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The World Split Open

Feminism has been declared dead, over, or irrelevant so often, it is a relief to reach for Ruth Rosen’s comprehensive history of the modern women’s movement when mustering a reply. In a single volume, Rosen has surveyed the history of both liberal and radical feminism to produce an engaging synthetic narrative of the revolutionary changes wrought by feminism and the reaction to them. As Rosen points out, the world before feminism is a world young women today find virtually unrecognizable. Truly, the gendered past is a foreign country. In a book that fits as well in the casual reader’s book case and the undergraduate’s back pack as the scholar’s reference shelf, Rosen traces the journey Americans have traveled from that world and the story of the women who led them out.

Rosen introduces a generational analysis of feminism, beginning in the 1950s with the now-familiar unhappy housewives and the daughters who refused to follow in their mothers’ footsteps. With a nod to newer research questioning the feminine mystique, Rosen believes it stronger than the ‘undertow’ of alternative views working against it and her portrait of the 1950s is an exhaustive synthesis of secondary historical sources on the subject along with postwar sociological studies and periodical research, sprinkled with oral history interviews by the author. She does note the sea change that represented “the most powerful challenge to the feminine mystique,” (p. 20) women’s labor force participation, and the fact that the nation’s labor market demands created that challenge. Nonetheless, she concludes that antifeminism and domesticity penetrated suburban split-levels, corporate steno pools, and Old Left political meetings all.

Inside suburban homes, daughters of the 1950s absorbed the mixed messages that would turn them into the ‘shock troops’ of women’s liberation. Rosen identifies a female ‘generation gap,’ pointing out that for women this chasm was more complicated than for men who could change the world and father, too, without a second thought. Young women “rejected the world of their mothers” and for this they were often branded antimotherhood. Rosen provides the context for the feminist use of motherhood as symbol in the heightened rhetoric of gender during the cold war. Young women had few female role models, she argues, and often adopted male visions of rebellion, whether social, sexual, or intellectual. They soon found these models ill fitting. The social movements of the early 1960s would provide them with new tools and inspiration in the person of black female activists and in the organizations of social change.

This is a story with which scholars of women’s history are familiar. Sara Evans’ *Personal Politics* and Alice Echols’ *Daring to Be Bad* or Flora Davis’ *Moving the Mountain* cover similar territory—the early years of radical and liberal feminism, respectively.[1] Rosen’s contribution is the telling of these stories side by side with attention to the diversity within each movement so that one senses the snowballing of feminist momentum in the 1960s. In her discussion of liberal feminism, Rosen is not as dismissive of it as some feminist scholars. Here, the
standard take on NOW is revised. NOW’s equality-based feminism was a radical break from the postwar liberal status quo, she argues. By extending individual rights to women, liberal feminists questioned the patriarchal family and the legal system; they re-imaged the American citizen as female, a process ongoing in the courts today. They focused on the concerns of all women workers, not just professional women, Rosen insists, noting that sex-segregated want ads stalled opportunity for working-class women, while its legal department supported the claims of southern factory women. The liberal/radical chasm was one of generation and style, rather than class.

After tracing the origins of radical feminism in the New Left, *The World Split Open* moves on to a discussion of the ways in which feminism transformed American sexual culture. Feminists exposed what Rosen dubs, “the hidden injuries of sex.” The Miss America pageant, abortion rights, women’s health, rape, prostitution, pornography, and sex itself: what American could look at these issues in the same way ever again? With Rosen’s tour, viewing the seventies through feminist eyes, it is almost impossible to sustain the popular image of those years as selfish and self-involved. New institutions, new laws, new ideas were all the result of collective feminist action by and for women.

In a chapter entitled, “Passion and Politics,” Rosen begins a wide-ranging account of feminist politics and political culture by noting the impact of consciousness-raising on women around the country as both anger and euphoria flowered. It was not long before feminists wanted to raise consciousnesses other than their own, applying the guerilla theater tactics of the radical left to the task, shocking more traditional women activists in the process. As their targets morphed from the war to sexism generally, the media coverage of women’s liberation began. What the media covered were feminist protests of corporations, educational institutions like the University of California, Berkeley, and media outlets themselves. The next step seems logical in hindsight but was almost revolutionary: a feminist magazine, *Ms.* From there Rosen introduces us to feminist poetry readings, women’s music, feminist artists, and other expressions of women’s culture.

