Feminism in "Waves": Useful Metaphor or Not?

written by Linda Nicholson | January 11, 2010



By the early 1990s, it had become clear that the kind of feminist activity that had blossomed from the late 1960s through the late 1980s in the United States was no longer present. Consequently, many began to ask: what was the present state of feminism? One idea put forth in the early 1990s was that feminism had not died but was merely in a "third wave" – a younger form of feminism that looked very different from earlier forms.[1] Here I would like to turn to the question of the current state of feminism, not through asking whether we are in a "third wave," but through reflecting upon the general use of the wave metaphor in feminist self-understanding. In seeing what has been useful, or not, in this metaphor, we can generate some tools in understanding the contemporary state of U.S. feminism.

Let me begin then with some reflections on the wave metaphor. In the late 1960s, it was very useful for feminists to begin to describe their movement as the "second wave" of feminism. It was useful because it reminded people that the then current women's rights and women's liberation movements had a venerable past – that these movements were not historical aberrations but were part of a long tradition of activism. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a time when feminists began to rewrite U.S. history. Involved in that rewriting were new understandings of the suffrage movement, including the recognition that the suffrage movement was part of a larger nineteenth century movement around women's issues. One could expand the meaning of the suffrage movement and tie it to 1960s activism by referring to the former as the first wave of U.S. feminism and to the 1960s movement as the second wave. Thus the wave metaphor both showed the 1960s movement as something other than an historical aberration and also framed the nineteenth century movement as far larger and more historically significant than most of us had been taught.

But the wave metaphor has outlived its usefulness. For one, the places where it mostly gets mentioned, among those who are committed to some version or another of feminism, are those places where people mostly now know this history, i.e. know about the larger significance of the nineteenth century women's movement and know that 1960s activism emerged from a long history of struggle around women's issues. But it is not only that the wave metaphor has outlived its usefulness. It is also that the wave metaphor tends to have built into it an important metaphorical implication that is historically misleading and not helpful politically. That implication is that underlying certain historical differences, there is one phenomenon, feminism, that unites gender activism in the history of the United States, and that like a wave, peaks at certain times and recedes at others. In sum, the wave metaphor suggests the idea that gender activism in the history of the United States has been for the most part unified around one set of ideas, and that set of ideas can be called feminism.[2]

But as the historical record has increasingly illustrated, that is not how best to understand the

past in the United States. The different kinds of activism around gender that have taken place since the early nineteenth century in this country cannot be reduced to one term, feminism. That kind of reduction obfuscates the historical specificity of gender activism in the history of the United States. It obscures the differences in the ideas that have motivated different groups of people to pursue different kinds of political goals at different moments in time. For example, to call the nineteenth century movement "the first wave" suggests an underlying similarity between the political goals of this movement with those of the movements that began to emerge in the 1960s. But as Nancy Cott argued in her groundbreaking book, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism,* it is not even appropriate to call much of the activism around gender issues in the nineteenth century, and particularly the nineteenth century suffrage movement, a "feminist" movement. For one, those active in this movement did not use the term. Moreover, many who supported suffrage had more limited political goals than did those who began to use the word feminism in the early twentieth century. Many of those who supported suffrage did so not on the basis of a general idea of women's equality with men, or because they thought of women as individuals similar to men — ideas that would become important for many of those beginning to call themselves feminists in the early twentieth century — but because they believed, for a variety of reasons, that women should have the vote. As Cott quotes an early twentieth century feminist, "All feminists are suffragists, but not all suffragists are feminists."[3]

Not recognizing these distinctions has led some scholars to be puzzled about why feminism "died" after the nineteenth amendment was passed. My own view is that it did not die because at that moment in time it had not yet been born, at least not as the type of large-scale social movement that suffrage had become. In the early twentieth century, while there were a large number of people who supported women's suffrage and who were working to improve women's situation in other ways, such as through supporting protective labor legislation for women, their support did not translate into what was then becoming understood as feminism. An important strand of the feminist vision of the time — that women and men were similar in fundamental ways and on that basis should be treated as equals — was the position of only a small number of women, mostly those in professional or gender neutral jobs. That kind of feminist position, as reflected in the National Women's Party endorsement of an Equal Rights Amendment, was strongly opposed by many who saw such an amendment undermining the protective labor legislation that women had only recently won. The relative isolation of this kind of feminist position remained the case up until the early 1960s.[4]

But even in the period between the passage of the nineteenth amendment and the early 1960s, real changes in gender roles and relationships were taking place. During the 1920s and 1930s, ordinary women were challenging older notions of womanhood in a myriad number of ways, from cutting their hair, to adopting new norms about sexuality, to developing new understandings of their relationship to wage labor. Particularly in the post World War II period, a growing number of women were entering the paid labor force for a larger period of their lives. In the 1940s and 1950s, women in unions were beginning to make many of the same kinds of political demands that had become associated with the label feminism in the early part of the century– such as equal pay for equal work. Connections began to be made among those who occupied leadership positions in such unions with others who were arguing for women's rights in other arenas, laying the groundwork for the kind of political activism that began to surface in a more public way in the early 1960s.[5] This complex history tends to be obscured by the use of the wave metaphor.

