Rethinking American Women's Activism

Annelise Orleck

American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century

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RETHINKING AMERICAN WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

In this enthralling narrative, Annelise Orleck chronicles the history of the American women's movement from the 19th century to the present. Starting with an incisive introduction that calls for a reconceptualization of American feminist history to encompass multiple streams of women's activism, she weaves the personal with the political, vividly evoking the events and people who participated in our era's most far-reaching social revolutions.

In short, thematic chapters, Orleck enables readers to understand the impact of women's activism, and highlights how feminism has flourished through much of the past century within social movements that have too often been treated as completely separate. Showing that women's activism has taken many forms, has intersected with issues of class and race, and has continued during periods of backlash, *Rethinking American Women's Activism* is a perfect introduction to the subject for anyone interested in women's history and social movements.

Annelise Orleck is Professor of History at Dartmouth College. She is the author of *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working Class Politics in the United States, 1900–1965* and *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*.

American Social and Political Movements of the Twentieth Century

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SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the *American Social and Political Movements of the 20th Century* series at Routledge. This collection of works by top historians from around the nation and world introduces students to the myriad movements that came together in the United States during the 20th century to expand democracy, to reshape the political economy, and to increase social justice.

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Heather Ann Thompson
Temple University

PROLOGUE

Reflecting on the Wave Metaphor and the Myth of Monolithic Feminism

Wrestling With the F Word

Since the 1980s, feminism – the word, the idea and its history – has carried something of a bad odor in American popular culture. Some of that stems from genuine fear of the dangerous power of female anger. Some of it arises out of the backwash from pundits' purposely distorting stereotypes. Anyone who has listened to radio for the past 35 years has heard the crude characterizations – man-hating, bra-burning, hairy-legged, chanting, marching women, "FEMINAZIS!"

Most high school and college students will run hard to distance themselves from anything that might associate them with such vestigial creatures. Even for most older people, the images generated by the word feminism are unsavory. And so feminists remain, for many, historic figures trapped in amber – tiny, hairy cave women waving their clubs as they march through the mists of recent history. We can see the angry expressions on their faces and tell from the movement of their mouths that they are shouting. But we can't quite hear what they are saying.

Feminism is best left that way, many young people feel. Even enrolling in a women's history course, or a women's and gender studies class is enough to elicit suspicious comments from other students who wonder aloud: "What do you learn in those classes? You're not a feminist are you?"

One purpose of this book is to make the "f word" – feminism – less frightening. What follows is a history of American women's activism in the 19th and 20th centuries that makes clear that there has never been a single or unitary American feminism. Rather there have been diverse and often conflicting expressions of women's desire for greater freedoms, for political and economic equality, for change in the home and in the boardroom. Women's desires for social and political change have not been limited to any time or place. Women's activism can be

found everywhere in American social, cultural and political history. One need only look beyond the headlines and the stereotypes.

This book will not shy away from use of the word Feminism with a capital F, or from examining explicitly feminist struggles for legal and economic equality, sexual and political equality. But it will situate feminist identities, thoughts and activisms broadly. It will focus not only on the campaigns of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (the driving force in getting women the right to vote), or the National Organization for Women (founded in 1966 to promote legal equality for women). It will identify feminist ideas not only in arguments for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution or in the famous books most often associated with advances in women's rights. Instead, it will trace and weave together multiple, intersecting streams of women's activism. Some of these have focused only on gender but others have also highlighted race, class, sexuality, motherhood and the struggle for subsistence.

In seeking to "redefine" American women's activism, this book creates a history not of Feminism but of feminisms. It recounts the story not of one women's movement but of women's activism in the abolitionist, labor, civil rights, welfare rights, lesbian and gay rights struggles – and elsewhere. Strands of feminism can be found in many movements if we look closely – in peace and environmental justice movements, among the Riot Grrrls of 1990s rock music, in the military and in the Women's National Basketball Association. There is not enough space in this book to explore all of these expressions of feminism in any depth. Still, this book will make clear that American women's activism has involved much more than a burst of fierce anger that flamed up in the 1960s and 1970s, then died an ignominious death in the 1980s.

