Second Wave: Radical Feminism

Why is it that when you call yourself a feminist, people automatically assume the worst? It turns into an instant debate and you have to defend yourself against being a lesbian or a woman angry at the world and tired of being stuck at home. Many of these off-putting ideas that we have about feminists today come from radical feminists of the second wave women’s movement. The second wave was from 1960 to 1995, and radical feminism was the first new type of feminism within this wave (Wood 73). According to Duplessis and Snitow, radical feminists tend to believe that the “oppression of women is the fundamental form of oppression on which all others are modeled”, and their main goal is to work against this in every way (74). They base many of their protests in highly political areas because their campaign is based on reforming the entire system from the ground up (Firestone lecture).

These women made statements by doing very out of the ordinary things to get people’s attention. This was not the group to join if you were shy and soft spoken. Much of what they do is public demonstrations loaded with controversy and havoc. They are not so welcomed into the public sphere; the government would rather shove them under the rug as a nuisance rather than take care of their wants or address them publicly. Folks in passing would make a mockery of them, too. Their ideas made people nervous. Even today the “unknown” is feared, and these ideas and beliefs are still very much unknown, so people do not want anything to do with it, especially politically. I believe this is why they had to do such outrageous things, so they were forced to be dealt with and recognized. As Boor put it,

“The potential power of public spectacle as socially constitutive is, of course, the primary reason radical feminists targeted the Miss America pageant in 1968, to launch
publicly their critique of patriarchy and precisely why their irreverent affront to this purportedly trivial tradition occasioned political ripples of such great consequence” (152-153).

Overall their goal was to attract media attention because all publicity is good publicity, and they accomplished their goal, and then some.

In September of 1968 the Miss America Protest occurred, this is generally accepted as the launch of the second wave of feminism in the United States (Hansich 1). This was done to demonstrate to everyone the standards that men in particular, but women as well, place on the physical attributes of females. Also how women are confined to a strict body image and type that we should all strive to be. Our ideal as women is to be thin, have long flowing hair, and be eloquent and delicate, but most importantly submissive. Or so they say. Dow stated, “feminists charged that Miss America promoted an ideal of women as plastic, doll-like, submissive sex objects who paraded in swimsuits for the pleasure of men” (128). It is no wonder that women did not want to be looked at in this light. Though Van Gelder explains, “in 1968 the mainstream really did take Miss America seriously. The title was one of the highest honors a woman in the United States could achieve outside marriage and motherhood without being accused of being a ball-breaker” (The Truth about Bra Burners). This is why women participated to begin with, not to be seen as sex toys, but to be respected and honored as much as they could be, as women, at that time.

It is important to point out that these radical feminists, though very determined and focused, were not crazy, and there was never actually any “burning of bras” that occurred. An interview in USA Today tells us explicitly “I was there. It never happened,” author Alix Kates Shulman says. She says the protest in Atlantic City marked the first national demonstration of the
movement. "Some of us got inside (the building where the pageant was being held) and unfurled a banner that said 'Women's Liberation' in the balcony. It was on national television. Initially, we had planned to burn some things, but since it was a wooden boardwalk in Atlantic City, we couldn't get a permit to have a fire" (Only the Myth Caught Fire). The fire was not meant to be a fire of rage or insanity, if it was to happen, it was meant to be symbolic of an event that happened just two weeks prior.

Dow mentioned that “the Miss America protest occurred less than two weeks after the tumultuous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and given that the majority of the members of New York Radical Women were or had been aligned with civil rights, antiwar, and New Left movement groups, Van Gelder’s analogy to the burnings of draft cards and flags was not out of place (131). An article in Newsweek also alludes to the similarities that were being drawn on with the fire “that myth (of bra burning) began when a sympathetic female New York Post reporter thought that a juicy first line conjuring up comparisons to burning draft cards might get more attention for the event” (It’s Ms. America To You).

