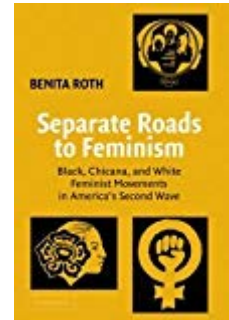


Benita Roth. *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiii + 271 pp. \$26.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-52972-3.



Reviewed by Timothy Hodgdon

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Why did distinct feminist organizations develop among radical women of color and Euro-American women in the late 1960s and 1970s? The question has engaged both scholars and activists since the organizations' emergence. Sociologist Benita Roth concludes that these organizations constituted separate feminist *movements*, and concurs with black and Chicana feminist theorists that the intersectional nature of oppression encouraged (but did not *determine*) their formation along the fault lines of race and class in American society. But she does not rest there. Applying the insights of social-movements theory, she argues that the "intermovement political field"--the myriad radicalisms of the period, and the ideas that circulated among them (including the widely observed ethical imperative to "look to your own oppression" formulated by proponents of identity politics)--further reinforced all feminists' inclination to "organize their own" (p. 22). Conjoining intersectionality and social-movements theory enables Roth to reconceptualize what a good answer to the familiar question should look like.

In the first place, she suggests that a good answer must move beyond the common presumption that there existed a single "women's movement" in the late 1960s and 1970s. That presumption, says Roth, has led scholars of the "second wave" to ask the unproductive question of why so few Chicanas and black women joined white women's-liberation collectives, and have answered--incorrectly, in her view--that women of color did not suffer the same relative deprivation as did their white counterparts, and thus most of them felt no need to join white women in organized resistance to gender inequality.[1] This single-movement hypothesis (my term, not Roth's) has thus treated the feminist activism of women of color as peripheral to the history of the "second wave."

Roth devotes her initial chapters to problematization of a critical claim supporting the hypothesis: that women of color judged their social standing by comparing themselves to men. She finds, instead, that they were more likely to perceive themselves as deprived in comparison to white *women*. Roth deploys statistical measures of in-

equality to confirm the perceptions of her subjects. While some women of color had gained expanded access to higher education and employment opportunities in the post-World War II period, their status as new members of the middle class proved far more tenuous (and for Latinas, their isolation in white-dominated universities and workplaces more acute) than was the case for most Euro-American women. If postwar prosperity provided all feminists with the resources for protest, those resources flowed disproportionately to whites, creating a significant structural barrier to sisterhood.

From Roth's perspective, each of the separate roads to feminism deserves its own history. She devotes successive chapters to the chronological and organizational development of white, black, and Chicana feminisms. Each arose within the context of a mixed-gender, racially specific "parent" movement for social change: the New Left, the civil-rights movement, Black Power, or Chicanoism. Students of the second wave have identified future feminists' participation in these "parent" movements as an essential prerequisite to the rebirth of feminism. Roth recognizes these benefits; however, she emphasizes that independent feminist activism also conflicted with feminists' deep loyalties to the "parent" movement. A good answer, then, must account for both the benefits and the liabilities of second wave organizations' roots in mixed-gender organizations.

Striking this interpretive balance enables Roth to argue that the contingencies of meeting antifeminist resistance in "parent" movements further reinforced the tendency to organize along racial and ethnic lines. Euro-American women faced a New Left movement culture in which possession of an epic theory (that is, a theory that, like Marxism, claims to account for the totality of social relations, in order to change them) served as a standard distinguishing "authentic" radical from the long American tradition of bourgeois uplift.[2] Possession of epic theory provided the op-

portunity for antifeminists (both women and men) to dismiss feminist concerns--and to accuse women pursuing questions of gender inequality within the movement of disloyalty. According to Roth, this atmosphere required of white feminists that they frame feminist activism as a superior form of epic theory (she does not use this term, but its applicability to this context is clear; see, e.g., p. 188). The Euro-American movement's analysis of women as a subordinated sex-class, whose primary interest in resisting gender hierarchy subsumed racial and class differences between women, flowed from this circumstance.