Moreover, the use of the wave metaphor becomes particularly unhelpful when we turn our attention back to the present. During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, feminism began to expand its meaning, including not only those who supported what many now think of as a liberal understanding of feminism, but also those who took this worldview in new directions. The 1960s through the 1980s was a period of great theoretical and political creativity and activity, making possible a very broad

understanding of feminism. But after that kind of creative activity began to die down in the 1990s, people began to wonder whether or not we were in a third wave of feminism. The appeal of this way of thinking was that it kept up the hope that gender activism had not really died down but merely had taken a somewhat different, more youthful and jazzier form. But when I think about what has transpired in the period from the 1990s to today, I don't think that the metaphor of a third wave is the best way to describe what has gone on. Instead, let me offer a different kind of analysis about what has happened.

Since the early 1990s, we have been in a period where the feminism that emerged in the1960s, 1970s, and 1980s has both flourished in many areas and stalled in others, and this complexity cannot be adequately captured by the metaphor of a wave. Rather, we need to understand the areas in which it has flourished and the areas in which it has stalled to have a realistic assessment both of where we are as well as to better figure out where we need to go.

Let me begin with the more optimistic perspective on how feminism has been flourishing. Following the mass transformation of consciousness that was the great legacy of the mass movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, feminism began the quiet, but very important job of institutionalizing itself. The phrase that has sometimes been used to describe this process is "the long walk through the institutions." We all are aware of many of the results of that process: the creation of women's studies programs, the establishment of rape crisis centers and shelters for the victims of domestic abuse, the creation of women's caucuses in many organizations, the formation of women's political organizations, such as Emily's List, etc., etc. What we tend to be less conscious of is how many of these institutionalized manifestations of 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s feminism are not static but have continued to grow and develop, more quietly perhaps than was the case with their inauguration, but still happening. Women's Studies programs are no longer small isolated ghettos in liberal arts schools but have spread into law schools, medical schools, and schools of architecture and journalism. Emily's List has grown into a powerful organization that almost succeeded in helping make a woman president of the United States. The women's ordination movement in many religious denominations has either achieved its goals or, in the case of some churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, has continued to grow.[6] Women make up an increasing percentage of those receiving doctorates in the United States, indeed surpassing the percentage of men in 2003.[7] While employed women still do a disproportionate share of housework and childrearing, that share has decreased over time.[8] And gender is talked about in more sophisticated and more public ways than would have been heard even in the glory days of the 1970s. Within Women's Studies settings, feminists recognize today in more conceptually developed ways than they did even in the 1980s, how phenomena such as gender, race, and class intersect in constituting an individual's social identity. Among the wider public, in the last presidential campaign, even conservative Republican women used the word sexism to disparage many of the criticisms Democrats were making of Sarah Palin. For all of the hypocrisy that one might see in their responses — when exactly did Phyliss Schafly change her mind about the appropriateness of a woman with a four-month-old baby entering the work force? — still, that these conservative women and men saw the adjective "sexist" as rhetorically powerful, meant that feminism was not only far from dead but was in a state of growth.

THAT IS THE GOOD NEWS. The bad news, however, is also not hard to find. The wage gap between women and men continues to exist.[9] Rigid and narrow standards of beauty continue to dominate the lives of women, perhaps even more so today than even forty years ago.[10] A sexual double standard among young women and men continues to be in place.[11] And no one could claim that many of the other encompassing goals of the radical and socialist feminist movements of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – such as for the elimination of racial and class inequality – have been attained.

The question then is why the feminism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s has advanced so far in some ways and gone nowhere in others. And here again, this is a question for which the wave

metaphor supplies little help. Instead, what we need to do is examine the reasons why we are where we are by looking at the very specific contexts of the lives of diverse groups of women. I can't come up with a full answer to this question, but instead let me offer a few reflections.