Feminism's demise has been regularly reported and celebrated ever since the 19th century. But, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of American feminism have usually been greatly exaggerated. It is true that, in some eras, it has been difficult to see women organized en masse. At other times, women's activism has been impossible to ignore. There has been no linear path toward women's progress. Still, if we see American women's activism as a tangle of currents, running through the 19th and 20th centuries – overlapping, diverging, running underground and re-emerging, one can see that it has always been there. Throughout American history, varied forms of feminism can be found at the intersections of social movements that historians have sometimes seen as completely separate. This book will argue that they were not so separate after all. And it will mark moments when, for a time, different streams, disparate movements, have come together. And, as the waters rose, women's discontent became visible.

Uprisings and the Painstaking Labor of Making Change

Historians of social movements, and I am no exception, have been drawn to moments of turbulent unrest that, for lack of a better term, may be described as "uprisings." They are romantic, exciting. They sweep up tens, even hundreds, of thousands of

people intoxicated by the prospects for imminent change. But uprisings are rarely if ever truly spontaneous. Not simply the upwelling of long-suppressed frustrations – as they are frequently characterized by pundits at the time – most periods of protest and mass unrest arise out of, and give rise to, longer, quieter times of painstaking and sustained activism.

Fewer people are moved to engage in political action during these in-between times but those who do are women and men whose lives are defined by activism. Often, they have a clear vision of the kinds of changes they hope to bring and they are in the struggle for the long haul. These are the activists who labor in the trenches lobbying and organizing to pass and enforce legislation. They are in the streets – and more recently on the internet – getting petitions signed. They stay up late in crowded storefront offices making phone calls, or in softly lit rooms researching and writing op-eds, political manifestos and legal briefs. It will be difficult in a short book such as this to capture the many kinds of political labor that women activists have performed in the quiet, interstitial years. But this volume will try to convey some sense of the crucial work being done at times when most journalists and historians were looking elsewhere.

Let's consider the dominant metaphor of feminist history that sees American women's activism and advances in women's rights as having come in two major waves – from the mid-19th century to the early 20th, then rising again in the 1960s and 1970s. That framing has resulted in American history too often being taught as if women had little to do with American politics or social change at any other times. This book asks what happens if we describe periods of feminist uprising as wave crests or peaks and the in-between times as troughs?

Waves are defined by their peaks, but the troughs are just as important to the ebb and flow of any political movement. This book will try to make visible some of the troughs in American women's activism as well as the peaks. It will trace not only the inspiring moments of mass uprising but also the years of painstaking work, the less glamorous but equally essential forms of activism that have come before and between and after the peaks.

The New York-born writer, peace activist and feminist Grace Paley – whose political work continued unabated from the 1930s into the 21st century – never minded laboring quietly in the troughs. She knew that she had contributed to change by protesting, speaking out and writing. But she insisted that the unglamorous work was just as important. "You still have to stuff envelopes," she quietly told a group of younger women writers at a 1990s gathering to consider the ways that writing can be a form of political activism.

Paley also reminded younger activists that it can take a very long time to make change. After Paley spoke to a group of U.S. history students about her efforts to end the war in Vietnam, one young woman asked whether she had ever grown so frustrated that she was tempted to engage in armed struggle. "Political violence is nothing more than a form of laziness," she answered. "Making change is hard work. You have to have patience to do the work it takes to bring real change."[1] One theme of this book is inspired by those words. Without the hard, unromantic

work that women activists have done in the trough years, there would never have been those dramatic peak moments when enormous changes have seemed to come rapidly and almost magically.

Cresting waves catch the sunlight and then crash on the shore dramatically. It's hard to miss them. They are compelling and beautiful and sometimes a bit dangerous if you get caught up in the wrong parts of the break. But troughs are parts of the same oceanic currents. One cannot understand waves without also probing their depths. Change is constant and currents crisscross. And the water is always moving.

Sex, Gender and Shifting Coalitions

The tides of political activism, just like oceanic tides, are ceaselessly changing, shifting, turning, splitting into rip currents. Extending the wave metaphor to include cross-currents and rip currents is one more way that this book attempts to redefine the history of American women's activism. Borrowing from some of the pioneering historians of American women, this book will argue that women's politics have always been, of necessity, coalition politics. And those coalitions – hard as many different people worked to build them – have inevitably been temporary, unstable and shifting.[2]

Women, like men, are unified by certain physical realities of biological sex, and they also share the gender norms of their culture and generation. Gender norms are socially constructed and historically evolving ideas about what constitutes acceptable behavior for men and for women. What kinds of clothing are men and women allowed to wear? How should our bodies look? May we speak in public settings? Are we allowed to express anger? Ideas about gender have been powerful organizing forces in every era of human history. They have shaped family relationships, political power distribution, workforce participation and economic class formation. They have often united women as a political force, especially at times when gender norms have denied women basic political and economic equality.

