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The third wave's break from feminism

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Janet Halley proves that third-wave feminism is wrong – wrongly described, that is. Young feminists in the United States tout a 'third wave' of feminism that is hip, ironic and playful – the supposed opposite of the dour and strident 'second wave' of 1970s feminism. Goodbye frumpy sandals; hello sexy fishnets, according to third-wave feminism. Initially young women themselves (and now writers and scholars) embraced a powerful wave metaphor to convey a generational conflict within feminism. In this metaphor, youth crashes against (and ultimately overtakes) its elders. But rifts within feminism cannot be so neatly explained. The story is more complicated than third wave vs. second wave, young vs. old, fertile vs. menopausal. The wave metaphor obscures a more complicated story of the power of labels. 'Feminism' is such mighty label that third-wave feminists want to remake it and Janet Halley wants to take a break from it. In spite of their different vocabulary, though, third-wave feminists and Janet Halley share similar goals and methods. Feminism has no use as a label – a theory, even – unless it yields to the complex realities of human experience.

Background

In 1991, then twenty-two-year-old activist and writer Rebecca Walker pronounced in the pages of *Ms.* Magazine 'I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.' (Walker 2002, p. 86) Although Walker did not elaborate, feminist writers and organisers in their twenties (and younger) embraced this youth-oriented label in the popular press and mass-marketed books.[1] Not too long after, academics working mostly in the humanities latched on to 'third-wave feminism' as a new basis for critical examination of the successes and failures of the feminist movement. (Heywood and Drake 1997) 'Third-wave feminism' has come to stand for a feminism defined primarily in opposition to its historic precedents. As one writer describes, '[i]t doesn't mean man-hating or being humorless! There is a new thing called "third wave" feminism that will open the door so you can embrace politics by being who you are!' (Wong, 2003). Third-wave feminism embraces personal preference, irony and contradictions.

Read in the aggregate, third-wave feminist writing reveals common concerns: sexuality, fluid personal identities and the role of the media in shaping and challenging gender roles.[2] Third-wave feminists employ first-person narratives (Harde and Harde, 2003) and embrace a coalition politics in service of a liberal left agenda (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). Theirs is a feminism that asserts the right to enjoy a spanking without any risk of subordination (Dailey, 2002) and the pleasures of compensated nude dancing (Frank, 2002) and sexual intercourse for hire (Pullen, 2002). In the third-wave worldview, pornography, to give one example, has no meaning or significance other than that which the actor or consumer gives it (Doyle and Lacombe, 1996).[3] 'The point is that the cultural and social weapons that had been identified (rightly so) in the Second Wave as instruments of oppression – women as sex objects, fascist fashion, pornographic materials – are no longer being exclusively wielded against women and are sometimes wielded by women. [Third-wave feminism] presumes that women can handle the tools of patriarchy and don't need to be shielded from them', explain Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in the *ür* third-wave text, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 141).

1 See, e.g., Walker (1995); Findlen (1995).

2 For a discussion of the principal themes and methodologies of third-wave feminism, see Crawford (2007).

3 At pp. 191–92: 'The feminist understanding of pornography as a way of seeing, a gaze, was a more sophisticated approach to sexist imagery than that of radical feminists for two reasons. First, rather than reducing porn to the truth of sex (man's violence), it directed our attention to the context [of] . . . the production and consumption of sexist images possible . . . Second, it emphasized, at least potentially, the viewer's activity in the production of meaning in pornography.'

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The goals of critique

Third-wave feminist writers and Janet Halley share an emphasis on critique. Third-wave feminists direct theirs explicitly and implicitly at second-wave feminists. According to one third-wave author, the critique that is third-wave feminism is:

> 'a welcome sign to my generation of young women, allowing us to at once differentiate ourselves from our feminist mothers and at the same time achieve mainstream power in our careers and love lives. It allows us the self-righteousness of being political activists without the economic sacrifice or social marginalization that has so often come along with that role. It is a feminism no longer on the defensive, with a fun, playful aesthetic that acknowledges the erotic and narcissistic pleasure women receive from beautifying themselves, a pleasure not to be denied.'
>
> (Walker, 1995, p. 16)

Third-wave feminism's utility thus is limited by its reactive framework. By failing to advance an alternative worldview, third-wave feminism is 'trapped within the mother–daughter relationship, albeit as only children to a controlling "mother" feminism' (Henry, 2003, p. 218).

