THE LEGACY OF SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS

EDITED BY ANGIE MAXWELL AND TODD SHIELDS

The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics

Angie Maxwell · Todd Shields
Editors

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Toward a New Understanding of Second-Wave Feminism

Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields

Abstract In this introductory chapter, Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields claim that the need to mark beginnings and endings of social movements, the over-reliance on popular, yet limited voices, the fact that feminism is not immune to white privilege, and the pain associated with lost battles for women's rights have all contributed to obscuring the true legacy of the Second-Wave feminist movement. They contend that existing narratives have inordinately focused on the media-appointed "leaders" of the movement, who were almost exclusively white, heterosexual, well-educated women who overshadowed the multi-racial, grassroots cast of hundreds of thousands of women in America and around the globe. While Third-Wave feminists drew attention to these omissions and recovered the history of overshadowed communities, the time has come to reconcile both waves and re-examine the legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American politics. This reassessment shows that the Second Wave was comprised of a heterogeneous army of women who, though

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often divided, still significantly influenced economics, theology, political activism, electoral success, attitudes toward homosexuality, and support for gay marriage. In fact, in many ways they were so successful that they were blind to the anti-feminist counterattack forming across the country. This introduction highlights the feminist historians, political scientists, gender studies scholars, and economists who are placing women's activism at the center of our political landscape in their contributing chapters.

In her edited collection, *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, Stephanie Gilmore speaks to the scholarly paralysis that has tempered our understanding of both the accomplishments and the failures, and of the structure and impact, of Second-Wave Feminism. Depicted most often as an offshoot of the Civil Rights Movement, Second-Wave feminists "are suspended in historical—or rather, ahistorical—amber, unable to move or be moved."[1] Gilmore's volume and its contributors did much to resurrect this debate. The paralysis, however, is not limited to the way in which the movement is conceived as branching from the larger fight for African-American rights, but also, as Sara M. Evans contends in Chap. 2, to our proclivity to periodization. The need to mark a beginning and an end to what has been a sustained and constant effort for women's equality—the need even to describe such periods as distinct "waves"—obscures much of the labor. And it obscures the laborers, many of whom remain absent from our narratives. Only popular leaders, or those leaders recognized by the media, present at key events highlighted by this periodization, remain in the public consciousness. Those leaders are almost exclusively privileged, white, and well-educated and function as the feature players overshadowing a multiracial, grassroots cast of hundreds of thousands of women in America and across the globe. And the movement itself, as the passage of a half-century has shown, lost control of the debate over women's rights as the individual became more powerful than the collective. And so the united front needed to brace against the titanic backlash proved elusive. The consciousness-raising opened women's eyes to their individual oppression, but not enough saw their own individual experience as part of a systemic and structural oppression for which political, collective, unified action remains the only antidote. Because the conservative backlash was so powerful, because the unity, despite the best efforts, was too fragile, because of our need to superficially mark beginnings and endings of social movements, because of our over-reliance on popular, yet limited

voices, because feminism is not immune to white privilege, and because the losses were so painful for so many activists, we still struggle to understand what it all meant then and what it means for all of us now.

