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Review of *Split Decisions*

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Before you even open the book, you expect that, with a name like *Split Decisions*, an unsubtle reference to the scoring in full-contact sports like prize fighting, the tone of the text is likely to be pugnacious. And indeed, Halley's is. But the title is also deceptive. A split decision in a boxing match is the closest possible judges' result in fights where there is a winner and a loser. Halley's splits, however, are largely gaping schisms and compound fractures. The reader never has a sense of Halley's subtitularly signalled decision to *Take a Break from Feminism* as almost a tie, or even a close question. In many sections of the book, the impression created is more one of canyon-sized fissures cleaving badly scorched earth.

Early on, Halley positions herself as an 'internally riven' post-modernist who is engaged in a debate over left of centre theories of sexuality that 'compete' with the 'various feminisms' for 'intellectual authority and political fealty among left, progressive liberal people' (pp. 11–12). I used all those quotation marks directly above to make it clear that those are her words, because they aren't terms I'd ever have chosen. If there is some pitched theory-of-sexuality-based battle being waged for the hearts and minds of 'left, progressive liberal people', it has largely escaped my notice. By which I mean: I think Halley exaggerates the impact that feminist theory has had upon the way most people live the sexual aspects of their lives.

I am not a social scientist, so I can't link my observations about the impact that feminist theory has upon actual sex to empirical research in a sophisticated or enlightening manner. The best I could do, if pressed, would be to assemble a law-professorly string citation listing the titles and publication information of every study about feminism and sex I could find, with appended parentheticals that are drawn almost verbatim from the abstracts and conclusions of the studies. This wouldn't be particularly elucidating, but it's still more than Halley has done in *Split Decisions*, in terms of offering anything more than theoretical support for her theories about others' theories. If she can convince readers she is correct, then she is correct, apparently.

For a book about sex,[1] *Split Decisions* is remarkably unsexy. It is mostly a catalogue of complaints about the way feminist theorists write about sex, which Halley describes as 'governance' that is prescriptively deployed. Feminism is, Halley alleges, a gender-neutral entity that 'refuses to own its will to power', ultimately constructing 'a textbook case of bad faith (p. 33). Halley even suggests that feminist theory is metaphorically exploitive, asserting:

> 'Of course acknowledging feminism to be a governance project has a dark side, and it is important to face it. That dark side includes its vanquished, its prisoners of war, the interests that pay the taxes it has levied and owe the rents it has imposed. Feminism with blood on its hands.'
>
> (pp. 32–33)

In Halley's view, then, feminism is feudal, acting as an army, a sovereign and a landlord, though who the unfortunate serfs it keeps in servitude are is never made clear. And in a book the author has explicitly told us is all about sex, the reference to bloody hands, in the above passage and a number of times throughout the book, is confusing and disturbing. She is accusing feminism of murder. If you think I am exaggerating, consider this excerpt from the chapter entitled 'Feminism and its others':

> 'I suppose it's good to feel paralyzed, buried alive, and murdered when in fact that's what has happened to you; but I am firmly convinced that it's bad to feel these ways when it hasn't. The story of feminism and its others that I have told here leads me to think that you are more likely to feel these ways needlessly, indeed somewhat irresponsibly falsely, if you want your social theory (here of sexuality and power) to be normative, descriptive, and aspirational; if you deploy it prescriptively.' (p. 273)

1 At page 23, Halley declares, 'This book – it's about sex'.

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Who are the homicidal feminists inflicting this theoretical violence? Many of Halley's most bitter diatribes against feminism are very generalised, so it's hard to tell. Women who come in for the heaviest derogation include Judith Butler, Robin West, Drucilla Cornell, Gayle Rubin and, of course, Catharine MacKinnon, whose very existence seems to both perturb and animate Halley at various junctures in the book.

Halley observes early on that for the last quarter century, Catharine MacKinnon has been 'by far the most brilliant and forceful thinker about sexuality in U.S. feminist legal theory' (p. 27). But she expends a lot of words thereafter extensively criticising MacKinnon's writings, after labelling as power feminism MacKinnon's 'formulation' of sexuality. And after a while, I got the distinct impression that Halley thinks feminists generally, and MacKinnon particularly, have fundamentally compromised, perhaps even ruined, sex. Here are some excerpts that illustrate this contention:

- In the context of iterating differences between power feminism and cultural feminism she writes that 'MacKinnon's theory makes it impossible to know the difference between normal heterosexual intercourse and rape' (p. 77), which is only inches short of the scurrilous and easily debunked accusation that MacKinnon believes that all sex is rape. Later in the same paragraph she asserts that cultural feminists promote an approach to sex that 'must depress masculinity in either partner and promote femininity in both' (p. 77), making the all too common accusation that feminists are emasculating.
- In the context of discussing Michel Foucault's theories of power, she says 'both MacKinnon and West, on one hand, and Foucault, on the other, offer us theories of sexuality in which it is a dark power' (p. 125).
- In the context of describing Gayle Rubin's work, Halley writes of Rubin's efforts to contest 'the ascendancy of feminist antipornography activism, including MacKinnon's variant and its alliance with a strong, new-right effort to repress gay male public sex' (p. 146), without providing any specific information supporting this startling claim.
- In the context of discussing Duncan Kennedy's *Sexy Dressing* article (Kennedy, 1995), once again she accuses MacKinnon of arguing that all heterosexual sex is rape, observing that in MacKinnon's early work: 'Sexuality as women's subordination and men's superordination pervades human reality, such that rape is merely the paradigmatic form of heterosexual interaction; and it pervades human consciousness, such that no one is in a position to say for sure that a given act of "voluntary" or "ordinary" heterosexual intercourse (or water-cooler flirtation) is not precisely homologous to what we call rape' (p. 172). And I find that idea preposterous.

Now I'm going to indulge in a bit of facile feminist theorising of my own. I think that Halley personalises theory too much, possibly as a way to distance herself from the harsh realities of actual personal interaction. When people who declare themselves feminists behave like jerks, it isn't feminist theory that made them do this. But maybe for Halley, blaming feminism is less painful than holding the people themselves responsible for bad actions.

Admittedly, I haven't spent a lot of time pondering the effect that feminist theory has upon my sex life. Most of the heterosexual women with whom I discuss such things assert that the social force most problematic to their sex lives is pornography, rather than feminist theorising. Pornography encourages men to expect women to have large breasts, tiny waists, and very little hair anyplace except their heads. It teaches them that during sex, women enjoy rough treatment, anal penetration, the insertion of fists and other large objects into their vaginas, and having men ejaculate onto their faces. Women who don't want to conform their bodies to a pornographic ideal, nor engage in pornography glorified sex acts, face resistance and rejection from porn-using men.

There is nothing wrong with criticising the writings or public acts of people who identify as feminists. Performing critical analysis is arguably the role of an academic, and there is no reason that feminist theory should be immune from negative scholarly evaluations. What's troubling about many of Janet Halley's criticisms, however, is that they are far too often generalised and unsupported.

Reference

KENNEDY, Duncan (1995) 'Sexual Abuse, Sexy Dressing, and the Eroticization of Domination' in *Sexy Dressing, etc. Essays in the Power and Politics of Cultural Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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