

The Force of Feminisms

By Johanna Lenne-Cornuez

This collective book, which studies feminisms through the prism of intersectionality and gender, recalls the dynamism of struggles from the Revolution through to current debates, for instance around single-sex spaces and means of action.

About: Bibia Pavard, Florence Rochefort and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Nous libérez pas, on s'en charge. Une histoire des féminismes de 1789 à nos jours*, Paris, La Découverte, 2020. 750 p., € 25.

Questioning feminist struggles based on our present is the ambition of the history written by Bibia Pavard, Florence Rochefort, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel. This beautiful book, including facsimiles in color and many transcriptions of important texts, focuses the narrative into four periods: the emergence of feminist struggles (1789–1871); the conquest of civil and political rights (1871–1944); the feminist revival centered on the question of the body (1945–1981); and contemporary feminisms (1981–2020). The surprise in this categorizing comes from the authors' desire to pursue the narrative up to its most recent developments.

The Plural of Feminism

Feminism is plural owing to its currents (radical, moderate, secular, Christian, reformist, universalist, differentialist, decolonialist, etc.). It is also plural thanks to the decentering of the gaze operated by the authors: feminisms from beyond the Parisian

scene, in France's overseas territories and former colonies. It is especially plural owing to the diversity of the women who have led these struggles.

Any book can be read as a homage, insofar as it lists the portraits of the women who are the subjects of this history, its key icons, but also the forgotten figures who must be recovered and remembered. History itself, by lending an ear only to certain struggles to the detriment of others, has participated in eliding many dominations women have sustained: political and civil, but also geographic, social, sexual, and racial.

However, beyond the plurality asserted by its subtitle, the book is far from widening the gaps or prolonging the scandalized oppositions that most often serve to discredit movements of revolt. Unity is achieved primarily in the negative: all of these struggles encounter hostile reactions. The anti-feminist backlash is never far away: feminism is constructed and deconstructed in terms of the reactions it elicits.

But unity must never be understood in a purely reactive way. Without subsuming feminisms under an overly general category, the unity of the struggle is conferred to it by the women who make it their own, refusing to allow men to think and act in their stead, taking charge of the discourse and struggle, within a dynamic that is that of emancipation. To the end, "the feminist subject 'women' resists, including its own rifts" (p. 485).

The Prism of Intersectionality

The principle of sociohistory, according to the authors, is "to place oneself within a problematic inspired by the stakes of the present, with a view to expressing its genealogy." (p. 6). The main guideline of the book is that of intersectionality. This is the charge against any relationship of domination that is emphasized, from the outset of feminist struggles. The interrelationship of the various forms of domination denounced first take on the form of an analogy: Black slavery is compared to the subjugation of women (p. 23).

Next, we see a convergence of struggles appear—for example among many others, a "proletarian feminism" (p. 45), Jeanne Deroin's visionary "intersectional" struggle in 1848 (p. 66), a feminist press in the West Indies in the interwar period (p. 169), the Beauvoirian commitment to anticolonial struggles (p. 246), the coordination

of Black women from 1976 on contributing to the “birth of an intersectional feminism combining gender, race, and class” (p. 333), or Afro-feminism at the turn of the twenty-first century (p. 438). Ultimately, we are witnessing a theorization of the concept of intersectionality that integrates race, class, gender, and sexualities, and call for a “new historical narrative” (p. 444).

While the authors insist on highlighting the convergences and refuse to confine themselves to a “class struggle” or a “race struggle” that would divide women—for instance, concerning the “bourgeoise” status of Jane Misme in 1914—they never shy away from the tensions that traverse the history of the convergence of struggles. For a long time, the question of equality was at best deferred, most often disqualified, within the very heart of insurrectional or progressive movements—as the Proudhonian legacy and unionism divisions show.

Not only did the intersection of struggles encounter myriad hostilities, but it ran the risk of dissolving the “differential involvement of women” within a movement that encompasses them all (p. 79). Moreover, the tensions are internal to the feminist struggles themselves. The figure of Hubertine Auclert is representative of such tensions. Without detours, she links the struggle against the “privileges of sex” to that of the “privileges of class” (p. 109); but, when faced with political divisions, she dissociated herself from revolutionary struggles, “the battle of the sexes predominates for her over class struggle.” In addition, the authors subtly restore the ambivalence of her “colonial feminism” (p. 115).

