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Comments on *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take A Break from Feminism*

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In her latest book, *Split Decisions*, Janet Halley suggests it is time to 'take a break' from feminism. 'Why not?', is my first reaction, approaching this book. After almost four decades of resurgent feminism, it is surely a good move to step back, critically assessing where that movement sprang from and its contentious afterlife. Then again, my second reaction is to think that this is a somewhat strange time to be issuing calls to take a break from feminism, after several decades of media declarations of its demise or irrelevance, accompanying organised attacks on women's rights to control their reproductive lives and the popularity of a 'pro-family' rhetoric often explicitly attacking women's economic choices. Nevertheless, despite well-organised resistance to its many legacies, as well as the long-gone days of feminism's existence as anything remotely resembling a co-ordinated movement, it is clear that its continued cultural impact has multiplied and divided in so many ways that keeping hold of its radically varied influence is a challenging enterprise.

What I like about Halley's book is its openness to, welcoming of, theoretical diversities. I appreciate her rejection of any single overarching theory, or attempts at what she calls 'convergent theory', especially within feminism. Any movement calling for justice and social transformations certainly has to keep shifting with the times, and nowhere have there been more shifts than in relation to the traditional gender order in Western worlds. Paradoxically, this has occurred alongside the many defeats of social justice movements more generally since the 1980s, with the impact of aggressive neoliberal policies globally. Appreciating the complexity of these shifts, and the continuities or discontinuities of specifically gender matters in women's lives, is all the more significant when, as Halley illustrates, feminism historically has had strong leanings towards the prescriptive and the moralistic. Of course, so have most other liberation struggles, although feminism, unsurprisingly, had its own special dollop of puritanism confronting, as it did, such cruel legacies of cultural belittlement and the sexual abuse of women and their bodies.

Halley highlights, in particular, the stridently normative tone that was once heard so powerfully around the early 1980s, known as 'cultural feminism'. Celebrating women's intrinsic virtues and male vice, it is most popularly associated with certain radical feminists, such as Robin Morgan or, in an even stranger and more energetic form, with the witcheries of Mary Daly (Morgan, 1978; Daly, 1984). Such writers offered robustly unnuanced, insular and static accounts of the fundamental thoughts, feelings and conduct of women, which many other feminists, myself included, began criticising from their very first emergence, back in the 1970s. Indeed, it was probing and questioning this form of chauvinistic feminism that inspired my own first book, *Is the Future Female: Troubling Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, over two decades ago, suggesting that any such complacent claims to female virtue could, on the one hand, be seen as hymning 'the compensations of the powerless', and on the other, as failing to address women's own many entanglements with power and privilege, while ignoring the deep divisions between and within women themselves (Segal, 1987). In Britain, at least, many feminists seemed to agree with it at the time, since feminism had emerged at the close of the 1960s precisely to challenge just such static views of gender differences. In Halley's book, however, this feminist outlook is associated with the legal theorist Robin West, who, it seems, is still rather popular in juridical feminist circles in the USA. Appeals to women's virtues in cultural feminist thought usually accompany a complementary image promulgating versions of 'victim feminism', called here, somewhat oddly, 'power feminism', as deployed in the alarming rhetoric of Catharine MacKinnon. Both this theorist, with her calls for a feminism 'unmodified' by ambiguity, nuance or complexity, and also the words of her former partner in overwrought moral frenzy, the late Andrea Dworkin, are given here so much more weight than it seems to me either of them deserve (MacKinnon, 1987). However, it must be admitted that it is perhaps a significance that bears some relation to the impact they have each had on many feminist campaigners, especially in the USA.