What actually happened was the women who were there had a “Freedom Trashcan” and they brought “typical female” items such as high heeled shoes, girdles, mops, brooms, kitchen rags, and of course bras to throw into this trash can, but none of these objects were ever set ablaze. There were some banners held up as well, but all they were doing was throwing things away and marching around a trashcan. Was it odd, yes, but if it was effective, they were unsure. They apparently had few expectations from this demonstration. Little did they know it would still be getting analyzed and discussed decades later. The Dallas Morning News explained why this exhibition was so effective; “it took the Miss America pageant, a cultural touchstone watched on TV by two-thirds of U.S. households, to bring Women's Liberation into the country's
living rooms” (1968: A Time to Redefine Women). Low and behold, they were right on the money. This event gave the women just the right amount of attention and leverage they needed to bring awareness to the cause they so passionately believed in. As Eva Burrows so brilliantly put it “We have to be careful in this era of radical feminism, not to emphasize an equality of the sexes that leads women to imitate men to prove their equality. To be equal does not mean you have to be the same” (134).

Although at some point it got to critiquing the participants themselves, that was never the idea. This is where they got a little off course. The objective was to challenge the mainstream way of thinking, to “direct the attention of the nation specifically toward sexist beauty ideals and social expectations” (Kreydatus 490). But it turned into more of a show for some rather than becoming a catalyst in the development of women’s rights. Hanisch reveals, “The women who did the anti-woman stuff at the Miss America Pageant were the ones who were screaming for action without theory. The members of one group want to set up a private daycare center without any real analysis of what could be done to make it better for little girls, much less any analysis of how that center hastens the revolution” (5). Though at some point along the way it seems that some of the ladies lost sight of what the ultimate aspiration was, they were all there with good intentions. “We all saw how it related to our lives, we felt it was a good action, there were things wrong with the action, but the basic idea was there” (Hanisch 5).

This could have gone over better if there was a little less drama. I know I am not getting the story straight from the horses mouth, and I know the media makes everything much more dramatic than it actually is anyway, I feel like these radical feminists could always tone it down a notch to make them more socially acceptable on the whole. It may take a little more effort on their part if their actions are not so bold but if they say and do the right things they could have
been more received within their communities and in the country. They also could have gone into it with more of a plan. Understanding that they did not expect this event to be as big as it got to be helps me give them a break, but they knew either way that it would get some attention, whether it be just on the street where they were or nationally as news. They as far as I am concerned, did not know what they were getting themselves into in this scenario and were not as prepared as they should have been for all of the media interest they received. Another thing they could have done to get attention was to talk directly to the media to clear up any misconceptions and false ideas that the people had about them. The bra burning for example, one woman spoke to the Dallas Morning News about it and joked, "I remember most of us said we wouldn't burn our bras -- we needed the support," which is a great way to go about things. People are always more receptive to ideas if you are willing to be humorous about them.

Personally, the reason I have stayed away from women’s studies and feminism for so long is not because I do not believe in the ideas, but because I did not know what those ideas were. I was also not willing or wanting to investigate because of the huge negative stigma that is attached to it. If these women who are so willing and able to put themselves out there like that and draw such attention to themselves would simply speak about these ideas rather than yelling it or chanting it so that they look unapproachable, I think it would be more beneficial for them in recruiting members to join their cause.

Overall, I think that these women working for what they believe in is great. Anyone who is so enthusiastic about something should do just that. I understand that these women define themselves as “radical,” which by definition according to Webster’s Dictionary means, associated with political views, practices, and policies of extreme. Though if they toned it down and were willing to talk about the subject in lighter terms, even if what they are speaking of is a
serious subject, I think more people would listen and be more responsive to what they have to say. Feminists are not bad people, they are not crazy people, they are not man hating lesbians, they do not have hairy armpits, they are purely women who want to be treated as equals. And why shouldn’t we be? I think that everyone today can agree with a statement made by Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler, “feminism is the radical notion that women are people” (157), simple as that.
Works Cited


Kreydatus, Beth. “Confronting the “Bra-Burners:” Teaching radical feminism with a case study.” The History Teacher 41. 2008: 489-504.