African-American feminists faced a different set of contingencies. With the rise of Black Power, "the community base for [African-American] women's participation" in the radical black freedom struggle "eroded as the movement momentum left the South" (p. 82). The "strongly ... masculinist discourse and practice" of black nationalists exhorted women to relinquish activism in favor of reproductive labor in the home (p. 84)--a sentiment exacerbated by the appearance, in 1965, of the Moynihan Report, which claimed to detect in black families a pathological "matriarchy" rooted in the emasculation of African-American men during slavery. Black feminists rejected both the racism and sexism of the Report and nationalists' exhortation to reclaim what feminists regarded as a spurious "tradition," arguing that the freedom struggle could succeed only if it fully mobilized women's capacities as leaders and thinkers. By 1971, they reconceived the black freedom struggle. The liberation of black woman had to become the highest and first priority of the movement. Because she occupied the social location at the intersection of racial, gender, and class oppression, the liberation of all other oppressed people could follow (p. 91). Roth terms this approach "the vanguard center." Thus, black women's separate road to feminism lay rooted not in a categorical hostility to white women's liberation (a charge that Roth characterizes as "greatly exaggerated" [p. 99]), but in the irreconcilable clash

between white feminists' claim of the primacy of woman-identification over race and class, and black feminists' insistence on the inseparability of those forms of oppression, grounded as it was both in personal experience and in the contingencies of intramovement antifeminist backlash.

At first glance, many of the characteristics of Chicana feminism seem to run closely parallel to the thought and activism of African-American feminists. Yet Roth's attention to the contingencies of the movement's emergence once again succeeds in identifying critical differences that set Chicana feminists on a "separate road." She points to the distinctive racialization process endured by people of Mexican descent as an important historical precondition that shaped the Chicano movement (pp. 132-138).^[3] As a consequence of the common reduction of "the race problem" to a white-black binary, the Moynihan Report did not single out the Mexican-American family as an incubator of social pathology. Thus, "Chicana feminists were not hampered" in their efforts "by the necessity of challenging a government-sponsored attack on their community" (p. 132). Indeed, one of the central tenets of Chicana feminism was the need to reorganize the family around the requirements of the racial and ethnic struggle; this led not so much to the development of a Chicana version of the "vanguard center" as to an emphasis on the historical and cultural precedents for Mexican-American women's political activism (pp. 159-166). Another factor arising from historical circumstances was the absence of a separate system of Mexican-American universities; first-generation college students encountered "settings where Chicanas and Chicanos were vastly outnumbered by whites" (p. 132). These factors prompted Chicanas to identify "a greater political presence in the wider Chicano movement" as their primary goal, to be achieved "both by organizing in autonomous groups and in women's caucuses within mixed Chicano organizations" (p. 130). This priority led not only to distance between Chicana and Euro-American feminist col-

lectives, but also to only occasional cooperation with African American feminists as well.

Roth's project is an ambitious one. She sets for herself the challenge of problematizing the question of the reference group of feminists of color, presenting the concise history of the formation of three distinct movements, and addressing the political economy of American radicalism as a factor in the formation of these three movements—all within the sharply delimited space of a single monograph. Yet, it should be clear that she has succeeded in crafting a persuasive and thought-provoking argument. Her achievement should inspire historians of the second wave to address the histories of Chicana and African-American feminism in greater depth, and to move beyond the tendency to regard the emergence of multiple movements as *only* a reaction to white feminists' insensitivity to racial and class differences. The complex interactions between multiple forms of inequality means that it "would have been difficult for feminists from different racial/ethnic communities to mobilize together on the basis of women as disadvantaged vis-a-vis men. Scholarship based on the assumption that they should have ... misses the intersectional quality of oppressions, and places too much emphasis on the ability of structure to directly compel activism" (p. 46). Furthermore, Roth's insight that "prior [mixed-gender] movements gift[ed] feminists with skills and contacts, while burdening them with loyalties to an existing community and potential constraints on feminist activity" should prompt historians to revisit existing accounts of feminists breaking away from the Left. Roth argues that the breakaway took longer, in structural terms, than do other accounts. I would suggest that, in ideological and theoretical terms, separation from the Left remained incomplete throughout the 1970s. ^[4] In order to make that break as complete as some (but only some, and of these, mostly Euro-American) feminists wanted it to be, they had to forge alternatives to the Marxist formulation of the "woman question," as well as alternatives to

functionalist sociology's theorization of gender as sex role.[5]