The Second Wave Reconsidered

To be fair, how the movement was portrayed in its time and how it has been remembered have drawn sharp criticism. For example, Charlotte Krolokke and Anne Scott Sorensen argue, "Second Wave feminism has come under attack from other marginalized groups, such as African American women and lesbians, for not including them." Furthermore, they assert "in the context of the complex power relationships of a post-colonial, but still imperial and capitalist world, [critics of Second-Wave Feminism] questioned what they saw as a predominantly white, middle-class, and heterosexual feminist agenda and raised the issue of a differentiated-identity politics based on the contingent and diversified but no less divisive intersections of gender, class, race/ethnicity, and sexuality."[2] The tendency, particularly in the initial scholarship on and retelling of the movement to describe a "hegemonic feminism," which "treats sexism as the ultimate oppression,"[3] disconnected from other bases of prejudice and discrimination, ignores the "double marginalization" of black women, as noted by Nadia E. Brown and her co-authors in Chap. 8 of this volume—not to mention the marginal role to which lesbian activists have been relegated, a historical correction that Claire Bond Potter boldly makes in Chap. 9. Essentialism, Krolokke and Sorensen contend—or "the tendency to assume a unitary notion of women," not only downplays African-American and Latino activism, but it prioritizes the needs of white women which are falsely assumed to be universal. Even believing in a kind of essential womanhood, promoted, for example, in Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970)[4], is based on "unarticulated premises"[5] of some sort of common understanding of gender. Moreover, it even assumes universal motivation, as Christina E. Bejarano and Valerie Martinez-Ebers demonstrate in Chap. 7 in which they show how Latina women are transforming their leadership within the family into their electoral success as candidates. Such a tendency, Lisa Corrigan warns in Chap. 10 of this collection, threatened to "collapse the Second Wave into whiteness."

The examples of multiracial activism should have been apparent, even in the cherry-picked media coverage of the public protests and Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) marches, because, as Becky Thompson has shown, women of color not only participated in "white-dominated" feminist

groups, but also in "mixed-gendered women's caucuses" and in "autonomous Black, Latina, Native American, and Asian feminist organizations."[3] The National Organization of Women (NOW), itself, was a mixed race organization with African American leaders such as attorneys Flo Kennedy and Pauli Murray.[6] Latina activists Aileen Hernandez succeeded Betty Friedan as president. And women of color were more supportive of the movement as a whole, with roughly 2/3 of those polled reporting sympathy to the cause, compared to only 1/3 of white women.[7] Thirty-five percent of the delegates to the 1977 Women's Convention in Houston with its record-setting attendance were women of color, and roughly 1/5 of the women in attendance were classified as low income.[8]

Despite the interracial nature of some women's organizations, Benita Roth has argued that early activist efforts were divided along racial and ethnic lines, but they existed alongside each other, paving many paths to Houston or "separate roads to Feminism."[9] Groups such as the Black Women's Alliance which expanded to become the Third World Women's Alliance and their journal *Triple Jeopardy*, "an antisexist, antiracist, anti-imperialist newspaper for women of color" and the fact that it criticized the Miss Black America pageant as putting "black women on the auction block again," and embraced the global struggles of African American, Native American, and Latina women,[10] gets wiped from historical memory.[11] The whitewashing of the story of Second-Wave Feminism too often also excludes the stories of theological and religious feminists, such as Catholics for the ERA, as pointed to by Laura Foxworth in Chap. 4 and has been characterized as "overly puritanical when it came to sexuality," an issue addressed by Claire Bond Potter in Chap. 9. Yet, the early histories of the Second Wave, rather than recognizing these distinct roads and analyzing where and how and when and why they intersected with each other, focused on elite white women (often WASPS, despite the fact that most of the white leaders in NOW were actually from the Midwest)[12] and on the more esoteric or philosophical competing types of feminism—liberationists versus socialists versus cultural versus radical feminists, for example.[13] It took the persistent activism of what we now label, Third-Wave Feminism, and the vocal critiques of black feminists in particular, to render the white privilege of our memory of Second-Wave Feminism visible.

The Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" frames gender and blackness as "interlocking oppressions"[14] that in many ways cannot be separated. Building on this image, Third-Wave Feminism advocates for widespread social justice and champions feminism "grounded in intersectional analysis." Lesbian and Jewish women

have also shined a critical spotlight on whiteness within the activism and coverage of the movement, pointing to the "white woman's position as both oppressed and oppressor."[15] Still, as Corrigan summarizes in Chap. 10, "we aren't even close to producing collective, inclusive histories," and there are several reasons why.

