**The Three Waves of Feminism**

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**Thursday, October 23, 2014**

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It is common to speak of three phases of modern feminism; however, there is little consensus as to how to characterize these three waves or what to do with women's movements before the late 19th century.

For instance, some thinkers have sought to locate the roots of feminism in ancient Greece with Sappho (d. c. 570 BCE) or the medieval world with Hildegard of Bingen (d.1179) or Christine de Pisan (d.1434). Certainly Olympes de Gouge (d.1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (d.1797), and Jane Austen (d.1817) are foremothers of the modern women's movement. All of these people advocated for the dignity, intelligence and basic human potential of the female sex. However, it was not until the late 19th century that the efforts for women's equal rights coalesced into a clearly identifiable and self-conscious movement, or rather a series of movements.

The first wave of feminism took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emerging out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics. The goal of this wave was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage. The wave formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, when 300 men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (d.1902) drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration outlining the new movement's ideology and political strategies.

In its early stages, feminism was interrelated with the temperance and abolitionist movements and gave voice to now-famous activists like the African-American Sojourner Truth (d.1883), who demanded, "Ain't I a woman?" Victorian America saw women acting in very "un-ladylike" ways (public speaking, demonstrating, stints in jail), which challenged the "cult of domesticity." Discussions about the vote and women's participation in politics led to an examination of the differences between men and women as they were then viewed. Some claimed that women were morally superior to men, and so their presence in the civic sphere would improve public behavior and the political process.

The second wave began in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s. This wave unfolded in the context of the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements and the growing self-consciousness of a variety of minority groups around the world. The New Left was on the rise, and the voice of the second wave was increasingly radical. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights were dominant issues, and much of the movement's energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex.

This phase began with protests against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969. Feminists parodied what they held to be a degrading "cattle parade" that reduced women to objects of beauty dominated by a patriarchy that sought to keep them in the home or in dull, low-paying jobs. The radical New York group called the Redstockings staged a counter pageant, in which they crowned a sheep as Miss America and threw "oppressive" feminine artifacts such as bras, girdles, high-heels, makeup and false eyelashes into the trashcan.

Because the second wave of feminism found voice amid so many other social movements, it was easily marginalized and viewed as less pressing than, for example, Black Power or the effort to end the war in Vietnam. Feminists reacted by forming women-only organizations (such as NOW) and "consciousness raising" groups. In publications like "The BITCH Manifesto" and "Sisterhood is Powerful," feminists advocated for their place in the sun. The second wave was increasingly theoretical, based on a fusion of neo-Marxism and psycho-analytic theory and began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother. Sex and gender were differentiated — the former being biological, and the later a social construct that varies culture-to-culture and over time.

Whereas the first wave of feminism was generally propelled by middle class white women, the second phase drew in women of color and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity and claiming, "Women's struggle is class struggle." Feminists spoke of women as a social class and coined phrases such as "the personal is political" and "identity politics" in an effort to demonstrate that race, class and gender oppression are all related. They initiated a concentrated effort to rid society top-to-bottom of sexism, from children's cartoons to the highest levels of government.

One of the strains of this complex and diverse "wave" was the development of women-only spaces and the notion that women working together create a special dynamic that is not possible in mixed-groups and that would ultimately work for the betterment of the entire planet. Women, whether due to their long "subjugation" or to their biology, were thought by some to be more humane, collaborative, inclusive, peaceful, nurturing, democratic and holistic in their approach to problem-solving than men. The term eco-feminism was coined to capture the sense that, because of their biological connection to earth and lunar cycles, women were natural advocates of environmentalism.

The third phase of feminism began in the mid-1990s and is informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. In this phase many constructs have been destabilized, including the notions of "universal womanhood," body, gender, sexuality and hetreronormativity. An aspect of third wave feminism that mystifies the mothers of the earlier feminist movement is the readoption by young feminists of the very lipstick, high heels and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression. Pinkfloor expressed this new position when she said; "It's possible to have a push-up bra and a brain at the same time."

The "grrls" of the third wave have stepped onto the stage as strong and empowered, eschewing victimization and defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy. They have developed a rhetoric of mimicry, which reappropriates derogatory terms like "slut" and "bitch" in order to subvert sexist culture and deprive it of verbal weapons. The web is an important aspect of the new "girlie feminism." E-zines have provided "cybergrrls" and "netgrrls" another kind of women-only space. At the same time — rife with the irony of third-wave feminism because cyberspace is disembodied — it permits all users the opportunity to cross gender boundaries and so the very notion of gender has been challenged.

This is in keeping with the third wave's celebration of ambiguity and refusal to think in terms of "us-them" or in some cases their refusal to identify themselves as "feminists" at all. Grrl-feminism tends to be global and multi-cultural, and it shuns simple answers or artificial categories of identity, gender and sexuality. Its transversal politics means that differences such as those of ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc., are celebrated but recognized as dynamic, situational and provisional. Reality is conceived not so much in terms of fixed structures and power relations, but in terms of performance within contingencies. Third wave feminism breaks boundaries.

Where feminism will go from here is unclear, but the point is that feminism, by whatever name, is alive and well both in academia and outside of it. Some older feminists feel discouraged by the younger generation's seeming ignorance of or disregard for the struggles and achievements of the early movement. They see little progress (the pay gap has not significantly narrowed in 60 years), and are fearful that the new high-heeled, red-lipped college grrls are letting us backslide. This, however, is not likely the case. There have always been feminisms in the movement, not just one ideology, and there have always been tensions, points and counterpoints. The political, social and intellectual feminist movements have always been chaotic, multivalenced, and disconcerting, and let's hope they continue to be so; it's a sign that they are thriving.