But women are as riven by differences of class, race, sexuality, politics, region, religion and age as men are. It has therefore been difficult to sustain political coalitions around women's issues for more than a few years at a time. The history of American women's activism then, is a history of shifting coalitions, constantly forming, dissolving and reforming.

There have been times in U.S. history when significant numbers of women have been able to come together with men and with each other – across lines of difference – to change laws that discriminated against women, to improve access to education and the professions, to win the right to control their bodies, to enhance their economic or political power. But the kinds of broad coalitions women activists had to build to accomplish these changes could hold only for so long. They inevitably crashed and broke up on the rocks of their differences. Writing about such moments of dissolution is also necessary if we are to understand the history of American women's activism.

So this is a story of crests and peaks, of troughs and painstaking labor in the shadows, and it is also a history of break-up and betrayal, of the painful disintegration of carefully tended coalitions, of human conflict, the ends of friendships and loss of trust.

Such painful moments in the history of social and political movements are delicate to write and sometimes difficult to confront. But no history of organizing for political, social and/or economic change is accurate that ignores the painful side of the story. For if "sisterhood is powerful," as some 1970s feminists argued, sisterhood can also be quite painful. This book argues that, in the history of American women's activism, more often than not, it was both at the same time.

Thinking About Women's Activism As Multi-Cultural, Multi-Racial, Cross-Class

That painful instability stemmed largely from the fact that the history of American women's activism, like American history writ large, has been multi-racial, multi-class and multi-cultural. One of the most enduring myths of American feminist history is the idea that activism around gender issues has been of interest only to a small slice of the overall population: white middle-class women. Nothing could be further from the truth. Working-class women have always been active in American politics. African-American and Chicana women have been vocal and visible activists. So too have Jewish women.

Since the 1960s, activism among these women has been the subject of a fair number of historical studies. The historical literature on activism by Chinese women, Italian-Americans, Korean and Puerto Rican women activists is newer but it makes clear that historians have only begun to explore the full range of people involved in American women's movements. These varied groups of women brought multiple and often conflicting strategies and political goals to their movement work, infusing gender consciousness with a range of perspectives on class, race, ethnicity and religion.

A brief study such as this can only touch lightly on the diversity and complexity of American women's movements. Still it is central to this book's purpose to convey the idea that the history of American women's activism has been anything but narrow or simple, anything but exclusively white and middle class. It is that, of course, but it is far more complicated, far more textured, far more conflicted and far more colorful.

Notes

1 Grace Paley, "Comments at the Books and Other Acts Conference," Dartmouth College, April 7–9, 1995.

2 Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880–1917* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980).

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RETHINKING THE SO-CALLED FIRST WAVE – AN EXTREMELY BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN THE U.S. BEFORE 1920

Creation Myths and Realities

The period of women's rights activism that is commonly referred to as the First Wave of American feminism lasted an awfully long time – nearly 90 years – from the first organized expressions of women's discontent in the 19th century to the achievement of woman suffrage in 1920. Many crests and troughs broke up that long period of change. Many waves rose and fell in that time. None of the most famous of the 19th-century women's movement leaders – Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Sojourner Truth – lived to see American women receive the vote as a right of national citizenship. By the time that right was won, several generations of activists had contributed to the struggle. Their activist roots, their ideologies and their strategies differed – sometimes in fundamental ways. To understand American women's activism in the 20th century, it is crucial to understand that this long "first wave" was really numerous waves. So, before this book ventures into the 20th century, it will briefly ride some of those crests, crash into some of the troughs, and evoke some painful moments of unraveling when the elation of unity was undone by divisions over race, class, gender and generation.

Histories of American women's rights activism have most often begun with the event that has come to be seen as the symbolic creation moment of American feminism, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, where delegates composed the first full-blown women's rights manifesto to come out of the still-young United States. In fact, women's rights rhetoric had been part of struggles before Seneca, going at least as far back as the American Revolution when the language of "self-evident" equality captured the imagination of women as well as men, enslaved as well as free people. But organized women's activism on a mass scale first appeared

in the decade leading up to Seneca, arising out of the industrial labor movement, the temperance movement, and, perhaps most importantly, the anti-slavery movement.[1]

Women were heavily involved in each of these struggles in the first half of the 19th century. But, at least at first, they were not moved by what we might see as overtly "feminist" sentiments. Rather they were concerned with the issues those movements foregrounded – shorter work days, safer factory conditions, a living wage, combating alcohol abuse in the hard-drinking early republic, and fighting the pervasive moral and political evil of human slavery. Women abolitionists, labor activists and temperance advocates began to think explicitly about the issue of women's political equality partly because they were inspired by the egalitarian rhetoric and culture of those movements, and partly because of the hostility they encountered from people who did not believe that women should be engaging in politics.