One of the academic ripple effects of Second-Wave Feminism was a new commitment to and interest in women's history. Evans contends that the unintended consequence of this scholarly shift was that historians ignored the movement because they were engaged in the tedious work of recovering women's history. Even as early as 1979 at an academic symposium, writer Audre Lorde insisted that scholars were arrogantly ignoring the voices of "poor women, black and third-world women, and lesbians."[16] Assessments made by the media and/or on the basis of popular culture resulted in an inaccurate depiction of the Second Wave, crafted from cherry-picked events and focused on activist celebrities. Though these waves have no definitive beginning or end, events such as the 1968 Miss America pageant, as noted by Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry,[17] offer a well-known opening anecdote to the story of the movement, and the defeat of the ERA in 1982 is too often presented as the finale.[18] Such set points—1968 was also the year that Martha Weinman Lear penned "The Second Feminist Wave" in the *New York Times Magazine*, coining the phrase[19]—similar to the way in which Civil Rights history has had to be reconceived of as the Long Civil Rights Movement, obscure the work of countless women who labored long before the media noticed (the publication of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, in the USA in 1953, is sometimes considered the catalyst for feminist consciousness).[20] Moreover, as Roth argues, this timeline too often portrays Black and Chicana feminism as derivative of white feminism, as opposed to developing simultaneously as the historical record clearly indicates.[21] The same is true of Asian American and Native American organizations.

If this chosen timeline distorts our image of Second-Wave Feminism, then the preferred spokespersons who became the media-appointed "leaders" and "faces," further whitewashed the Second Wave, which, otherwise, was a heterogeneous, divided, and even unorganized movement. Women like Gloria Steinem were sought after by journalists and news outlets because of their popular writings, their intelligence, and their physical appearance. These media-appointed leaders are chosen for reasons that help media ratings, not because of reasons that help the

movement, or because members of the movement have elected or chosen these individuals to be their representatives. It is important to note also that such representatives can be exploited against their own cause. Foxworth argues in Chap. 4 that these chosen celebrities—Steinem along with Betty Friedan—became targets when Christian anti-feminists pointed to these spokeswomen as evidence that feminism was a Jewish conspiracy. With a manufactured timeline and a limited cast of characters, it is not surprising that much of what was written about the movement also misrepresented its intentions and key messages. The sex wars dominated headlines, with feminists portrayed as anti-men, taking the movement's focus off gender equity in class, race, and the economic system.[22] The lack of attention specifically to economics, contends Cecilia Conrad in Chap. 5, actually drove many women of this generation into this academic field, not only developing a new subfield of feminist economics, but also establishing both the "discrimination" and "perfect market" theories that locate obstructions both inside and outside of the market to women's advancement.

The linear, singular storyline, perhaps most significantly, destroys our understanding of and appreciation for intersectionality. People's lives cross circles, Gilmore insists.[23] Their politics and interests are overdetermined and complex. Women of color, lesbians, religious women, and poor women fought multiple battles concurrently, an experience that privileged white women, nor the media, nor the first generation of scholars writing about the movement, could fully appreciate. Third-Wave feminists challenged this mythology effectively, though at times while condemning the movement whole cloth. They are not wrong. The feminist ideology of the 1970s was based on an "ethos of organizing one's own… actually recruiting large groups of women for coordinating activism across racial/ethnic lines was not prioritized," contends Roth.[24] Progress was made in the shadows, so to speak, but Second-Wave feminists did not all have equal voices, nor was everyone even given a chance to speak. There were, in reality, many different members and groups in the Second Wave who played important roles, in different places, in different times, and for different reasons.[25] According to Julia Wood, "Second wave feminism is not one, but many … and the question may not be whether you are a feminist, but which kind of feminist you are."[26] Similarly, Roth, in her book *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana and White Feminists Movements in America's Second Wave*, argues that scholars should not consider the Second-Wave

movement a single organization, but rather a mix of many separate feminist movements all pushing for different priorities and ideals, but all focused on the rights of women.