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Fortunately, for many engaged in women's activism internationally, who do not dwell within the law courts of the USA, or have to read the terrifying reductionisms of court reports, their encounters with feminist thought are often rather less simplistic. As Halley suggests, to the extent that we can isolate them as totalising perspectives, both 'cultural' and 'power' feminism share certain common features. What both cultural and power feminism share is a repudiation of all aspects of women's power, even as we have seen it continue to grow. It follows that they also insist upon a clear and seemingly perpetual polarisation between masculinity and femininity, even as we have seen it fade, or at least diminish, amongst many groups of women and men over recent decades. Within this strict gender polarisation, as Halley argues, all men are seen as having power over all women, despite the multitude of other power relations dictating our fate. It goes without saying that, within these fixed contrasts, we find no analysis of the complexities of power itself. The goal is one that seeks to revalue and empower women, and women alone. Halley's critique of any such perspective is compelling. Nevertheless, my problem with her book is that it rigorously critiques a feminism that, from the dawning of second-wave feminism at the close at the 1960s, many feminists have never espoused. Yet, have we not served our time? Are we not due more recognition? This, then, is *my* difficulty as a reader of this book.

Why, in particular, and why so urgently, in this political climate, do we need to take the break from feminism that this book solicits? *Whose* feminism must we take a break from? True, reading through Halley's massive documentation of the feminism that has impacted upon her own specific scholarship, it does become clear just why she feels she needs a break from her own packaging, and re-packaging, naming and re-naming, of certain types of feminist theorising. The feminists whose thoughts have wearied her, one should note, are all located within the Ivy League of the USA. They are criticised with arguments often borrowed from named male French continental philosophers. Most of the diverse feminist writers from Europe and elsewhere who have, for better or for worse, also developed their own theoretical critiques of North American 'cultural' and 'victim feminism', whether Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Sheila Rowbotham, Juliet Mitchell, Anne Phillips or Mandy Merck, to name a tiny number, are not cited in the book. Moreover, the arena wherein feminism has become tiresome is a strictly academic (or at times a juridical) one. There is no mention of either the diverse and difficult engagements of feminists working in NGOs, who have for so long campaigned internationally, and with considerable success, for the recognition of women's reproductive and sexual rights, despite the opposition of the Vatican, conservative and fundamentalists governments everywhere, and especially, and most recently, that of George W. Bush. Nor does the huge diversity of grass-roots women's activism globally and nationally, whether addressing discrimination, poverty, social policy or environmental issues, receive a mention, despite the significant work of feminists inside the US academy in raising awareness of these movements, or in insisting that women's rights be incorporated into our thinking of human rights. To name just a few, here I am thinking of the work and writing of Temma Kaplan, Barbara Ehrenreich, Arlie Hochschild, Linda Gordon, Nancy Fraser and numerous others, none of whom have ever really taken a break from feminism, but nor have they, ever, had a moments time for 'cultural feminism', 'victim feminism' or even the overarching 'convergentism', ascribed here as constituting feminism.

Like Halley, they have challenged unitary theorising, time and again, especially where it is most pernicious, in relation to the complex, confusing, never less than contradictory, domain of sexuality. Are feminists really so unaware of these irreconcilable conflicts around feminist sexual politics? Some few of them are, but most are not. It is, after all, a quarter of a century since those feminists who fitted Halley's image of a monolithic feminist standpoint on sexuality lined up against those feminists who were opposed to any such stance, the latter having organised the Barnard Conference on Sexuality in 1982. The ebullient array of feminist theorists and activists trying to stage the conference, presided over by Carole Vance and supported by dozens of feminist scholars, pointed out the difficulties and dilemmas of pretending that all women were simply powerless, all men always empowered, in heterosexual encounter. They challenged the traditional images and iconography presenting heterosexuality as something that was, by definition, oppressive to women. Feminists, whether deploying psychoanalytic or Foucauldian framings, pointed out that women, as well as men, both gay and straight, might sometimes enjoy, even feel empowered by, straight sex, rather than flee in fear and trembling from its misleading positioning of sexual 'passivity' as quintessentially 'female', and essentially subordinating (Segal, 1994).