Thanks to her involvement in the movement, readers are treated to first-hand anecdotal accounts—her own and those of other participants—that convey the excitement and momentum of the early movement. And, as a historian mindful of her contemporary audience, Rosen has carefully peeled back the superficial labels of feminists as ‘anti-motherhood,’ or ‘angry’ to reveal the important issues underneath. But when it comes to defending feminist funny bones, one senses a movement activist that still smarts at the ‘no-sense-of-humor’ stereotype.

After celebrating the fruits of sisterhood, Rosen dissect the darker side of feminist politics: the anger and competitiveness with which feminists could view one another. Readers of Alice Echols’ treatment of radical feminism will find a similar discussion here. Rosen’s interviews with feminist participants and recipients of ‘trashings’ provide both a sense of immediacy and one of seasoned regret. One of the more interesting threads that could have unraveled feminism and undoubtedly fo mented conflict is the extent to which, under COINTEL-PRO, the FBI infiltrated and spied on feminist activists and organizations. Characterizing feminist politics as “paranoid,” by the early 1970s, Rosen goes on to note the sound basis of many wary activists’ concern, stating, “Still, in my wildest flights of paranoia I never imagined the extent to which the FBI spied on feminists or how many women did the spying” (p. 240). The FBI was apparently able to recruit women informers to attend meetings and report back to the FBI with ease. Bureau files contain summaries of feminist meetings with such subversive aims as, “They wanted equal opportunities that men have in work and in society” (p. 242).

When the San Francisco office recommended suspending surveillance of women’s liberation groups in the bay area, Hoover retorted, “Interwoven with its goals for equal rights for women is the advocacy of violence to achieve these goals,” that he saw as a threat to internal security (p. 245). FBI regional offices apparently experienced some of the same difficulties historians do when they attempt to piece together the history of recent feminism. One operative in Detroit explained, “This movement has no leaders, dues, or organizations” (p. 246). The files offer much to amuse, including reports on the activities of dangerous radicals Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Grimshke (Grimke) sisters. Humorous bungling aside, Rosen links actual infiltration with the factionalizing and personal attacks that characterized the movement in the early 1970s. When radical actions were proposed and trashings occurred, feminists wondered whether the resulting splits were organic or the result of infiltration. The net effect was that, “feminists sometimes found it easier to accuse one another of being informers than to accept the inevitable differences among them that, even without the FBI, would naturally result in different feminist perspectives and different ideas of sisterhood” (p. 260). Rosen’s examination of FBI files on feminist groups
serves as an important reminder of the limits placed on social reformers in the 1960s and 1970s and the threat that organized action for gender role change symbolized to those in power.

Differing ideas and other differences meant that, by the mid-1970s, the movement “was everywhere and nowhere” (p. 263). Rosen calls this condition “diffusion” and compellingly argues that for all the fragmentation, feminism continued not only to make inroads, but also to win converts, changing women’s lives and communities as it went. Feminism rocked the halls of academe and religious institutions. It inspired women to create new organizations like Nine-to-Five, Dayton Women’s Liberation, the Older Women’s League. Social services begun by women’s groups became the responsibility of counties and municipalities. By the 1970s, women of color were— not unambivalently—embracing feminism and defining it for themselves. Rosen recounts the origins of feminism in the movements for social change in the African-American and Mexican-American communities.

A need to fight racial oppression alongside men lengthened the gestation period for feminist consciousness; feminism was still burgeoning in these communities at a time when the media was declaring feminism’s demise. This section of the book is a bit cursory. Historians of feminism need to direct more attention to the feminism of women of color. Despite the fact that a women’s culture with new institutions like bookstores, music festivals and health centers flourished in the 1970s, and that African-, Asian-, Latin-, and Native American women formed feminist groups, the popular and historical view is that feminism sputtered out.

Rosen devotes the final chapters of The World Split Open to the paradox of late-twentieth-century feminism. Its successes were often taken for granted and the movement itself rejected by many of its beneficiaries: ‘postfeminist’ women. The media portrayed feminists—women with a deep commitment to social change and collective action—as selfish careerists. By the early 1980s women’s claim to the opportunities of capitalist individualism was all that remained of feminism in the popular mind.

