Review Essay

Feminist afterlives: The defenses and dead ends of revisionist history

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Why we lost the sex wars: Sexual freedom in the #MeToo era

Lorna Bracewell

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We are not born submissive: How patriarchy shapes women's lives

Manon Garcia

Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, 234 pp., ISBN: 978-0-691-20182-5

Of the many vexing political questions that haunt feminists in the twenty-first century, one of the most difficult is also one of the most persistent: why are feminist theory and activism so susceptible to the appropriative co-optation of its best ideas? The question has undeniably contemporary motivations, given that in the last several years alone, feminist vocabularies have been deployed, very much against their own grain, to defend policing in the face of an abolitionist uprising, to denigrate and delegitimize trans women and their political claims, to explain away careening economic inequality, and to justify the extension of religious freedoms that dramatically undermine fragile gains for sexual freedom. As Lorna Bracewell and Manon Garcia show in a pair of books that return to previous moments in feminist theory and activism, uncertainty about how best to defend feminism against its would-be co-opters has been a perennial problem: from anti-feminist women and midcentury reactionary conservatives during the post-war era to liberal legal scholars in the 1980s, Bracewell and Garcia reveal a wide range of strategies that have threatened to appropriate feminist concerns for their own ends.

But these books waste no time bemoaning co-optation as evidence of feminists', or feminism's, political ineffectuality. As Bracewell rightly argues in her introduction, perennial hand wringing about how feminism has failed to live up to its promises has led more than one generation of scholars to adopt reductive narratives – such as the 'catfight' narrative that often frames the so-called sex wars of the 1980s – that both fail to take seriously the political arguments that feminists have developed and, worse still, underestimate the perniciously misogynistic ways that mainstream audiences misappropriate feminist claims in order to make them

amenable to existing structures and hierarchies. In refocusing our attention on the complexity of co-optation, these are books that seek to set the record straight about the range of feminist defenses that are available to us today. Where Bracewell turns to the sex wars of the 1980s to explore how both antipornography and sex-radical feminists interacted with liberal interlocutors who fundamentally undermined feminist claims about sexual freedom, Garcia returns to Simone de Beauvoir to explore how she upended the durable perception of women as passively submissive. In turning to these disparate political and disciplinary moments in feminist history, the books suggest that the contexts in which our ideas circulate can complicate – and sometimes altogether undermine – feminist efforts to realize women's liberation.

Where the books differ is in their view of what these questions mean for politics, which is in some ways as telling as the questions themselves. For her part, Garcia argues that the durability of women's oppression is an effect not only of men's domination, but also in no small part of women's submission. To understand the concept 'submission' with the kind of philosophical rigor she argues it deserves, Garcia frames the book in terms of an impasse between philosophers of the essentialist 'eternal feminine,' who argue that submission is an inherently feminine trait, on the one hand, and philosophers who see submission as a moral vice, on the other. For Garcia, these two strands of philosophical thinking pose a formidable problem for understanding women's freedom, since their actions are both circumscribed by assumptions about their inherently submissive nature and excluded from power on those same grounds. At the same time, however, Garcia is not satisfied with the idea that women's submission is wholly a social construct: women *do* submit, she argues, either to individual men in asymmetrical sexual and emotional relationships, or by failing or refusing to become feminists.

In the midst of this impasse enters Garcia's Beauvoir, who gives us the tools to understand the seeming paradox of women's submission by adapting the phenomenological method to feminist ends. In standard phenomenological accounts of power, and especially those developed by existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, submission – the willing relinquishing of one's freedom – is a paradigmatic form of bad faith that tempts all subjects at one time or another. However, Garcia shows that for Beauvoir, women encounter a unique situation: not only are they tempted in the usual ways to abdicate their freedom, but their whole experience of the world teaches, even *demand*s, that they accede to these temptations. Thus, in Garcia's words,

