mechanics were strictly segregated. Most academic courses were open to both sexes, but informal mechanisms channeled children to conform to sex stereotypes, especially in the higher levels. In particular, the programs that prepared students to enter high-status occupations were largely male domains until women's access to these positions was opened after the 1960s. Through these mechanisms, the school system has helped to perpetuate women's lower status.

Yet even as they sought to preserve sex-role distinctions, schools and colleges gave women and men considerably more similar experiences than they would have later in life. Women studied most of the same subjects. They read the same books. They learned the same basic skills and knowledge. Usually they attended the same classes. Repeatedly they vied directly with males and discovered they could do as well or better. This similar educational experience belied gender inequality. Even as the schools tried to treat the sexes differently, they did more to subvert inequality than to sustain it. They prepared women for careers and a style of competition with men that they would find denied them after they left school.

Meritocratic ideas also reflect the unintended consequences of institutional individualism. Meritocratic ideas and practices originated in diverse institutional contexts—among businessmen defending their status against the established elite and seeking ways to tame their growing firms, among politicians seeking legitimacy for the state and contending with the government's bureaucratic expansion, and in schools applying bureaucratic standards to the educational process. They arose because they met institutional needs. Regardless of origins, meritocratic customs propagated the belief that qualifications should decide who gets promotions and rewards. These ideas and practices implied that suppressing qualified women was both unfair and counter to organizational interests (in getting the best personnel at the lowest salary). Sex inequality had nothing to do with their origin or development. Yet even if the men controlling these institutions had thoroughly understood how meritocratic ideology would affect

women's claims for equal treatment, they would have been unlikely to reduce their support for these new ideas. The abstract issue of gender inequality's fate over the long term was too vague and remote compared with the immediate and self-interested reasons for adopting meritocratic ideals.

Institutional individualism also penetrated the family as it slowly shifted toward less hierarchical, more voluntary organization. Increasingly, family life stressed companionship and mutual emotional support. Divorce rates rose steadily, with marriages lasting only as long as both wife and husband chose to preserve them. When emotional goals displaced material goals in families and staying married became voluntary, the family ceased to provide dependable support for women's subjugation.

Expanding individualism did not rob people of all alternative forms of attachment and organization. People have preserved kinship and community ties. To sustain these ties, however, people had to change them. Kinship and community bonds gradually lost much of the authority and dependency they once had. The attachments and private institutions that people care about today usually concern ties of affection and mutual support among autonomous individuals.

Whatever its specific form, the institutional individualism that emerged in these diverse social contexts was generally inconsistent with exclusionary status inequality. Sustained status inequality must be embedded in positional inequalities, particularly economic and political inequality. This embedding enables advantaged status groups to control high-ranking positions and to restrict access to people like themselves through discrimination and oppression. By generalizing the effects of the concentration of social power in economic and political organizations, institutional individualism directly contravened such exclusionary practices.

Institutional individualism comprises social beliefs, practices, and relationships that recurringly make status inequality seem arbitrary, impractical, and unjust. Institutional individualism can coexist with status inequality, producing neither direct contradictions nor challenges. Such conditions are unlikely to be stable, however. The more that individualism pervades a society, the shakier the supports for status inequality become. Individualism both practically and ideologically erodes people's commitments to the discriminatory practices needed to sustain status inequality.

Institutional individualism reflects two fundamental principles of modern social organizations: they have no integral interest in gender inequality, and they do have inherent tendencies to produce interests that ignore sex-role distinctions. Organizations might exploit opportunities stemming from existing gender inequality, as when employers hired cheap female labor. Organizations might adapt to gender inequality, as when schools created specialized courses to fit women's and men's distinctive roles in society. The men running organizations might generally prefer to honor and support gender inequality because they share the prejudiced ideals and perceptions of their sex. Nonetheless, modern organizations have no inherent interest in preserving gender distinctions. Instead, they generate interests in treating all people by criteria related to the functional activities of the organization. People are increasingly recognized and responded to in terms of their role in relation to the institution, as workers, managers, consumers, voters, criminals, students. Institutional individualism may not have been a primary cause of gender inequality's decline, but it reinforced the movement toward greater equality and made it easier to attain.

