

David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

RUTH ROSEN'S *THE WORLD SPLIT OPEN:
HOW THE MODERN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT CHANGED AMERICA*¹

Rosen in her *The World Split Open* seemingly surveys just about every activity connected with feminism, women's liberation, and/or the women's movement (WM) in the United States from 1950 through 1990. She refers to major and minor personalities, and she provides a comprehensive social history of the modern WM. Her ample documentation, further augmented by a full bibliography, indicates considerable research of archival material, oral interviews, and interpretative literature. As a result, she balances institutional and individual concerns, and she indicates points of convergence as well as divergence within a societal force that ebbed and flowed systemically.

At issue, though, remains Rosen's contention about the overall effectiveness and impact of the modern WM. She carefully observes the diverse perspectives within the movement. But as an insider, she seldom appreciates the opposite viewpoint of women who adhere to traditional roles *a la* mainstream American culture. For example, her excursus on the conservative backlash during the 1980s contraindicates any notion of a "proliferation of feminism" (chapter eight). And she fails to give credit to the rightist belief that feminism represented a real threat to the structure and norms of the traditional American family. This larger context for understanding the peculiarities of the modern WM is, in the reviewer's opinion, necessary.

¹New York, NY: Viking Books, 2000.

David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

Rosen also does not provide a clear indication of who feminists were reacting to or against, that is, certain types of men or specific discriminatory aspects of the system rather than men or the system in general. And she perhaps overrates the upheaval occasioned by various facets of the modern WM. A good illustration of this is her assertion that “marriage . . . began to seem like just one of many lifestyles that men and women might choose. Never before in American history had such ambivalent attitudes toward fidelity and commitment entered mainstream culture” (314). This contention is just not true, as a cursory read of Nancy F. Cott’s excellent study, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Harvard, 2000) indicates.

Certainly, the modern WM impacted American culture greatly in many ways, but does its influence deserve the designation “revolution” as if it “split the world open”? Her conclusion—that there is no end in sight—seems to imply that the WM should be seen as evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Of this evolution, Rosen has proven herself to be a wise observer and reporter.