Like men, women are torn between the will to project themselves onto the world and the temptation to abdicate. Unlike men, however, submission is socially prescribed to women. There are therefore possible advantages for them in submitting ... In the patriarchal context, woman's situation thus

alters the equilibrium between costs and benefits of freedom and makes freedom much more costly for women than for men. (p. 193)

Garcia's Beauvoir, thus, reveals that the challenges for an emancipatory feminist politics are steeper than we often imagine. In a world structured to offer women pleasure, love, and praise in return for their submission, women's very desire for freedom is truncated, co-opted, and narrowed in ways that sustain the status quo. Emancipation will require both confronting this reality and nonetheless persisting in the task of choosing freedom, as Garcia argues Beauvoir herself did: 'In writing *The Second Sex*,' she argues, 'Beauvoir manifests the possibility for a woman to throw herself into such and ambitious project, in this autonomous work that guarantees freedom. In that regard, she breaks the vicious cycle of women's oppression' (p. 203).

Puzzlingly, though, Garcia stops short of putting Beauvoir's analysis in any sort of conversation with the complex history of feminist politics and theory after 1949. In this way, *We are Not Born Submissive* sidesteps the very questions that give rise to the contemporary study of submission in the first place: nowhere does the book address feminists' remarkable attempts to undertake 'autonomous work that guarantees freedom' and to inaugurate political communities that ensure the possibility of women's *collective* freedom, which largely occurred, of course, after *The Second Sex* appeared. And nowhere does it address the co-optation, appropriation, and narrowing of those very projects of freedom, including a vast conservative backlash against feminist claims and their appropriation by neoliberal narratives of inclusion that would contextualize a contemporary interest in how and why submission interacts with today's world. Indeed, Garcia seems to suggest that if only feminists had more fully digested Beauvoir's philosophy in 1949, we would not have struggled so deeply with the political problems of enacting freedom from 1968 to the present.

Perhaps this is not Garcia's intention. But if she (and Beauvoir) is right that an adequate understanding of power would involve how the world militates against women's freedom in a structured way over time, then it seems an incredible overstatement to suggest that Beauvoir, in writing a single intervention into western philosophy in 1949, 'manifests' a model of freedom that can shape an emancipatory feminism in the present. Beauvoir understood that submission is something accomplished through repeated, consistent, and collective undermining of women's autonomous choices over the course of both a women's own lifetime and across generations; its power is in the granular refusals and misappropriations of women's actions over time, creating a 'situation' in which undertaking freedom becomes not only less successful but less imaginable. Without taking into account the afterlives of *The Second Sex* – or any other feminist manifestations of freedom – in the deeply divisive decades since its publication, Garcia misses perhaps the most important insight of Beauvoir's writing: that women's oppression is not

characterized by a dearth of free actions on the part individual women but by the exhaustion and frustration that comes with the world's constant undermining of their free actions.

By contrast, it is on precisely these grounds – the careful analysis of how feminist ‘manifestations’ of freedom have been frustrated by complex forces that exceed the failures of individual women – that Bracewell stakes her intervention. In her analysis of the so-called ‘sex wars’ of the 1980s, Bracewell takes up the afterlife of a period of feminist freedom seeking that has not only been subjected to a massive conservative backlash but also to more complex forms of undermining that even feminists themselves have largely failed to fully digest. The sex wars, Bracewell argues, ‘tend to be remembered as a straightforward clash between sex-negative feminists concerned primarily with danger on one side and sex-positive feminists concerned primarily with sexual pleasure on the other’ (p. 5). Bracewell’s task is to expand our thinking about the range of arguments on offer by these feminists, as well as the political responses that have accompanied them over the course of decades. In pursuing this task, she shows that *both* projects, while importantly distinct and, at times, incompatible with one another, were pitched against the utter incapacity of liberal political thinking to adequately conceptualize the range of harms – and, critically for Bracewell, the possibilities for freedom – that lay just under the surface of mainstream, liberal sexual politics.

