

What is Left of Radical Feminism? Victims and Victimology in the Contemporary United States
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The legacies of the women's movement this book examines are not the ones second wave feminists intended, anticipated, or even desired. *What is Left of Radical Feminism?* concerns itself with the vestiges of the movement in contemporary *representations* of sixties and seventies' feminism. It focuses on such atavistic images of the second wave to find out not what they have to teach us about feminism's past but what they reveal about our own present. Specifically, I show how this pivotal era of feminist history continues to haunt a wide range of cultural, academic, popular, and institutional discourses whose only common denominator might paradoxically be their claim to have supplanted it. The question I ask is the following: Why this continuing fascination for, if not obsession with, an era that seems only to evoke critical detachment if not condescension from such disparate sites as Hollywood cinema, feminist academic and activist circles, and the healthcare industry? In answering this question, I expose disturbing intersections between seemingly opposed and competing discourses (feminist and anti-feminist, mainstream and alternative, activist and theoretical) whose commonalities feminists need to recognize and process if we are to successfully partake of the refashioning of gender relations in the twenty-first century.

One of the most visible legacies of the feminist movement with which this book is concerned is the evolution of the term "victim" in cultural and academic life. Whether it is from the left or the right, feminism or the backlash, everyone seems to agree that being a victim is no longer a straightforward proposition. George Bush's closest adviser, Karen P. Hughes, who was instrumental in crafting the White House's response to 9/11, insisted that in his first speech to the nation, the president not describe the tragedy in terms of the United States' victimization as originally planned. To quote Hughes, "When he [Ari] read it, the first line made me apoplectic: 'America today was the victim of' 'We are not victims,' I interrupted, 'we may have been attacked but we are *not* victims.'" Over the last two decades, Hollywood movies and TV shows have staged a similar aversion to the use of the word and powerfully illustrate the loaded ideological meanings the term has accumulated over the years. Paradoxically, victims of violent crimes themselves often disavow the term, demanding to be called survivors instead. Last but not least, feminist theorists such as Wendy Brown warn us against adopting injury (victimization) as an identity. So why can't victims just be victims any more? When did the concept begin evoking aversion rather than sympathy? Most importantly, why has being the victim become a condition that reflects badly on the people suffering from it? How and when did the negative connotations of the term become associated with the victim herself rather than with the circumstances or the perpetrator(s) behind the harming deed? *What is Left of Radical Feminism* examines what is at stake in this wholesale rejection of what was once a mere descriptive term and places the development of the meanings attached to the word in the context of the second wave.

I argue that the semantic and ideological shift the term victim has undergone over the last three decades is symptomatic of a reaction against the watershed the second wave constituted. In the sixties and seventies, feminist activists helped put on the political and public agenda a wide range of previously marginalized issues--such as rape, domestic violence, pornography, lesbian rights --that radically transformed social and cultural theory up to the present day. We have since been living with the implications of this revolutionary turn. It is in response to feminism's radical intervention then that one of the key terms it had appropriated for political change, namely the

concept of victimization, has since been interrogated, contested, feminized, and even neutralized. The constructed and shifting nature of victimization becomes particularly evident when we examine the various practices (anti-rape activism, consciousness raising, natural childbirth, etc.) that are associated with the legacies of the second wave in both mainstream and academic discourses.

Chapter I: Introduction: Are Feminism's Victims the Victims of Feminism?

This chapter discusses the double-edged process of contestation and neutralization that the term "victim" has undergone over the last three decades or so. "Victim" has become a taboo term in our culture because it signifies a lack of agency that is now ascribed to a psychological or psychic flaw within the harmed individual rather than to circumstances external to the self. Radical feminism and activism, i.e. the very movements that mobilized to fight against women's victimization in the sixties and seventies, have since paradoxically been rewritten as an instance of "victimology." This chapter discusses the parameters within which this shift occurred (the normalization of therapeutic discourse, the backlash) and its effects on feminist practice and theory.