## 4. INSTITUTIONAL INDIVIDUALISM

1. Steven Lukes, *Individualism.* For examples of alternative treatments see Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism;* W. Richard Scott and John W. Meyer, *Institutional Environments and Organizations;* Daniel Shanahan, *Toward a Genealogy of Individualism.*
2. For thoughtful discussions see Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action;* and Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism.* Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* appeared in 1835, Henry Sumner Maine published *Ancient Law* in 1861, Ferdinand 'ninnies presented his ideas in *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* in 1887, and Emile Durkheim introduced his ideas about solidarity in *The Division of Labor in Society* in 1893.
3. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System.*
4. David B. Tyack, *The One. Best System;* Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women;* David B. Tyack and Elisabeth Han-sot, *Learning Together;* Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood.*
5. Tyack and Hansot, *Learning Together;* and John L. Rury, *Education and Women's Work,* document America's widespread and rapid acceptance of coeducation. Unfortunately, although they describe it well, they do not explain it successfully.
6. *Historical Statistics, vol.* 1, pp. 375, 379. The share of all youths receiving high school degrees increased from about 6 percent in 1900 to about 75 percent in 1970.
7. Data are from *Historical Statistics, vol.* 1, pp. 379-380, 385-386; U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education: 1984,* pp. 58, 88, 98; idem, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1996,* pp. 253, 281.
8. See Rury, *Education and Women's Work.*
9. *Historical Statistics, vol.* 1, p. 375.
10. Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women.*
11. Newcomer, *Century of Higher Education,* p. 37. On coeducation see Newcomer, pp. 35-51; Solomon, *In the* Company *of Educated Women,* pp. 4361; Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place;* Patricia A. Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion"; Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States;* Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, *Woman's Place.*
12. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women,* pp. 62-77.
13. Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage,* pp. 21-23.
14. The evidence on changing inheritance is not precise. See, e.g., Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, *Inheritance in America;* Susan Grigg, "Women and Family Property."
15. The first generation of college-educated women is well known to have experienced a relatively low rate of marriage. Exceptional and unusual women chose to be among the first attending college, and it is difficult to say if their college experience had any effect on their marriage experiences. This does not controvert the observation that some middle-class families hoped daughters might find a better husband by going to college.
16. Newcomer, *Century of Higher Education,* p. 49.

17. Angell quoted in Annie Nathan Meyer, *Woman's Work in America,* pp. 78-79.
18. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage,* vol. 4, p. 966.

19. Newcomer, *Century of Higher Education,* pp. 72-103; Jerry A. Jacobs, *Revolving Doors.*
20. Some evidence supports the claim that medical schools began applying the same admissions standards to women and men before modern affirmative action policies or modern feminist beliefs had any effects (Stephen Cole, "Sex Discrimination and Admission to Medical School, 1929-1984"), so that women's low representation reflects a lack of interest. While this evidence probably accurately represents a surface truth, it neglects widespread discriminatory processes that allowed medical schools to achieve the appearance of impartiality while still avoiding the assimilation of women. Cf. Judith Lorber, *Women Physicians.* See also Robert Fiorentine and Stephen Cole, "Why Fewer Women Become Physicians."
21. On the determinants of curricula, see Randall Collins, *The Credential Society;* Margaret Scotford Archer, *Social Origins of Educational Systems;* Ivor Goodson, *School Subjects and Curriculum Change;* Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958;* John Boli, Francisco 0. Ramirez, and John W Meyer, "Explaining the Origins and Expansion of Mass Education."
22. Tyack, *The One Best System;* Tyack and Hansot, *Learning Together.*
23. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950.*
24. Collins, *The Credential Society.*
25. Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033.*
26. Reinhard Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry;* Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature;* Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915.* For a recent example of derivative thinking, see Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal.*
27. Max Weber, *Economy and Society;* Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain.*
28. Max Weber, *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society.* On Weber's conceptions of rationality see Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rational-
ity."
29. But for an analysis of the public civil service's direct effects on women's employment, see Frances Gottfried, *The Merit System and Municipal Civil Service.*
30. John Meyer and his students show a strong similarity in the curriculum coverage of primary education across nations in Aaron Benavot et al., "Knowledge for the Masses."
31. C. James Quann, "Grades and Grading"; Mark W. Durm, "An A Is Not an A"; Tyack, *The One Best System.*
32. Tyack and Hansot, *Learning Together;* Rury, *Education and Women's Work.*
33. See, e.g., Deborah Rhode's comments on the judiciary in *Justice and Gender,* pp. 19-28.
34. Cf. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World.*
35. Carl N. Degler, *At Odds;* J. E. Goldthorpe, *Family Life in Western Societies;*

Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson, eds., *Family and Inheritance;* Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family.*

36. While some societies have applied their kinship terminology to fairly extensive clans and the like, these commonly are forms of political organization imposed on the family institution. A large clan is not a family. How we should assess the family as an institution in these cases is open to debate, but need not concern us here.

37. E.g., David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest.*

38. Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, *Family Socialization and Interaction Process.* A good, brief review of criticism received by the isolated family idea appears in Steven Ruggles, "The Transformation of American Family Structure," pp. 104-105.

39. William J. Goode, "Why Men Resist."

40. This idea is consistent with Barbara Ehrenreich's contention, in *The Hearts of Men,* that middle-class men began to rebel against family life and to abandon it well before modern feminism sprang to life. See Chapter 6 for further discussion.

41. Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage;* Paul H. Jacobson, *American Marriage and Divorce;* Kingsley Davis, "The American Family in Relation to Demographic Change."

42. Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder;* Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations* and "The Pressure to Provide"; William O'Neill, *Divorce in the Progressive* Era; George E. Howard, A *History of Matrimonial Institutions;* Nelson M. Blake, *The Road to Reno;* Degler, *At Odds;* Robert L. Griswold, *Family and Divorce in California, 1850-1890.*

43. On power relations between spouses see Dair L. Gillespie, "Who Has the Power?"; Rebecca L. Warner, Gary R. Lee, and Janet Lee, "Social Organization, Spousal Resources, and Marital Power"; Carolyn Vogler and Jan Pahl, "Money, Power and Inequality within Marriage"; Sara Arber and Jay Ginn, "The Marriage of Gender Equality"; Karen D. Pyke, "Women's Employment as a Gift or Burden?"; Janeen Baxter, "Power Attitudes and Time."

44. Willard Walter Waller, *The Family.*

45. Waller's idea may be properly interpreted as one elegant, nonmathematical precursor to modern game theory.

46. Goody, Thirsk, and Thompson, *Family and Inheritance;* Grigg, "Women and Family Property"; Aim **R.** Tickamyer, "Wealth and Power"; Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America;* Shammas, Salmon, and Dahlin, *Inheritance in America.*

47. For simplicity, I ignore here the wide range of patterns between impartible and partible inheritance, e.g., the classic presentation in H. J. Habakkuk, "Family Structure and Economic Change in Nineteenth-Century Europe."

48. John H. Langbein, "The Inheritance Revolution."

49. These numbers represent the predicted distribution assuming male and female births were equally likely.

50. These estimates are derived from birth cohort data, *Historical Statistics, vol.* 1, pp. 53-54. The actual number of families with only daughters is difficult to estimate accurately. Reproduction rates varied considerably by class and location (particularly rural versus urban). Also, several generations with divergent histories coexist at any time. This means that one must have precise data about specific groups to achieve accurate and thorough estimates. The average number of children born to white urban women (including all classes), for example, was probably about 3.5 in 1800 and declined to about 2.5 by 1900; during the 1800s, the proportion of the population living in urban areas rose from 5 percent to 40 percent.