The book is an invitation to revisit ideas that, for reasons that are historical rather than conceptual, have been ‘left behind’ in feminist politics, and to think critically about the ways that the sex wars were ‘won’ on strategic alliances rather than on moral correctness. Bracewell gives a particularly generous historical reading, for example, to Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, whose work on notorious antipornography statutes has rendered them unwelcome interlocutors in most contemporary feminist debates. Critically, though, even as she calls for renewed attention to the range of thinkers involved in the sex wars, Bracewell claims neither to defend particular feminists on either side of the ‘pleasure/danger’ binary nor to offer a ‘solution’ to the political ambivalences that a careful analysis of the period opens up. Instead, she turns toward the question of co-optation and misappropriation much more directly than Garcia by turning attention to the responses that both antipornography and sex-radical feminists elicited in their liberal interlocutors. While she offers a range of ways that feminists have attempted to ‘manifest’ models for sexual freedom, she is attentive to the fact that such claims are always contested, both by other feminists and – more importantly – by those whose investments in the status quo drive them to willfully misconstrue, narrow, or undermine sexual freedom.

For Bracewell, liberalism was far from merely a backdrop for the sex wars; liberal legal scholars were not only active participants in these debates (Bracewell vividly describes encounters between liberals, antipornography feminists, and sex-radical feminists at legal conferences over two decades) but were also deeply

concerned with winnowing both sets of feminist investments – so much so that both antipornography and sex-radical feminisms by the late 1980s had come to look like ‘species of liberalism rather than ... [critical engagements] with it’ (p. 27). This story of co-optation is more than a straightforward ‘revisionist history’; it tells us something profoundly important about the intractability of gender and sex hierarchy as well as the seeming incapacity of feminist theories of liberation to remain committed to their more politically expansive impulses. Bracewell shifts responsibility for these failures away from feminists themselves and instead towards the ‘situation’ in which feminists found themselves in the 1980s; namely, in relation to liberal thinkers who were either unwilling or unable to recognize feminist arguments about sexual freedom as politically transformative, and whose ‘tepid’ engagements with feminist ideas reduced them to narrow legalistic notions like private expression and criminal violence.

Bracewell’s writing is at its strongest when she underlines the gulf between these liberal legal notions and the feminist ideas they undermined and rewrote. On the one hand, she details how liberal conceptions of harm, which criminalize direct violence, diverged sharply from antipornography feminists’ attempts to conceptualize sexual objectification as a new category of harm and to ‘secure for it legal recognition and redress’ (p. 84). Quite unlike the notion that pornography is criminally dangerous when it incites direct violence (an argument Bracewell attributes to liberal jurist Cass Sunstein rather than to feminists themselves), antipornography feminists sought to define pornography ‘not by its prurience or its morally deleterious effects, but by its politics – that is, its contribution to the subordination of women’ (p. 36). That Sunstein’s antipornography liberalism ‘conforms to, as opposed to defies or confounds, conventional liberal notions of harm, liberty, and the public and the private’ (p. 46) by supporting the criminalization and punishment of violent sexual harms is a radical revision of the antipornography line, which in Bracewell’s telling ‘tended to view the carceral state as an extension of the patriarchal rape culture they sought to dismantle’ (p. 182). Similarly, Bracewell’s sex-radical feminists – Gayle Rubin, Patrick Califia, Amber Hollibaugh, and others – ‘believed that the abstract liberal language of “civil rights” ... hindered the cause of sexual liberation’ (p. 113). In their pursuit of a radically expanded framework in which to give meaning to erotic life beyond free speech concerns, the freedom that sex-radical feminists sought ‘vastly exceeded the freedom sought by midcentury civil libertarians’ (p. 116). Indeed, despite their many differences, sex-radical feminists, like antipornography feminists, ‘condemned defenses of sexual behavior rooted in appeals to privacy, rejected individualistic conceptions of sexual identity and freedom, questioned portrayals of (hetero)sexual desire as natural or innate, channeled significant effort into cultivating diverse sexual identities and erotic communities, and demanded a sexual freedom that entailed the destruction of what they theorized as a system of sexual oppression’ (pp. 116–117).

