

“Can You Hear Us Now? How New Feminist Legal Theories and Feminisms are Changing Society”

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“What Third-Wave Feminism Can (and Should) Learn from First-Wave Feminism”

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Abstract

In thinking about the questions that frame this conference – (1) What wave of feminism currently exists? (2) How is it affecting society and effectuating change? and (3) How is it linked to the past waves? – we thought it might be helpful to highlight some of the most important elements of, and lessons learned from, first-wave feminism for third-wave feminists. “Third-wave feminism” is a term that emerged to describe a set of distinctive themes in the writings of the generation of young women coming of age in the early 1990s.¹ In their work, third-wave feminists have focused a great deal of attention on the cultural and social dynamics influencing their gender identities, sexual choices, and aspirations for their families and careers. This work often appears in the form of collections of personal essays,² but occasionally third-wave feminists have attempted to describe a political agenda promoting the personal aspirations and values they have addressed in their writings.³ When they write in this more political vein, it is clear that third-wave feminists are inclined to reject some of the strategies pursued by feminists of the second-wave. While they often acknowledge many of the successes of the second-wave, third-wave feminists have tended to focus on the shortcomings of the previous generation of feminists. They are concerned that the second-wave feminists’ “brand” is unappealing: too anti-sex, too man-hating, too humorless. However, even in their more political writing, third-wave feminists have paid far less attention to the organizational repertoires⁴ and social change strategies⁵ of the earlier waves of feminists.

¹ See, e.g., Rebecca Walker, *Becoming the 3rd Wave*, Ms. (Spring 2002); JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER & AMY RICHARDS, *MANIFESTA: YOUNG WOMEN, FEMINISM, AND THE FUTURE* (2000); RORY DICKER AND ALISON PIEPMEIR, EDs., *CATCHING A WAVE: RECLAIMING FEMINISM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY* (2003); ASTRID HENRY, *NO MY MOTHER’S SISTER: GENERATIONAL CONFLICT AND THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM* (2004); Bridget J. Crawford, *Toward a Third-Wave Feminist Legal Theory: Young Women, Pornography, and the Praxis of Pleasure*, (14 Mich. J. Gender & L. 99 (2007); DEBORAH SIEGEL, *SISTERHOOD INTERRUPTED: FROM RADICAL WOMEN TO GRRLS GONE WILD* (2007).

² PAULA KAMEN, *FEMINIST FATALE: VOICES OF THE TWENTYSOMETHING GENERATION EXPLORE THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT* (1992); REBECCA WALKER, ED., *TO BE REAL: TELLING THE TRUTH AND CHANGING THE FACE OF FEMINISM* (1995); NAN BAUER MAGLIN AND DONNA MARIE PERRY EDs., “BAD GIRLS”/“GOOD GIRLS”: WOMEN, SEX, AND POWER IN THE NINETIES (1996); BARBARA FINDLEN, ED., *LISTEN UP: VOICES FROM THE NEXT FEMINIST GENERATION* (2001).

³ JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER & AMY RICHARDS, *MANIFESTA: YOUNG WOMEN, FEMINISM, AND THE FUTURE* (2000).

⁴ Elisabeth S. Clemens, *Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change: Women’s Groups and the Transformation of U.S. Politics, 1890-1920*, *Am. J. of Sociology* 98 (1993) 755.

This paper is intended to contribute to this larger conversation about the future of third-wave feminism. Our central aim is to encourage third-wave feminists to examine the strategies pursued in the first wave, when the focus of the movement was centered on political organizing and broader social change. While we recognize that many of the first wave feminists are not exemplary role models with respect to racial equality matters in particular, this paper highlights some of the lessons from the first wave that we encourage third-wave feminists to consider. We focus on two points in time in particular: (1) the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention; and (2) Alice Paul's work on behalf of the suffrage movement and the Equal Rights Amendment. The paper describes three major strengths of the first wave's political strategy:

1.) Rhetorical framing – The first wave feminists' public campaigns were always carefully considered, coordinated, and designed to highlight the contradictions between American values and the treatment of women. For example, the 1848 Convention's Declaration of Sentiments highlighted the failure of the revolution announced by the Declaration of Independence to encompass women's rights and freedoms. Similarly, Alice Paul's protests in front of the White House challenged President Wilson to support democracy at home as well as abroad.

2.) Reform agenda - Their strategies presumed a necessary connection between their political and legal reform battles, and broader social and cultural change. Woman suffrage advocates understood the movement's meaning as far exceeding that of merely obtaining the vote, but, rather, with the vote, introducing a revolution in women's legal, political, social, and economic status.

3.) Social change tactics – The first-wave feminists exhibited a talent for optimizing their organizational strengths, and the effectiveness of the movement is arguably largely due to these talents for employing innovative methods of organizing, in order to apportion resources, coordinate state-by-state campaigns, etc.

The paper will conclude with analyses of these lessons, focusing on the extent to which third-wave feminists are likely to find them useful and appealing.

⁵ See, e.g., WILLIAM GAMSON, *THE STRATEGY OF SOCIAL PROTEST* (2nd ed. 1990); SIDNEY TARROW, *POWER IN MOVEMENT: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, COLLECTIVE ACTION, AND POLITICS* (1994); FRANCES FOX PIVEN, *CHALLENGING AUTHORITY: HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE CHANGE AMERICA* (2006).