The 1830s was a particularly turbulent decade in American history – marked by religious and political mass movements, utopian community-building and the first stirrings of industrial labor activism. Women mill workers – Yankee farm daughters laboring in Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts – were very much at the center of that era of political and cultural unrest. They struck in 1834 and 1836 to protest wage cuts. They marched and paraded through Lowell in what one mill agent called an "amizonian (sic) display." They circulated strike petitions, made speeches and urged other women workers to walk out of the mills in support of the strike.

Amused and also annoyed at being compared to the mythical one-breasted army of women warriors, these militant young women decided that they needed to speak for themselves. They feared that their movement would be slandered by biased bosses with greater access to print media. And so they decided to tell their own story. Beginning in 1841, New England mill workers began chronicling their activism and their lives in a newspaper called *The Lowell Offering: a Repository of Original Articles Written by Factory Girls*. The "Offering" reflected a politics forged on the mill floor and in mass street meetings, but also infused by the spirit of the more leisurely evening hours they spent together in workers' dormitories. These young women had a great deal to say. In the *Lowell Offering* and a more radical journal called *Voice of Industry*, they published young mill workers' first attempts to articulate a political theory of industrial feminism – grounded in their sense of how gender and class shaped and limited their lives.[2]

Mixing pragmatic demands for change with reflections on the social position of industrial woman workers, Lowell activists created the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association – the first political organization for women workers. They circulated petitions, marched on the state capitol in Boston, and testified before state legislators, demanding safer workplace conditions and a ten-hour day. Positing a relationship between free and un-free labor in the U.S., they referred to themselves as "wage slaves."[3]

That new phrase could be found in their published poetry, in the songs they sang as they marched and protested, and in their public testimonies. It was a knife's edge position they carved out – both asserting a sense of sisterhood with enslaved African-American women in the South and expressing a measure of outrage that they – Yankee daughters – should be treated as badly as slaves. They both condemned the institution of slavery and distanced themselves from it. "I cannot be a slave," they sang as they marched. "I will not be a slave."[4]

But, time and again, for all of the attention they received, these militant factory workers were brought up short by the fact that their political leverage was minimal. As free workers, they could choose which masters they worked for but they could not choose to be free of all masters because their economic circumstances required them to work. They needed the money. The class status of their families forced them to labor. And yet they were unlike laboring men because of their sex. They had little ability to pressure elected officials to pass safety or hours legislation. For, though they were white and free born, they were women. And – as women – they did not have the right to vote.[5]

Even as women mill workers came to this dispiriting and galvanizing recognition, middle-class women abolitionists were grappling with the same issue. The 1830s was a period of intense activity by those who opposed slavery. Hundreds of middle-class women's anti-slavery organizations were formed during those years, many of them in the Northeast. In 1837, to foster broader social and political networks, abolitionists convened the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, held in New York. It attracted women delegates from eight states.

The movement gained momentum and attracted more women every year. But, as strong as anti-slavery sentiment was in the Northeast, women faced strong resistance to their playing leading roles in the abolition movement, especially from religious authorities. Militant women abolitionists represented a counter-culture and their views on sex and gender, together with their views on race, marked them as radical – truly different from most of their neighbors, even in the North.

The most famous example of abolitionist women flouting the gender norms of their day was the 1837 speaking tour of two South Carolina sisters, Sara and Angelina Grimké. When the two traveled north to bring a Southern white woman's perspective to the movement against slavery, they were lauded by abolitionist organizer Theodore Weld. Because they were from a slave-holding family, he wrote, the sisters "could do more at convincing the north than twenty northern Females." Fearful of those powers of persuasion, Boston's pro-slavery ministers urged congregants to boycott the women.[6]

In June 1837, the Congregationalist Ministers' Association of Massachusetts issued a pastoral letter asserting that "the power of woman is in her dependence" and condemning "any of that sex who so far forget themselves as to itinerate in the character of public lecturers and teachers." Women were like vines, the ministers opined, "whose strength and beauty is to lean upon the trellis-work" of home. But

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