
Review

Feeling women's liberation

Victoria Hesford

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I once taught a feminist theory course in which a good number of the students were deeply political and already well-read in the subject. When we discussed radical feminist works from the 1970s and early 1980s, I was taken aback by the students' level of dismissiveness and outright anger. The most vocal in the class argued that queer theory was the only viable theoretical position and that reading Marilyn Frye or Catharine MacKinnon was a waste of time and offensive to their sense of freedom and community. They saw the earlier radical feminists as hopelessly white, upper middle class, US women, who essentialized all claims about sex and sexuality. Meanwhile, I was committed to discussing these texts that had transformed my life because they articulated – and rejected – something so familiar to me. The course nearly came to a standstill, passions inflamed, positions staked out.

This perceived antagonism between feminism and queer theory motivates Victoria Hesford's *Feeling Women's Liberation*. As Hesford argues, and as I experienced firsthand, women's liberation 'remains subject to intense feelings of attachment and disidentification' (p. 2). These feelings have shaped the way the archive of the women's liberation movement has been read. 'Instead of approaching the archive as an array of rhetorical materials that sought to persuade and enact a new political constituency and world into being, it has instead largely been read as evidence of specific and coherent theoretical and ideological standpoints, which are then defended or criticized in a more knowing present' (p. 2). Her goal is not to tell readers *the true* story of women's liberation but instead to reclaim some of the Second Wave's complexity while simultaneously tracing the ways in which that complexity has been flattened. She sees the book as an intervention in queer historiography, 'drawing attention to the danger, rather than (just) the pleasure, of a loving look backward at the past' (p. 13). At the same time, this work of history is ultimately about the present, as our understandings about the past shape the 'conditions of possibility' for political and intellectual work today (p. 250).

The book is admirably hard to summarize. Resisting the impulse to place history into tidy narratives is central to her project. The 'Introduction' lays out her

commitments and the general terrain of the book. The first chapter examines mass media representations of the women's liberation movement in 1970, aiming to understand how the feminist-as-lesbian became the dominant figure by which women's liberation has been remembered. The heterogeneity revealed by Hesford's archival work helps us appreciate that ways in which the linking of lesbianism and women's liberation can be read as a 'struggle over the relationship of feminism to the whiteness and bourgeois values that marked the privileged domain of national belonging' (p. 78) – not just a foregone critique to be made of Second Wave feminism.

The next two chapters go on to examine *how* the feminist-as-lesbian figure was used within the movement itself. In Chapter 2, Hesford ably demonstrates how 'ultimately, the women's liberation movement's endorsement of the lesbian as a figure of feminist revolt vividly illuminates [an] uneasy ambivalence between an attachment to and estrangement from proper femininity' (p. 85). Thus, even as activists endorsed antiracist and anticapitalist ideas, the movement archives reveals the ways in which women's liberation became marked as white and middle-class. Chapter 3 sticks with the 'feminist-as-lesbian' figure but moves into an examination of 'the struggles of women's liberation to imagine a collectivity in the name of women and to enact political claims on its behalf' (p. 118). Hesford shows how women's liberation came to the idea of 'the personal is political' through contestation and questioning, rather than as a settled theoretical position. Hesford then turns to Kate Millet's *Flying* in Chapter 4, reading the text as a 'remainder of events' (p. 157). Instead of seeing the memoir as a relic of the movement (and thus of its whiteness or its class position and so on), Hesford interprets the text as an attempt to create something new in the world and in terms of Millet's refusal to be just one thing, thereby destabilizing 'the cultural conventions and social coordinates that would make Millet recognizable as a particular type of woman' (p. 194).

The final chapter of the book looks at how this period of feminism gets remembered today, exploring mass media representations in movies and periodicals, as well as academic essays. Her examination of both mass culture and subcultural representations of women's liberation demonstrates the intermingling of the two, as well as the tenacity of the developmental narrative of progress from the Second Wave and its seemingly problematic lesbian separatists to the more correct theoretical–political position of the queer present (and its own under-examined privileges and claims to exceptionalism). Borrowing from Elizabeth Freeman, Hesford calls on us to appreciate 'temporal drag', allowing history to bother us more deeply in the present by pushing us into 'disorienting relation to the past' (p. 229).

I see this as the real strength of this engaging work, particularly for political and social theorists. Hesford provides a thoughtful critique of the developmental narrative and her work gives readers a model for alternative historiography. For Hesford, the usual progressivist readings rationalize historical effects as natural and necessary outcomes and offer accounts as the *real* story (seen in hindsight).



They thus obscure the contingent nature of things and downplay the eventfulness of history. In that mode, we tend to see each text of the women's liberation movement as a declarative statement of a settled position, rather than as creative interventions in an ongoing construction of a new way of being. Hesford thus eschews the 'ordering mechanism of a developmental narrative' (p. 158), often reading texts out of temporal order (for example, Morgan before Solanas before Friedan), which is disorienting in a critical way, helping readers to see text anew as productive documents springing out of very specific and often forgotten contexts. The reader is encouraged to confront the danger of settling on any one story and to appreciate the 'paradox that historical truth can only be grasped around its edges and through artifice, through the creation of a form in which to tell or apprehend it' (p. 261; Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home*, discussed in the Epilogue, is her model for accounts that encourage this multiplicity and openness).

At the same time, in her effort to restore complexity to the women's liberation movement, the book can seem to downplay critiques leveled at some Second Wave texts, claims or figures by those concerned with the essentializing effects of the movement. Even if trying to assign those individuals and documents to a particular and stable position with a larger narrative is problematic, and even if those critiques tend to downplay the actual diversity within the movement, and even if the whiteness and middle-classness of the movement itself sprang from very specific conditions that should not be naturalized, the fact and memory of the movement as relatively privileged in these ways has had important effects. I think this is amplified by the fact that even as Hesford attends to a great number of texts in the work, the central figures – such as Friedan, Millet, Ti-Grace Atkinson – are white and middle class, reinscribing their prominence as representatives for women's liberation.

Regardless of this, I applaud Hesford's ambitious project and there is a great deal to learn about both women's liberation and how we do history from *Feeling Women's Liberation*. The work certainly taps into an important and often frustrating antagonism between feminist and queer positions; I was grateful to dive into a historical work aimed at uncovering and exploring what has gone into creating that tension. Arguing from the perspective that accountability to the past is critical for contemporary politics, Hesford has provided new readings of the women's liberation movement that happily help loosen up some of our most calcified narratives.

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Correction

We have added a missing author name in this final version.