Yet if so many separate movements worked in tandem toward a collective goal of women's equality, then why were there so many failures, like the ERA? And why do so many inequities between men and women persist? In 1972, Gloria Steinem defined sisterhood in the first issue of *Ms. Magazine* as the "deep personal connection of women," which, she argued, "often ignores barriers of age, economics, worldly experience, race, culture…"[27] But this "fiction of unity"[28] seemed to dissolve within a decade. In her 1982 essay "Voices from a Postfeminist Generation," which appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, Susan Bolotin alluded to the answer. Bolotin pointed to the divide between women's collective consciousness and their individual experiences. "Not one woman I spoke to," Bolotin wrote, "believes that women receive equal pay for comparable work, but it does not occur to most of them to use the power of the feminist movement to improve their position."[29] This disconnect may have resulted from feminist efforts to personalize the discrimination that women faced. Even Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, credited with catalyzing women's consciousness, can be viewed as focused on "individual autonomy" and "the right to self-determination,"[30] implying that "personal transformation is a means to bring about social change."[31]

These consciousness-raising sessions, organized throughout the country, allowed women to discuss their personal experiences and come to grips with the way in which gender shapes expectations regarding housework, sexual pleasure, and their treatment as consumers. "The media treated women as mindless sex objects to sell otherwise unappealing products," notes Nancy MacLean.[32] The consciousness-raising method was a necessary step in awakening women to their specific relationship to gender oppression, but many turned a critical eye on the self, rather than uncovering the institutional embeddedness of sexism. Similarly, the mantra "the personal is political," initiated by activists in the Civil Rights Movement, such as Anne Braden, and repeated both by the New Left and many Second-Wave feminist organizations,[33] was intended to enlighten women to the way in which socially constructed gender roles affected their lives and to expose the way in which issues often considered personal and private—abortion, domestic violence, unemployment, etc.—were deeply political. In many ways, the success of

this consciousness-raising resulted in specific efforts to address inequity, which in turn allowed women to focus on their individual gains. Their success unraveled any attempts at unity, so much so that, as Susan Carroll contends in Chap. 6, by 1984 it was debatable as to whether Geraldine Ferraro's nomination as Democratic-hopeful Walter Mondale's running mate would even entice more women to vote.

When women grew increasingly aware of the institutional sexism affecting them directly, they initiated campaigns to address their individual repression. In Chap. 2, Evans mentions the SEARS campaign as emblematic of this fundamental shift in the movement. The Chicago branch of NOW launched a campaign against retail giant Sears based on its refusal to promote women to higher-paying positions. Rather than focusing efforts on the ERA, this initiative prioritized the advancement of individuals. Though surely important in the overall efforts of Second-Wave feminists to secure economic power for women, the SEARS initiative and others like it altered the meaning of the "personal is political," with political protests now seen as an avenue to individual improvement. Third-Wave feminists—or those who the media has called on to speak for the Third Wave—such as Naomi Wolf and Rene Denfeld[34]—have continued to offer solutions based on not only women's needs, but also the needs of separate communities of women based on class and race and sexuality. The post-1990s feminists have been criticized by the generation that preceded them for being "all style, no substance,"[35] but many in the Third Wave continue to dispel the mythology of the Second Wave and its efforts to raise a universal women's consciousness.

The Second-Wave movement itself (its rhetoric and its success) and the Third-Wave movement gave rise to and fueled this shift to individualism, and there are advantages and disadvantages to such a shift. The Third Wave has the added difficulty of functioning in a "cultural climate hostile to feminism"[36]—not that the Second Wave didn't encounter opposition, but the real backlash surged in the wake of the 1970s movement. And that damage came at the hands of anti-feminists who also twisted the "personal is political" to fit their own cause. Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA movement stood for "Stop Taking our Privileges," and her rhetoric and the rhetoric of her followers convinced many women that the ERA would damage their individual lives. They would be expected to get jobs, enter the draft—"foxholes are bad enough for men, but they certainly are not a place for women"[37]—and put their children in government-run day cares, anti-feminists warned. Calling the

feminist movement "a delusion," Moral Majority leader, Jerry Falwell, who praised Schlafly, employed the same technique, cautioning women about the way in which the ERA would impact their individual lives—their custody arrangements, their protection from military service, etc.[38] As Marjorie J. Spruill clearly shows in Chap. 3, the anti-feminist movement portrayed the Second Wave as a personal threat and an insult to who they were as women.