One of the reasons why 1960s, 1970s and 1980s feminism did generate the kind of mass attention that it did was because a lot of it spoke to the real conflicts many women were experiencing as they were entering the workforce. As I noted earlier, the post World War II period was one of an important change in the gendered nature of the paid labor force. Women had been entering the work force in increasing numbers since the early twentieth century. But prior to World War II, a lot of this labor had been associated with women who were poor, black, single, or childless. After World War II, more married women, more white women, more middle class women, more women with children at home, became part of the paid labor force. Moreover, they were entering jobs that were not as sex stereotyped as those in which most women had been employed before the war. The consequences of these changes were numerous. Among union women, it meant that while older demands such as protective labor legislation were still important, such legislation began to diminish in importance in relation to newer issues such as equal pay for equal work and the elimination of gender segregated seniority lists.[12] Among middle class women, the older ideology that one was either a wife and mother or a career woman began to diminish in favor of the newer ideology that women could be both — a happy wife and mother and a successful contributor to the household economy.[13] The consequence was that in the early 1960s, the ideology of liberal feminism — that women are equal to men, and that women, like men, should be judged as individuals — the very ideology that could not generate a mass following in the 1920s, could now begin to generate such a mass following. And because this understanding of feminism continues to speak to the real concerns of many women, this understanding of feminism continues to flourish in contemporary society.

But, as we know, liberal feminism was only one part of the feminist movement of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Also constituting an important part of this movement was radical feminism. In some respects, the radical feminism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s also expressed ideas that responded to the conflicts of many. Radical feminism's slogan that "the personal is political" captured the tensions experienced by many women who found themselves subject to older sex role stereotypes within domestic settings as they were also beginning to negotiate a more equal economic arena. In bringing attention to the politics of housework or the phenomenon of domestic abuse, radical feminists were drawing attention to phenomena with which many could identify. In using such terminology as "sex roles," radical feminists were also employing the kind of psychological/sociological language that was becoming more prevalent in ordinary discourse. In all of these respects, radical feminism also has become a part of mainstream America.

But there were aspects of radical feminism that could have been advanced only by a small group of relatively privileged women at a certain point in their lives and that therefore could not be sustained by many over time. The idea that women should separate from men could not appeal to the very large population of American heterosexual women who saw marriage and motherhood as representing some of the best of what life has to offer. And because so many American women have and still do see romantic relationships as central parts of their lives, other aspects of radical feminism also became impossible to implement in a mass way, for example that women should abandon the task of making themselves more beautiful or sexually desirable. These were ideas that young women in small radical enclaves might have adopted at a certain moment in their lives. But looking back now from the perspective of forty years later, it seems unlikely that these kinds of political ideals could have reached many or made themselves part of the general culture in any kind of sustained way.

And if many aspects of radical feminism could speak only to a small segment of the U.S.

population, the same is even more true of an even smaller and less influential segment of the feminism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, its Marxist and socialist wings. The ideals of this part of women's liberation — eliminating racism, sexism, and class inequality — while theoretically understandable given the heady sense of optimism of the time, did not resonate with a significant segment of the U.S. population. This point responds to one of the criticisms that sometimes has been made against women's liberation as well as against the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, that both "sold out," were "co-opted," or undermined the left because neither sufficiently advanced an economic agenda that would have pushed this country in a socialist direction. But this kind of criticism blames Black Power and women's liberation for failing to achieve what neither could have achieved given the political climate of the United States in that period. That socialist movements within both movements were always relatively small is only one sign of the fact that America in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s was not ready to make encompassing social structural changes either in terms of economic, racial, or gender relations.[14]

In short, what I am saying is that the feminism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s achieved and continues to achieve what it has to the extent its message has resonated with the felt needs of many. Certain aspects of those movements that did speak to problems and tensions expressed by many have continued to generate change, often in more extensive and sophisticated ways than was true of the earlier period. Others that were less in tune with the lives and desires of ordinary women and men have fared less well. In short, we are in a period now where the kind of feminism many of us experienced in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s is both flourishing and quiescent. Gender is alive and well as a focus of attention in public discourse and public life even as some of the issues associated with the feminism of the earlier period have retreated from sight. That kind of complexity cannot be captured with the metaphor of a wave.