‘Together with Susan Douglas’ ‘cat fight’ analysis of the media’s impact on feminism, Rosen’s discussion of the ‘first woman’ story helps explain the gulf between popular perceptions of the movement and reality.[2] On the one hand, these firsts were the success stories: women who broke barriers in occupational opportunity. But, on the other, they were also invariably portrayed or wished to portray themselves as individualists and rarely claimed a feminist identity. Appearance, a welcoming climate, and an easy balance of home and work were the key elements of the story. Sexism, women’s liberation, and affirmative action were not. Unfortunately, the prototypical ‘first woman’ story did not die in the 1970s and 1980s, but continues to trumpet the firsts in academic leadership, software entrepreneurship, and politics. The ‘first woman’ story was just one of the sources of the ‘superwoman’ stereotype that helped to create consumer feminism. This individualist credo was reflected in women’s magazines, therapeutic self-help manuals, advertising, and Hollywood offerings. It was also reflected in women’s lives as they entered the labor force in increasing numbers without child care programs or subsidies, making “having it all” mean “having it all to do.” To many Americans it appeared the selfless mother had been replaced by the self-absorbed female yuppie. Rosen observes, “when Americans took a good hard look at this narcissistic superwoman who embraced the values of the dominant culture, they grew anxious and frightened, for they no longer saw loyal mothers and wives who would care for the human community, but a dangerous individual, unplugged from home and hearth, in other words, a female version of America’s ambitious but lonely organization man” (p. 330).

The image of the selfless and loyal family-centered woman underwrote the conservative politics that defined the 1980s and 1990s. A mythical nation of ‘traditional families’ has no need for a comprehensive system of child care or, for that matter, a social safety net of any kind: women as dedicated mothers and volunteers would apply the band-aids to the collateral damage of free-market capitalism. Female autonomy threatens this view and fear of it generated a backlash that struck out at the ERA, abortion rights, and feminism. A cultural backlash included prognostications on single career women’s likelihood of getting married.

In 1998, long after Susan Faludi’s study of the media, Time Magazine placed a television character, Ally McBeal, on the cover.[3] Her head floated against a black background where she was preceded by similar cutouts of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem. Time posited that the character Calista Flockhart played on the series signaled the death of feminism because she was overly concerned with her unsuccessful relationships and appearance. Writer Ginia Bellafante rightly criticized this cultural offering and others for their private, personal, self-involved focus in comparison to the earlier decades of public purpose, but asked, “Is Ally
McBeal really progress? ” Here she conflated cultural product with feminism. Feminism may have made possible a woman-focused drama that frankly addressed sexuality as well as sexual harassment, but feminism did not produce Ally McBeal; David Kelley did.

The problem for scholars of the movement and perhaps for American women is that the trajectory of feminism at the dawn of the 21st century echoes that of feminism in the 1920s. Tremendous social change generated in large part by feminism greeted women coming of age after the mid-1970s with unprecedented opportunities and choices. NOW still exists, feminist scholars are ensconced in academia, working women continue to avail themselves of the important legal advances since feminism but the momentum of, participation in, attention to the movement and the issues it raised have ebbed. It would seem that, as Nancy Cott taught us about the 1920s, what historians of women must do is examine what women, feminist-identified or not, are doing in the 2000s for a true understanding of the movement’s effect.[4]

Significantly, in Time/CNN’s 1998 poll, exactly half of all women, aged 18-24, polled thought feminists shared their values, even while the percentage of women who considered themselves feminists had dropped well below fifty percent.[5] Women appear to believe that American society can support the implementation of those values without the pressure of an organized social movement. Rosen’s sweeping survey of the years since 1945 will inspire and inform, should those hopes be disappointed. Meanwhile, as she reminds us, internationally, feminism has helped to define women’s rights as human rights, and the changes this might mean for women around the globe have just begun to take shape.

This history of feminism is lucid and wide-ranging. If the basic outlines of the story are ones women’s historians already know, it is nonetheless useful to find them woven together so skillfully in a single narrative. The World Split Open vividly depicts the feminist transformation of the United States since the 1950s as well as the experience, excitement, and frustration of feminists who worked for change. A detailed chronology that stretches from 1848 to 2000 handily encapsulates major feminist developments. Teachers of women’s history and the post WWII period will find the interviews and anecdotes make excellent material for lectures. The general reader may now, thanks to Rosen, reach for a single book that tells the story of recent feminism in a breezy conversational style, enlivened with personal histories and eye-opening anecdotes.

Notes