As I see it, many feminists, almost from the beginning, have known one or two things that Halley is pointing out here, *as if* for the very first time. Moreover, it saddens me that I don't see many of us,

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so-called, 'prodigal' feminists mentioned here. Why not? It was not only the theoretical text, *Conflicts in Feminism*, published in 1990 (Hirsch and Fox Keller, 1990) that tried to keep feminism open to the inevitable conflicts within it, to reject attempts to erase such differences within totalising foreclosures (as we might now say). Although I do tend to agree with Halley that the move from thinking in terms of feminist politics (which have always been so diverse, conflict-ridden and contradictory) to seeking out a shared feminist ethical agenda (which she finds in the 2000 feminist anthology *Feminist Consequences* (Bronfen and Kava, 2000)) seems to suggest a new form of totalising feminist interests, though in the name of rejecting any such thing. Thus, Halley sniffs out what she calls a new form of overarching 'convergentism' in the feminist ethical agenda of Drucilla Cornell, and even Judith Butler, although surprisingly she says little about theoretical incommensurabilities between continuing forms of feminist theorising (whether Lacanian versus relational psychoanalytic feminisms; anti-racist versus post-colonial feminist frameworks; or the new feminist materialism which usually differentiates itself from former Marxist or socialist feminist perspectives). So I can appreciate some of the feminist taxonomies Halley labours so hard to present to us, even finding it necessary to invent neologisms to pin down feminist thought (as in her distinction between the convergentist and divergentist forms of theorising, which my dictionary is most unhappy with). However, I too remain unhappy. There is something I need to take a break from, for sure, but it is from what I see as the fixities and oversimplifications of Halley's own classificatory efforts.

As suggested above, I cannot recognise myself, or any of my particular feminist companions or theoretical guides, new and old, within them. We are not the creatures that this book squashes down into its boxes, from which it then hopes to rescue us, by encouraging a break. Well, thank you for the offer, but it is *as* a feminist thinker, writer and activist that I feel I have come across, indeed that I have myself made, many of these arguments before. And I am not a particularly original thinker. I take my guidance from other feminists. I want a break, and now more than ever, from these academic typologies that I believe distort the history and complexity of second-wave feminism, as well as its aftermath.

It is always easiest to be solipsistic, of course, and I have just myself written what I see as a collective memoir of my generation of second-wave feminists, with all the problems of locating different feminist 'generations' and their interactions and legacies (Segal, 2007). Insofar as I can welcome this book, it is because it runs through, though rather eccentrically, the contention that was there from the start. More slowly, I have done the very same thing. My first monograph, *Is the Future Female* (Segal, 1987), critiqued the popular cultural feminism of the eighties, the next, *Slow Motion* (Segal, 1990), repudiated the insistence that we were immutably trapped with that power relation between women and men, with women always losing, men always winning. *Straight Sex* (Segal, 1994) was written to tackle MacKinnon, and her boastfully fundamentalist readings of heterosexuality. Moreover, these books were all written before post-modernism, or at least before my own perhaps belated encounter with this rather falsely homogenised reading of post-structuralist thought. Before the 1990s, and the input of 'post-modernism', we are told by Halley, *all* feminists wore a seamless notion of male power, female powerlessness, and the need to revalue the feminine, on our sleeves as a mantra. Just for a start, this is certainly itself both a homogenising and misleading picture of the trajectory of second-wave feminism, one which certainly invalidates my existence. However, more irritatingly, although most feminists I know are always moving in and out of their feminism, taking on board the need to address the world at large, to worry about corporate globalisation, the increasing dominance of the one world superpower, the relentless rise in warfare throughout the twenty-first century, the worsening situation in the Middle East, the failure to bring to an end Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, and so on and so forth, I don't see any hint or whisper of this in Halley's text.

So yes, my North American friend, please hurry up, please decide at once, to take that break from the 'feminism' you present as hegemonic, to encompass a few more contradictions, to step aside from those futile academic typologies. However, I am not confident that you will manage this. For, oddly, having told us exactly why we need to take a break, the last line of the chapter most forcefully arguing your case itself returns us, once again, to feminism: 'We need to take a Break from feminism precisely to be *for feminism*' (p. xx). If that is taking a break from feminism, I suggest Halley has just shot herself in the foot. *Split Decisions* is a performative contradiction. I am so glad that Halley has not seriously given up on us all, those of us who, one way or another, have always known that neither women, nor men, constitute a unified group, let alone exhibit any consistent or shared identity.

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