In Halley's work, in contrast, critique itself provides liberation from the intellectual straightjacket that is feminism. Her proposed solution to the problem of unitary theoretical deployment (or what third-wave feminists would call 'the feminism that assumes there is one pure way to be and it is anti-capitalist, super-serious and hostile to bikini waxes and Madonna' (Pollitt and Baumgardner, 2003)) is critique itself. Halley calls for a 'hedonics of critique' (p. 9), an intellectual and practical pleasure in deciding 'right' from 'wrong', presumably in a legal sense. 'I am urging us to indulge – precisely because we love justice but don't know what it is – in the hedonics of critique' (p. 9). Halley rejects the notion that any one particular theoretical approach to a legal or political problem is 'better' than another. At most, according to Halley, one can strive for awareness of how particular choices 'spread both benefits and harms across social and ideological life' (p. 9) (although it is not clear that such awareness carries with it a mandate to distribute maximum benefits by doing the least amount of harm).

The methods of critique

Both Halley's and third-wave feminists' methodologies rely on the personal narrative. Halley's use of the first person serves a more developed theoretical project, however. A third-wave feminist might describe the pleasures she derives from dressing in a hyper-feminine style or nude dancing, without claiming anything more than *this is my choice and it is all part of feminism.* Halley's deployment of the first and second person entices the reader into what seems like a conversation: 'A bold theory can startle you out of worn-out habits of mind, enable you to see newly and act creatively. But in my experience – yours, too? – it's horrifying to live that way too long' (p. 9). Halley is explicit about her aims: 'So I hope to elicit your desire to think that no theory, no one political engagement, is nearly as valuable as the invitation to critique that is issued by the simultaneous incommensurate presence of many theories (past, present and still to be made)' (p. 9). If third-wave feminists pursue personal pleasure, Halley steeps in the 'hedonic of critique' (p. 9), not only for the pleasure it gives, but also because she believes there is no other honest way of approaching legal problems. We cannot know what is right or wrong; we can only make more (or less) harmful choices. To claim legal certainty, under the banner of feminism or any other theory, Halley suggests, is hubris.

The vocabulary of critique

Despite their shared use of the first-person narrative, Janet Halley and third-wave feminists take opposite views of feminism's theoretical capacities. Third-wave feminists have articulated a thirteen-point 'manifesta', or agenda for young feminists, which includes coalition-building across traditionally disempowered groups in advocacy for reproductive rights (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 279), equal access to health care (p. 280), labour-force rights (p. 280) and constitutional guarantees of equality (p. 281). According to the *Manifesta*'s authors, 'the issues on which [third-wave feminists] focus are broader than those historically identified as feminist issues, such as environmental issues, prison reform, and fair housing. And with the current convergence of so many movements that are simultaneously working to reframe leadership, such as political groups and the media, this generation of feminists is ripe for this transition' (Baumgardner and Richards, 2003, p. 164).

Third-wave feminists want to *redefine* feminism as an inclusive and open posture, making it into a universal label applicable to any social justice project. But Halley rejects that as impossible on feminism's own terms. In Halley's view, feminism's tridentine beliefs (that there are differences between men and women, that such difference is linked to men's domination of women and the importance of 'a commitment to work

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against that subordination on behalf' of women (p. 5)) limit its expansion. So, the only realistic solution, in Halley's terms, is to *take a break from* feminism.

Halley's analysis of the utility of theory pushes against its own limits – if theory has no claim to universality, then theory can have no claim on law – something which is not true in US constitutional jurisprudence. Indeed, equal protection claims under the Fourteenth Amendment would have no vitality but for the law's theoretic embrace of 'women,' for example, as a discreet group – a class of people against whom it is unlawful to discriminate, with discrimination determined by comparison to another group.

The critique of critique

Third-wave feminists would agree with Halley's assertion that 'in deciding to advocate, negotiate, legislate, adjudicate, or administer one way or another, we spread both benefits and harm across social and ideological life – and that some of these benefits and costs, however real, may be constituted by our very practices of accounting for and attempting to redress them' (p. 9). But third-wave feminists embrace the *feminist* label when Halley wants to leave it aside, at least temporarily. The core idea of both third-wave feminism and Janet Halley's *Split Decisions* is a departure from a *certain kind* of feminism – a feminism that does not account in a meaningful way for some women's desires for sex, subordination and (sometimes) sex that is subordinating. Third-wave feminists and Janet Halley share an affection for the interstitial, the spaces between theory and experience. That space remains unexplored and messy – with no neat division between waves or breaks to be made.

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