It is particularly in terms of the contemporary period that the authors excel at conveying the tensions between an institutionalized feminism and a radical feminism, or the contrasted positions of feminists regarding secularism, allowing glimpses, however, of their affinities with the denunciation of “mythologies of republican universalism” by North American historian Joan Scott, and dismissing the feminism without “contextualization or nuances” of Élisabeth Badinter.

The Prism of Gender

The second guideline of this sociohistory is that of the critique of gender norms. There too, it is a matter of revealing the dominant prejudices, including within progressive movements that feminist affirmations attempt to disrupt—the “gender

ideology of the triumphant Republic” or the “reaffirmation of the gender order” after World War II.

“Feminisms are always pioneering when it comes to thinking and proposing a more egalitarian society within the field of gender” (p. 130), for which Madeleine Pelletier was one of the first thinkers. The authors support the usefulness of the distinction between “a moderate feminism,” which defends equality while extending a traditional conception of the family and of femininity, and a “radical feminism,” which places “a critical position regarding gender” at the core of its analysis (p. 131). This dividing line enables them to compare and contrast “lingerie feminism,” reconciling activism and codes of feminine seduction with the refusal of any sign of femininity advocated by certain figures of La Belle Époque, the opposition from the materialist movement to the differentialist and ecofeminist movements, or that of the feminism advocating the abolition of prostitution versus the “pro-sex” feminism represented by Virginie Despentes.

The book gives a central role to the pioneers of the deconstruction of female essence (Beauvoir, p. 243), the “queer evolutions” of the movement (Wittig, p. 330), or the introduction of queer theory in France (Bourcier, p. 399). While returning to the origins of the recurrent debate between those that support that only the oppressed can theorize their oppression and those favorable to the opening of university institutions to these questions—a debate present as of the *Partisans* issue in 1970—the authors defend the consolidation of the institutionalization of feminist studies (p. 377).

Non-Diverse Spaces and Means of Expression

The ambition of renewing the history of feminisms by reexamining it based on current questions proves particularly fertile on two counts. The question of non-diverse spaces that has given rise to the most extreme positions, particularly during workshops reserved for Black women at the Université Paris VIII, is enlightened by the genealogy this affirmation was based on.

From the Saint Simonian newspapers enabling the unity of an “us, women” to be affirmed (p. 45) to the non-diversity of the Union des femmes socialistes created in 1880 (p. 110), from Marguerite Durant’s *La Fronde* newspaper in the early twentieth century to non-diversity becoming an “identificatory trait” of the Women’s Liberation

Movement after May '68, it is always the need to liberate speech that is at stake. Whereas, in the 1990s, non-diversity is deemed *passé*, its usefulness is reasserted by collectives such as Mwasi, which does not preclude aspirations for unity, as with the demonstrations organized by #NousToutes.

Since social networks and the #MeToo moment have revived the question of the relationship between feminism and communication, the attention paid to means of expression and terminological evolution have become of particular interest. From the retrospective descriptor of 1789 feminists to the changing of the meaning of “knitters,” to the verve of little-known feminist figures such as Léonie Rouzade to the “feminist” neologism invented by the misogynist son of Dumas, from the annunciative novelists of the literary *négritude* movement such as Suzanne Lacascade and Paulette Nardal, to the militant Algerian writers under a colonial context, from the difficulties of introducing the queer notion or the concept of gender to the transformation of the term “intersectionality” into an adjective and to the emergence of the term “*racisé*” (racialized), to the current work of redefinition of the notions of harassment and femicide, language and expression are an integral part of this history.

“History is a battleground in itself,” wrote Christine Delphy in 1980 (quoted on p. 352). She feared that the history of the feminist movement would be forgotten, as well as the calling into question of some of its principles, owing to their incomprehension. The genealogical effort pursued in this book fights in a salutary manner against an amnesia whose effect is to exacerbate tensions and weaken movements of emancipation.

However, a lack of theorization of the promised genealogy is to be regretted. While we understand the desire to “not conclude” a history that is still being written (p. 484), the very short introduction does not suffice to give the reader a conceptualization of the chosen prisms, nor a sufficiently precise view of a sociohistory that announces its preference for “avoiding the metaphor of waves” (p. 9), nevertheless reaffirmed as a “temporal marker” and an “identity-based” one (p. 470). There is however no doubt that the book will be useful and stimulating for students of both sexes, to whom it is addressed.

First published on laviedesidees.fr, on 7 December 2020.
Translated from the French by Anna Knight with the support of the Institut français.
Published in *booksandideas*, on 6 October 2021.