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Scouts' dishonor

On the Boy Scouts of America's decision to admit girls in their ranks.

It is not often that we quote cnn with approval. But a recent headline from the “news” site deserves an award for provocative understatement: “Boy Scouts’ decision to welcome girls isn’t completely welcome.” No, not completely.

The decision in question, as our readers surely know, came last month when the Boy Scouts announced that, henceforth, they would be admitting girls as Cub Scouts and allowing them to earn the rank of Eagle Scout.

Our first question on reading that was: is there anything that feminism cannot spoil?

The answer to *that* query, we are confident, is “No, it ruins everything it touches.” But the forces that brought about the demise of the Boy Scouts are larger and more encompassing than feminism. It was not feminism, exactly, that led the Boy Scouts to welcome “transgender” scouts a few years ago. Likewise, it was not feminism alone that precipitated the decision to remake the Boy Scouts as a co-ed institution.

Feminist animus is doubtless part of the story, as is what our friend and contributor James Piereson once called “punitive liberalism.” At the end of the day, helping girls is incidental. Punishing boys is the more immediate goal.

There were surely also a host of pragmatic considerations: with more mothers working, would it not simply be more convenient to drive Jill to the same spot that Jack was headed after school?

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But the larger context is the cultural-moral revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, of which feminism is merely one of many weaponized battalions. The deeper story, the more potent toxin, is the anti-civilizational imperative bubbling in the cauldron of Marxist-inspired

revolutionaries like the German-born Frankfurt School guru Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979).

Marcuse's paeans, in his countercultural bible *Eros and Civilization*, to "polymorphous perversity" and "primary narcissism," to say nothing of his attacks on "procreative sexuality" as an instrument of repression, are far more radical than anything emitted by your common or garden-variety feminist. Had not the substance of such ideas—including the idea that sexual identity is fundamentally plastic—been absorbed by large precincts of elite culture, the Boy Scouts would still be an organization exclusively for boys.

The death knell of the Scouts has been ringing for some time. As long ago as the 1970s the organization began making accommodations to forces of cultural dissolution. They, like the Catholic Church (and now Hollywood), also had their share of sexual abuse scandals. Parents responded accordingly. In 1987 there were nearly 5.5 million Boy Scouts in the United States. In 1997, that number had dropped to 4.6 million. Now it hovers at just over 2 million. Many alternative institutions have sprung up, filling in the moral space that the Boy Scouts had originally staked out but then abandoned, though none is as large or well-known as the Scouts.

According to the traditional Scout Law, "a Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent." What would Hollywood have to say about that list of virtues? The Scout Oath is similarly scandalous: "On my honor, I will do my best/ To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law;/ To help other people at all times;/ To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight." Would reciting that at most contemporary colleges even be permitted?

It is worth noting that Robert Baden-Powell, the British military man who started the scouting movement, had nothing against girls. Shortly after he inaugurated his first scouting troop, in 1908, he and his sister Agnes started the Girl Guides, out of which the Girl Scouts grew.

The Baden-Powells understood two simple truths that seem to elude their more sophisticated heirs. The first truth revolved around the recognition that the psychological and moral advantages of practicing outdoor activities like camping, boating, and woodcraft were sharpened and enhanced by cultivating an attitude of reverence and helpfulness. The spirit of the movement is easy to caricature, as anyone who has read about the exploits of Edwin the Boy Scout in P. G. Wodehouse will fondly recall. But there is also something essentially, elementally wholesome about the ambitions of the scouting movement, something our culture is in peril of losing. (An index of just how threatened that ambition is may be estimated by the smile that passed your lips at the word "wholesome.")

The second truth that the Baden-Powells assumed was that there are fundamental differences between boys and girls and that, in many circumstances, they profit by single-sex associations that nurture and cater to those differences. This is a truth that has been understood by most cultures throughout history. It is not abrogated by the rancorous ideological innovations of the last few decades, though many children will be harmed by those innovations. Indeed, among the many unfortunate ironies attending the decision of the Boy Scouts to renounce a key element of its charter is that it will undoubtedly damage the Girl Scouts. Henceforth, every overbearing

mother who is determined to see her daughter at Harvard and then in a corporate boardroom or the U.S. Congress will start the journey by enrolling her not in the Girl Scouts but in the Boy Scouts in the hope that achieving the badge of Eagle Scout will hurry her on her way. And can anyone doubt that the coveted rank of Eagle Scout will soon be subject to “affirmative action” scrutiny and will henceforth be apportioned as much by quota as by achievement?

Back in 1979, the literary critic Paul Fussell wrote a perceptive essay called “The Boy Scout Handbook,” recommending that best-selling work to the attention of critics and, indeed, to the wider literate public. There is a lot to praise in Fussell’s essay. But we suspect that he underestimated the nature of the changes that, even then, were sweeping through our society. “The pliability and adaptability of the scout movement,” Fussell wrote, “explains its remarkable longevity, its capacity to flourish in a world dramatically different from its founder’s.” That may have been true in 1979. Is it still? Fussell’s next observation makes us tremble about the answer. “Like the Roman Catholic Church, the scout movement knows the difference between cosmetic and real change, and it happily embraces the one to avoid any truck with the other.”

Unpacking the protasis of that sentence *circa* 2017 will not necessarily yield the consolation Fussell assumes.

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