Nevertheless, these models for sexual freedom, which sought to transcend a situation in which gendered and sexual hierarchies were politically obscured by liberalism's founding assumptions, were met with a range of appropriative responses that rendered their frameworks compatible with, rather than transformative of, liberalism itself. For Bracewell, feminism's failure to fundamentally transform the underlying conceptual framework of liberal democracy in the late twentieth century is not as much a feminist problem as it is a *liberal* problem, in that it reveals the granular and iterative ways that liberalism undermines feminist ideas:

[The] feminist critique of pornography, which had emphasized the political character of pornography's harms and pursued remedies that flouted the bounds of traditional First Amendment jurisprudence, was supplanted by a much narrower liberal critique that represented pornography's harms in more conventional terms like 'violence' and 'crime', and pursued remedies that could be obtained within the bounds of long-standing liberal constitutional interpretation. In the case of sex-radical feminism, a project that began as an audacious demand for sexual freedom, which far outstripped anything even the most daring anticensorship liberals had ever envisaged, culminated in a moderately expanded liberal politics of expressive freedom (p. 127).

Ultimately, Bracewell concludes that liberals' failure to conceive of either sexual freedom or sexual harm outside of the narrow constraints of individual expression and criminal harm – and the strategic alliances that some (white) feminists made with liberals – is to blame for the paradoxical participation of feminist ideas in decidedly non-liberatory projects like the carceral state.

How different an account, then, than the one on offer by Garcia in *We are Not Born Submissive*, which poses the problem of anti-feminism as a philosophical rather than a historical question. Part of this vast gulf between the books is disciplinary; where Bracewell's aim is quite clearly to explain how seemingly feminist ideas have come to be included in an oppressive apparatus like the carceral state, Garcia's object is not so much to highlight how feminist ideas, like women themselves, are 'made' to submit to a world that militates against women's freedom as it is to elevate Beauvoir's philosophical interventions in the western canon. Nowhere are these disciplinary differences more apparent than in their treatment of the complex relationship between feminism and racial hierarchy. For example, Garcia devotes only a few short pages to the idea of intersectionality and then sidesteps the framework altogether by claiming that '*The Second Sex* has provided women from around the world a description of womanhood with which they could identify' (p. 108). By contrast, Bracewell concludes *Why We Lost the Sex Wars* by arguing that the 'failures of both white antipornography and white sex-radical feminists to take seriously the challenges offered by their Black and third world

feminist allies during the sex wars ... prepared the way for the liberal appropriations and attenuations' of both critiques of liberalism (p. 128).

This difference is not at all a trivial one. Indeed, Bracewell's argument that a 'monistic focus on the sexual needs, experiences, and desires of white women may have blunted the radicalism of both antipornography feminism and sex-radical feminism, leaving them more vulnerable to liberal co-optation than they otherwise would have been' (p. 178), offers a pointed rebuke to Garcia, who nowhere deals with how race or, for that matter, non-normative sexualities interact with how submission is lived or how we understand it conceptually. As Bracewell so compellingly shows, much of what has happened in feminist theory and politics since *The Second Sex* was published could be viewed as a lesson in the risks feminists incur when they fail to adequately grapple with intersectional realities. Denying or even bracketing these complexities risks the kinds of co-optations that lead, ultimately, to an even more ambivalent form of feminist submission to the liberal status quo – the deployment of feminist ideas in the service of a carceral state – in which feminism's 'ability to address sexual injustice is severely curtailed' at best, and radically rewritten, at worst (p. 198). If we are to resist such co-optations of feminism, Bracewell argues, we 'must look ... toward alternatives in which potent, public, political, and most importantly, anticarceral responses to sexual injustice are at least conceivable' (p. 199). As Bracewell argues, those alternatives, at present, are largely the province of intersectional feminisms; returning to those manifestations of sexual freedom that remind us of our best, most intersectional defenses – rather than to origin stories that stake their claims in philosophical rigor – is the single most valuable weapon in the feminist arsenal.

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