To be sure, there is one use that the wave metaphor is suited for – to identify those moments in history when issues of gender mobilize large numbers of people in very public, noisy, and challenging ways, that is, when such issues are able to generate large scale social or political movements. We are not in that kind of period, which makes the description of feminist activism today as a "third wave" even more questionable. But if we look back at other periods in U.S. history where that kind of activism was also not present, say, for example, in the period between the 1920s and the 1960s, the lack of such very public activity does not necessarily mean the lack of changes in gender norms and gender ideology. Consequently, younger feminists are correct in claiming that there are possibilities for gender activism today that are different from the forms of activism that flourished in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. We can acknowledge those differences and also acknowledge the connections such activism might have to the activism of the1960s, 1970s, and 1980s without the use of the "wave" metaphor. A more useful way of thinking about these changes as well as other changes in activism over time can be suggested by the metaphor of a kaleidoscope. At any given moment in time, the view in a kaleidoscope is complex, showing distinct colors and patterns. With a turn of the kaleidoscope, some of these colors and patterns become more pronounced, others less so, and new patterns and colors have emerged. This kind of metaphor suggests a better way to think about the changes that have marked the history of gender activism in the United States than does one that likens such changes to an ocean's ebbs and swells.[15]

Footnotes

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1. An essay that was influential in introducing the phrase "third wave" was Rebecca Walker's

"Becoming the Third Wave" in Ms. (January/February 1992) pp. 39-41. The term received further prominence through the publication of Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richard's, Manifesto: Young Women, Feminism and the Future (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). Several books that were published in the 1990's that also focused on the idea of a next generation of feminism include: Barbara Findlen, ed., Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation (Seattle, Washington: Seal Press, 1995); Rebecca Walker, ed., To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1995); and Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., Third Wave Agenda (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1997).

2. Ednie Kaeh Garrison also argues against the wave metaphor in feminist historiography because of its suggestion that feminism represents a unified phenomenon. She suggests replacing the metaphor of an ocean wave with the metaphor of radio waves in part because of the plurality that the latter metaphor suggests. See Edna Kaeh Garrison, "Are We On a Wavelength Yet? On Feminist Oceanography, Radios and Third Wave Feminism," pp. 237-256 in Jo Reger, ed., Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

3. Nancy Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987). For this last quote see p. 15.

4. I elaborate this argument in Linda Nicholson, Identity Before Identity Politics (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 142-161.

5. Dorothy Sue Cobble, The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004). See also, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

6. Catherine Wessinger, ed., Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

7. Scott Smallwood, "American Women Surpass Men in Earning Doctorates," The Chronicle of Higher Education, December 12, 2003, in "The Faculty" p. 10.

8. By the mid 1990s, men were still doing only about a third of the housework. However, this contribution represented a doubling of their share from the mid 1960s. Suzanne M. Bianci, Melissa A. Milkie, Liana C. Sayer and John P. Robinson, "Is Anyone Doing the Housework – Trends in the Gender Division of Household Labor," pp. 191-228 in Social Forces, September 2000, 79 (1): 191.

9. See here.

10. Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991). This book, published in the early 1990s, shows the continuance of rigid beauty standards even twenty years following the emergence of radical feminism. Eighteen years later, there is no evidence that the power of beauty standards has diminished.

11. I base this claim upon reports from my undergraduates at Washington University in St. Louis.

12. Dennis A. Deslippe, "Rights, Not Roses," Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 32.

13. Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique," pp. 229-262 in Joanne Meyerowitz, ed. Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960 (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994). See particularly, p. 231.

14. Adolph L. Reed Jr., "Black Particularity Reconsidered," in Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Is It Nation Time: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism," pp. 39-66 talks about the ways in which Black Power deviated from what was possible in the 1960s and in this sense "sold out" the left. Nancy Fraser talks about the cooptation of feminism within the context of an emerging neo-liberalism in Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," pp. 97-117 in New Left Review, 56, March/April 2009. Richard Rorty makes a similar argument about the wrong turn taken by the identity political movements of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in Richard Rorty Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard

University Press, 1998). I've responded to Rorty's argument in a more elaborated form than I have done here in pp. 575-579 of a review I did of Achieving Our County in Constellations, Volume 5, No. 4, December 1989. I've responded to Reed's position in Linda Nicholson, Identity Before Identity Politics, pp. 177-181.

15. It is not clear that all those who have expressed the idea of a "third wave" require the use of this metaphorical phrase. Their point seems to be more importantly that there exists a younger generation of feminists whose politics both are similar and different from those of an earlier generation of activists. The lack of need for this particular metaphor is illustrated by Rebecca Walker in a 2004 introduction to the volume The Fire This Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism, eds., Vivien Labaton and Dawn Lundy Martin ((N.Y.: Anchor, 2004). In this introduction Walker states: "To notice the next wave of feminism (or however one chooses to label it)…." p. xxx. My sense is that an even younger generation of activists than the one of Walker and her fellow activists will make the use of the wave metaphor even less attractive. People will recognize the silliness of trying to fit each generation's activism within a series of numerically numbered "waves."