Taking Feminist Theory to the Streets

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During my years at Smith College in the 1980s, feminism was very much alive on campus, and my friends and I spent many a night animatedly debating all the various topics included in the so-called sex wars. Class discussions sometimes got heated as well. I will never forget my classmates almost coming to blows the day we talked about Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum" in Elizabeth Spelman's Feminist Philosophy class — acting out the "gay-straight" split in feminism.

Completely new to me at the time, feminist theory stimulated me on multiple levels — socially, intellectually, and, perhaps most importantly, politically — so I was thrilled to be accepted into Professor Spelman's senior seminar in feminist theory — a class so popular, she had to take applications. The course featured the recently published but now classic text *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* by Alison Jaggar (1988). Still used in college classrooms today, that book presents feminism in terms of competing philosophical traditions, yielding liberal feminism, traditional Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism. Given her own political commitments, Spelman also included "women of color feminism" in the curriculum via *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* by bell hooks (1984). For my research paper, I added anarchist feminism to the "hyphenated" feminist roster.

Situating feminist theory in terms of its relationship to broader traditions still forms one major approach to texts overviewing the subject. A second popular approach places feminist theory in historical context, showing its development over time, sometimes through a series of "waves." A third type of reader anthologizes primary sources.

Eschewing all three of these standard approaches, the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* breaks new ground, offering instead an encyclopedic treatment of key topics germane to feminist research via 50 original genealogical essays by "noted feminist scholars" (10). Volume editors Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth resist the urge to impose their own vision on the material by organizing the entries in alphabetical order, so the volume moves, not in accordance with any

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implied narrative — from individuals to institutions, for example — but simply from A to Z — or, more accurately, from "Affect" to "Violence."

Despite this deliberately undisciplined and capacious approach, the *Handbook* presents a coherent vision of feminist theory as a "multifaceted, multisited project" (1). Not reducible to a set of policy prescriptions, feminist theory operates as a "mode of critical theory" (2) that intervenes in a range of conversations. That is to say, because gendered thinking pervades almost everything, feminist theory can add complexity to virtually any discussion, which is why the lengthy volume includes essays not only on "Embodiment," "Sexualities," and "Reproduction" but also "Markets/Marketization," "Development," and "State/Nation," to give just a few examples.

Although arising from activist struggles, or perhaps because of that, feminist theory, as articulated in the *Handbook*, does not speak in a unified voice. For example, it does not take any particular position on the divisive "sex wars" that roiled feminism during the 1980s, since feminist positions exist on both sides of debates over pornography, prostitution, heterosexuality, and so on. Yet that does not mean there is no core to the feminist theory project.

Disch and Hawkesworth do an impressive job of amplifying the harmonious notes in a seemingly cacophonous body of scholarship. Reframed as a critical orientation, feminist theory articulates, they tell us, three core purposes: (1) to denaturalize categories of difference; (2) to challenge the aspiration toward universal, impartial knowledge; and (3) to utilize intersectional analyses to engage the complexity of power. As the volume demonstrates, these three goals arose over time out of political struggles for women's empowerment all over the world, and they today form the loose parameters of feminism as "a vibrant intellectual practice" (1). An incredibly generative scholarly approach, feminist theory has initiated exciting lines of inquiry and criticism in a range of fields, not only in the social sciences and the humanities but also in the natural sciences.

The *Handbook* presents feminist theory as a scholarly project. The 50 diverse articles in the volume intervene in a wide range of academic debates. They are theoretically sophisticated albeit largely esoteric. I do not mean that in a negative way. You cannot fault theory for being scholarly, and the *Handbook* makes a huge contribution to the literature, or, more accurately, to literatures. It will be very useful, I believe, as a reference for scholars who want a feminist theory perspective on a particular topic, which is another advantage of organizing the material

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in terms of "signature subjects" (10) rather than philosophical traditions or historical time periods.

Even more importantly, however, the *Handbook* will help with syllabus preparation, so professors can integrate feminist themes into a wide variety of courses. In the classroom is where difficult theoretical ideas become meaningful and come to shape the thinking of a new generation of young people.

I view *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* as a landmark publication. Reading the volume made it crystal clear just how far feminist theory has come since the beginning of its academic ascendance in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, when I entered the Rutgers women and politics program in 1988, during its early years — the first such program in the country — feminist theory had not yet made a mark in political science, but now look at us. "We've come a long way, baby," as a carcinogenic advertisement used to say back in the day.

Yet at the same time, in thinking about the book project as a whole, I could not help being deeply troubled by the fact that while feminist theory is making such great progress in the academy, the world around us seems to be moving in the opposite direction. Focusing just on the United States, we see the election of Donald Trump, who bragged about assaulting women; continuing attacks on reproductive freedom, not only abortion but now also contraception; rape culture; sexist harassment online and in the workplace; lack of affordable child care; attacks on women's health care; police killings of African American women and men; heartless deportations of undocumented women and men; increasing militarization; continuing mass incarceration; the rise of white nationalism; hate crimes; income inequality; generalized immiseration; et cetera, et cetera.

We seem to be moving in reverse. Indeed, in a recent opinion piece in the *New York Times*, sociologist Stephanie Coontz (2017) talks about the backward slide in public opinion about gender roles. She charts the percentage of Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 who disagree with the following statement: "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside of the home and the woman takes care of the home and family." The number of young men who disagreed with that statement grew steadily from 1977 to the mid-1990s, and then the trend reversed. "In 1994, 83 percent of young men rejected the superiority of the male-breadwinner family. By 2014 that had fallen to 55 percent."

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How can such a huge disjuncture exist between the blossoming of feminist theory and the metastasizing of misogyny, racism, violence, and generalized injustice in the larger culture? Certainly, this is not just a problem for feminist theory. I see the same disconnection in deliberative democracy circles. We have been working for 25 years to strengthen self-government, and over the course of that time, our society has become less democratic and our culture less civil. How can that be, and how can we turn things around?

In the case of feminism, perhaps there is reason for optimism. Since the 2016 election, women have literally taken to the streets, some even carrying signs referencing "intersectional feminism," which testifies to the impact of a college education. Add that to the already active mobilization in the Black Lives Matter movement and the return of democratic socialism, and perhaps we are on the brink of another major period of progressive change.

Sadly, long-standing conflicts over "identity politics" versus class analysis and gender vs. race continue to cause divisions among activists. Yet on a theoretical level, at least, feminist theorists can articulate better ways to negotiate such conflicts than we could in the 1970s and 1980s, so hopefully the current activist generation will be able to avoid the destructive splits of the past — if we can better connect theory to practice. Perhaps the *Handbook* will spur the "tenured radicals" of academia to disseminate the critical tools of feminism more broadly across college curricula, and millennials and others will learn to become less stymied by divisions than was my generation.

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