Chapter II: Rape and Victimology in Feminist Academic Discourse

Over the last few decades, postmodern feminist theory has been instrumental in challenging existing paradigms about women's "experiences" and "oppression" which too often constituted the unproblematized basis of a positivist feminist politics. Yet it has been reluctant to theorize sexual violence, i.e. what constitutes one of the most prevalent aspects of women's existence as well as of second wave feminist scholarship. Postmodernists have written at length about discourses of victimization, but their inquiries have stopped short of examining the social meanings grouped under the category "rape." This chapter seeks to explain this extraordinary lacuna in the context of the general (re)turn to interiority that has animated cultural theory in recent years. I investigate the problems associated with this renewed focus because it too often reduces anti-rape politics to a psychic dimension and echoes in so doing the arguments of the backlash. Indeed, when they do tackle rape and anti-rape politics, postmodern feminists seem unable to do so in any other way than in the victim-blaming terms that have dominated hegemonic approaches to gendered violence in contemporary culture. I conclude the chapter by calling for an alternative theoretical model that challenges this overemphasis on subjectivity and interiority without falling back on an unproblematized category of "experience."

Chapter III: From Founding to Funding: Professionalism and Agency in Women's Organizations

Domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers were founded at the beginning of the seventies during the heyday of a movement that put issues of sexual violence on the public agenda for the first time. This chapter examines these agencies' contemporary counterparts which, while posing as progressive organizations, frequently fail to live up to a feminist legacy they sometimes actually openly reject. What distinguished the earlier feminist organizations was that victims of sexual violence took social transformation in their own hands and started organizing and demonstrating, founding and running shelters and women's communities, and volunteering their time and energy to promote social justice. Today, when such political activities do occur, they are irremediably dissociated from victims who are seen as the objects rather than the subjects of these movements. Victims are represented as irremediably and unidirectionally shaped by the trauma of rape/domestic violence and hence incapable of dealing with anything

but their own inner turmoil. I argue that the strength of the second wave was precisely that it challenged the facile opposition between agency and victimization that animates cultural criticism today. It showed the world and victims themselves that they were more than the sum of their traumatic experiences, that they could act and organize *even as* they were dealing with the psychic effects of violence. I conclude by showing how it is now faith-based programs that have stepped in and reappropriated for their own purposes the lessons of the second wave.

Chapter IV: Laboring Women, Coaching Men: Childbirth Education in the Contemporary U.S.

Hospitals today are increasingly adopting a rhetoric of family-centered maternity care and “natural” childbirth. One of the ways in which they show their commitment to this vestige of second wave feminism is through the integration of the husband-as-coach model of childbirth (the Bradley Method) into their delivery practices. In this chapter, I argue that this model’s widespread popularity testifies less to the culture’s transformation and endorsement of a progressive and feminist approach to childbirth than to its consolidation of conventional gender roles. In a striking reversal of the usual ruse of capitalism, healthcare’s touchy-feely “feminist patriarchy” has substituted unpaid labor (the husband-coach) for (under)paid female labor. This chapter examines the costs and implications of this reversal, offering in the process a critique of childbirth education in the contemporary U. S. I argue that childbirth education in the twenty-first century continues to legitimize separate spheres for women and men even as it has paradoxically incorporated men into the feminized space of childbirth. Far from providing adequate labor support, its deployment of masculinity simultaneously facilitates and obscures healthcare’s profit-making imperatives. Feminists have done much to expose the ways in which reproductive technologies contribute to colonizing women’s bodies. This chapter addresses the ways in which the rhetoric of “natural” childbirth too provides a site for the production and reproduction of capitalist power.

Chapter V: Sensitive Men, Radical Women, and Masculinity in Hollywood Cinema

Even a cursory glance at representations of feminism in Hollywood films and TV programs over the last few decades reveals that the mainstream seems unable to forget radical feminism at a time when feminists themselves have long struck its death toll. Instead of dismissing Hollywood cinema’s recurring references to second wave feminism as stereotypical misconceptions, however, this paper examines them as reappropriative moments that are instrumental to the narrative film’s construction of normative identity. I argue that these references are crucial ideological hinges that curb the destabilization of gender, racial, and social hierarchies at a time when cinematic representations of masculinity have undergone a significant shift from the “hard bodies” of the 1980s to the soft masculinity of the 1990s and beyond. Specifically, I show how the mutual constitution of gender, race, and sexuality (which is obscured when cultural critics discuss femininity only in relation to masculinity) help us rethink the cultural construction of masculinity and of gender more generally. The imbrication of racial and sexual politics in the two movies I single out as case studies (*Sleepers* and *Jerry Maguire*) points to the need to revise our reading strategies to account for the inseparability of categories of identity in cultural (and film) criticism.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Past to Rewrite the Future