The GOP took notice too, realizing that anti-feminism, and its corollary, the "family values" movement, could pay huge political dividends if they invested in this reactionary style of identity politics. As Carroll notes in Chap. 6, Reagan's administration pointed to the individual successes of women to deny the ongoing structural sexism in America. Similarly, Susan Faludi summarizes in her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, the Reagan era gave rise to "a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women."[39] And it wasn't just about promoting traditional gender roles; the negative attacks were so intense and so damaging as to render the feminist label wholly unpopular. The anti-ERA forces started the demonization, with members of groups such as Happiness of Womanhood (HOW) calling feminists "profane," "nihilistic," and "women but not ladies."[40] In fact, by 1992, a Time/CNN poll found that while close to 80% of college women believe that the Second Wave had improved the lot of women, only 33% were willing to call themselves feminists.[41] Moreover, by the 1990s the energy of the feminist movement seemed depleted by this backlash, resulting—most notably in the culture industry—in the closing of "feminist presses, publications, record labels, and bookstores."[42] Third-Wave activists resurrected feminist arts as explained in "Riot Grrrl Manifesto," authored by Kathleen Hanna of the band Bikini Kill, and saw them as a means to confront the family values backlash through their individual art. "We seek," she declared, "to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit Christian capitalist way of doing things."[43]

The accomplishments and methods of the prior generation, however, were not lost on this new cohort of activists. Rachel Walker, for example, creator of the Third Wave Foundation, organized youth voter registration drives and invested in women's political initiatives. Motivated by the Anita Hill interrogation by the Senate Judiciary committee in 1992, Walker

(daughter of writer Alice Walker) attempted to resurrect the common bond of women in the service of activism. "To be a feminist," Walker announced, "is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systematic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them."[44] The ongoing dance between this conservative backlash, between the cohorts of the Second and Third Waves, and among scholars about what the movement did or did not accomplish, deserves greater attention. When there was synergy, progress was made, though sometimes in ways that can only be seen now, long after the Second Wave has receded and after the Third Wave has forcefully crested.

Ruth Rosen notes in her landmark work, *The World Split Open*, that "each generation of women activists leaves an unfinished agenda for the next generation."[45] Whatever the criticisms may be in retrospect—even of the "wave" concept itself[46]—the legacy of the movement warrants recovery and understanding. The strength of this collaboration is twofold. First, these essays serve as a reminder that movements do not happen in a vacuum or without repercussions. Second-Wave Feminism spurred an anti-feminist response that fundamentally changed such longstanding institutions as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Republican Party, among others. Even though the pendulum swung back with great conservative force, it did not suffocate the movement as a whole. Second, though the major setbacks and the major victories of the movement are well-documented, this collection points to unexamined accomplishments, including the rise of female economists and a focus on women's economic status, the expansion of women's spirituality, and a growing politicization that underscores a powerful gender gap in voting. And the influence extends well into the twenty-first century. New ripples—the impact that Second-Wave activism had on Latina women and their eventual success as political candidates, or the way in which the movement worked in tandem with the Civil Rights Movement for future generations of African American female state leaders—require scholars to reconceive of the wave in much broader terms.