If Roth chose not to develop this argument, it is partly because she focuses on the obstacles to be overcome by feminists organizing within the context of "parent" movements. Productive as it is, this focus does not succeed in framing woman-identification as the sea-change in perspective that it was, one brought about by Euro-American lesbian-feminist dramatization of heterosexism within their movement, and the nearly simultaneous wave of consciousness-raising on sexual violence in 1970-1971. This sea-change is significant to Roth's project, because, as she recognizes, its turbulence influenced the entire intermovement political field within which women of color also labored. If the source of this turbulence does not stand out as boldly as it might in Roth's account of white feminism, it is also because she employs the terminology of sex-role theory (though she prefers the updated form, *gender roles*) to represent the historical agency of feminists who were whittling away at its foundations well before they discarded its terminology. An earlier generation of historians of women only gradually untangled themselves from "separate spheres" terminology, recognizing it as "a trope, employed by people in the past to characterize power relations for which they had no other words ... and by historians in our own times as they groped for a device that might ... impose ... analytical order on the anarchy of inherited evidence, the better to comprehend the world in which we live." [6] Along with many other scholars today, Roth finds herself in the same position with regard to the terminology of "roles"—all the more poignantly so because, as was not the case for students of "separate spheres," many of the agents of Roth's historical past still live in the scholarly present.[7]

Discussion of the limitations imposed by a weak link in the interpretive chain should not, however, obscure the strength of the other links that Roth has fashioned. Her capacity to prob-

lematize widely accepted approaches to the study of the second wave enables us to see that field anew. After this, the currently accepted answers to the question of why organizationally distinct feminisms took shape in the 1960s and 1970s will not entirely suffice. Even those who ultimately do not accept Roth's interpretation of separate organizations as separate movements will have to come to terms with her cogent critique of the single-movement hypothesis.

Notes

[1]. Relative-deprivation theory holds that individuals who exceed the minimum requirements of subsistence may nevertheless perceive themselves as deprived relative to members of another social group exhibiting similar attributes but receiving greater rewards. James A. Davis systematized the concept in "A Formal Interpretation of the Theory of Relative Deprivation," *Sociometry* 22, no. 4 (December 1959): pp. 280-296. Social scientists seeking to explain the emergence of "second-wave" feminism pointed to women's expanding employment opportunities in the post-World War II era, positing that these raised women's expectations for concomitant political and social equality with their male peers. Frustration of those expectations, they argued, prompted the formation of both liberal and radical feminist movements. See, for example, Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay, 1975), pp. 15-17.

[2]. See Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," *American Political Science Review* 63 (1967): pp. 1062-1082.

[3]. For a systematic analysis of racialization in the American West, see Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Almaguer argues that as a consequence of the legacy of slavery, segregation, and sectional rivalries between North and South, white Americans generally conceive of

race as a black-white binary (the "biracial model"), even though the conquest of the Southwest required invention of a new "multiracial model" to legitimize white dominance in the region in the late-nineteenth century. In the new model, whites, Latinos, Asians, African Americans, and Native Americans occupied distinct niches in a multilevel hierarchy of race; "Spanish colonization ... had conferred upon Mexicans a 'white' racial status, Christian ancestry, a romance language, European somatic features, and a formidable ruling elite that contested 'Yankee' depredations." As a result, "Mexicans, particularly the Californio elite, were ... generally perceived as worthy of at least partial integration and assimilation into the new social order" (p. 4).

[4]. On "breaking away from the Left," see the chapter of that name in Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Ruth Rosen hints at the possibility of a more complex account of the "breakaway" in a similarly titled chapter in *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), especially at pp. 138-140.

[5]. For a useful overview of the attempts by socialist feminists first to reconcile feminism with Marxism, and then to invent a new materialist framework, see Anthony McMahon, *Taking Care of Men: Sexual Politics in the Public Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 39-42.

[6]. Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): p. 39.

[7]. For an activist perspective on the inadequacies of sex-role theory, see Brooke [Williams], "What's Wrong with Sex-Role Theory," in *Feminist Revolution (New Paltz, N.Y.: Redstockings, 1975), p. 80; reprinted in Feminist Revolution: An Abridged Edition with Additional Writings (New*

*York: Random House, 1978), p. 84. For a scholarly critique that echoes Williams' key points, see Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, "Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change, ed. Michael Kaufman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 165-168; and the early chapters of R. W. Connell, Masculinities_ (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).**

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