As these essays demonstrate, movements, simply put, move. And sometimes their impact is not felt until decades later. Rather than condemn all the mistakes—the focus on the individual and the failure to understand intersectionality—that were surely made by the movement itself, by the media who handpicked their spokeswomen, and by the

scholars who were too quick to create a definitive timeline and too often told only one part of the story, the critical light directed by the Third Wave and the sheer passage of time should reveal a more nuanced, balanced, honest, and accurate assessment of the legacy of this generation of activists 50 years later. The constant motion of women's activism, no matter how it has been perceived or recorded, has indeed produced change in ways both expected and unexpected. Part reflection, part recovery, this collection only scratches the surface of a "wave" that is much wider and deeper than has been acknowledged.

Chapter Summaries

In "Generations Later, Retelling the Story," Sara M. Evans counters the narrow narrative that is popularly used to describe the Second-Wave movement. Rather, she advocates for a broader consideration of a movement that remains active and in progress. The formal association of specific waves with key leaders limits our understanding of the grassroots, widespread activity that occurred and remains ongoing. Such an omission often accompanies top-down narratives of American history that simplify class, racial, and ethnic diversity within a movement, as well as the major contributions made by groups outside of the historical spotlight. As one of the groundbreaking scholars in the field, Evans encourages a new generation to view the movement as having exactly that: real, sustained, continuous movement. One of the primary criticisms of Second-Wave Feminism was that it catered only to the needs of privileged white women—a perspective that Evans reconsiders. More than that, the leaders of the Second Wave, and the principles for which they stood, were demonized as radical and destructive to American society. Opposition groups used these arguments to oppose the ERA and to serve as catalysts for bringing otherwise politically inactive conservative women into the political arena.

Marjorie J. Spruill uncovers the source for much of that antagonism by extending our common understanding of the Republican Party's racially motivated Southern Strategy to their conservative stance on women's rights. Professor Spruill, in her chapter, "Feminism, Antifeminism, and the Rise of a New Southern Strategy in the 1970s," notes that the political activism of feminists living in the South served as a catalyst for conservative groups to organize in opposition. When overt racist appeals were becoming increasingly unacceptable, following the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, the emergence of a politically active group of anti-feminists in the South provided the GOP with a new

group of southern whites to convert. An unexpected result of the Second Wave was, in fact, the activation of conservative women and thier "family values" into the partisan divide. In particular, Professor Spruill gives specific attention to the organization of, and opposition to, the feminist-inspired International Women's Year conferences in 1977, as a critical turning point.

In addition to the evolving Republican Southern Strategy in response to Second-Wave Feminism, another unintended consequence of Second-Wave political activism was the development and popularization of the now ubiquitous voting pattern called the "gender gap." One of the leading scholars of women in contemporary American politics, Susan Carroll, contends that a "gender gap" in electoral politics has been used as a political and rhetorical devise by both feminists and anti-feminists. In Carroll's chapter, "The Gender Gap as a Tool for Women's Political Empowerment: The Formative Years, 1980–1984," she highlights a consistent difference in voting patterns between men and women, with the tendency of women to vote for Democratic presidential candidates and men to vote for Republican candidates. Carroll considers when this pattern was first observed, how it was framed, and the variety of ways that this trend has been used as a political tool by both liberals and conservatives. Even though First-Wave feminists hoped that once women were given the right to vote, they would immediately use their votes to bring about policy-related changes, the persistent and widespread differences in the vote choices of women and men became apparent only after the successes of Second-Wave feminists. The "gender gap" in voting first caught public attention following the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. Since then, subsequent concern over the gender gap, and developing a campaign strategy in light of the general pattern, have become common campaign practices. Carroll discusses these aspects of the gender gap in the efforts to ratify the ERA and the efforts to have a woman added to the Democratic presidential ticket in 1984.

Not all of the efforts of Second-Wave feminists were focused on direct political and electoral action—at least not in the traditional view of political action such as protests, voting strategies, and legal challenges. Another dimension of the multifaceted Second-Wave feminist movement was the intellectual influences that feminists had in academia and in traditional fields of study. Given the emphasis of Second-Wave Feminism on equality in the workplace and fair labor standards, it is not surprising that