


BOOK REVIEW

Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era.
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In *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*, Lorna N. Bracewell unearths forgotten complexities in feminist debates over sex and sexuality during the 1970s and 1980s. Centrally, the book aims to challenge the reductive “catfight” narrative that portrays these debates as a “straightforward, two-sided, and wholly internecine squabble among women” (5). Against this view, Bracewell contends that both supposed combatants in the sex wars—antipornography feminists concerned with sexual violence and sex radicals seeking polymorphously perverse forms of sexual liberation—were transformed by their engagements with liberalism.¹ Despite an initially critical or even hostile orientation toward liberalism, Bracewell contends, antipornography and sex-radical feminists’ sophisticated and strategic alliances with liberals ultimately gave way to co-optation, producing the narrow spectrum of feminist views on sexuality that remain hegemonic today. By highlighting the role of liberals and other participants who did not fit cleanly into a sex-positive/sex-negative binary, Bracewell demonstrates that there were more than two sides involved in second-wave feminist contestation over sex and sexuality. Most notably, she draws attention to the contributions of Black and Third World feminists like Alice Walker, Mirtha Quintanales, Frances Beale, and Chela Sandoval. Correcting previous accounts that neglected or homogenized the views of feminists of color, Bracewell analyzes how a shared commitment to intersectionality connects the work of feminist lesbians of color—including Audre Lorde, Tina Portillo, and Cherríe Moraga—despite their substantively diverse views on issues like pornography and sadomasochism. The result is a thorough, thoughtful account of the multiple and evolving constellations of perspectives and interactions that composed the so-called Sex Wars.

¹ Bracewell defines liberalism as a political philosophical tradition rooted in the ideas of thinkers like John Locke and John Stuart Mill that promotes limited government, the rule of law, and individual rights and liberties (e.g., freedom of speech, privacy, due process, formal equality) (4, 14).

Chapter 1 excavates antipornography feminists' critiques of liberalism and antagonistic exchanges with liberals from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, including a surprising but convincing section on antipornography feminist influences in Carole Pateman's critique of social contract theory. Chapter 2 details the mid-1980s rapprochement between antipornography feminism and an emerging antipornography liberalism represented by thinkers like Cass Sunstein. In Bracewell's account, this convergence paved the way for increasingly punitive and carceral feminist responses to problems like sexual assault and violence against women. Chapter 3 explores the shockingly expansive vision of sex-radical feminists and their alignment with liberal civil liberties advocates against the MacKinnon-Dworkin antipornography ordinance. Chapter 4 documents the marginalization of women of color within mainstream feminist spaces during the Sex Wars, while recovering their nonetheless intellectually vital contributions to feminist theories of sexuality. One of the most compelling examples concerns Cherríe Moraga's involvement with the infamous 1982 Barnard Conference and the accompanying activist/literary Speak Out. The book bears witness to Moraga's account of how women of color at these events faced harassment, isolation, exploitation, and deception by white feminists in both camps. In response, Moraga wrote an incisive yet generous and constructive critique of both sides' behavior and theories. In the process, Bracewell demonstrates, Moraga developed a uniquely compelling synthesis of antipornography and sex-radical feminisms grounded in her experiences as a queer Chicana. Finally, the conclusion expounds on the significance of Bracewell's counter-history for contemporary feminism.

While there is much to appreciate about *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*, it is not without limitations. The narrative parallel between liberalism's relationship with antipornography feminism and its relationship with sex-radical feminism appears strained at times. In Chapter 2, Bracewell convincingly demonstrates that antipornography feminists' trenchant critiques of liberalism faded as they reconciled with the new antipornography liberals. But Chapter 3's case that sex-radical feminists were likewise de-fanged by their encounters with liberalism is more muddled. By Bracewell's own account, these twin relationships with liberalism are not perfect mirrors. For instance, antipornography feminists like Catharine MacKinnon are depicted as engaging in genuine intellectual dialogue with liberals, while sex radicals like Lisa Duggan are portrayed as tactically redirecting liberal legal discourse (99, 120). Bracewell shows how antipornography feminist scholarship embraced liberal concepts and language such as John Stuart Mill's harm principle once violence against women became legible to liberals as a real form of harm, but the converse happens in the case of the sex radicals, whose language and notions of sexual freedom spill over into the legal arguments and public rhetoric of liberal organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (90-91, 122-123). Despite this, Bracewell insists that antipornography and sex-radical feminisms alike were impoverished intellectually and politically by their entanglements with liberalism. Yet, the two sides' lost ideas do not seem equally valuable as resources for articulating contemporary feminist theories of sex and sexuality. While antipornography feminism lost vital tools like MacKinnon's critique of the state, sex-radical feminism's lost ideas

seem rightly consigned to the dustbin of history, as in the case of Pat (now Patrick) Califa's defense of "intergenerational sex" and unrestricted sexual self-expression in the workplace. Furthermore, it is unclear that sex-radical feminism's lost ideas were abandoned *because of* their strategic interventions in liberalism.

Relatedly, focusing on the 1970s and 1980s precludes significant engagement with poststructuralist feminism, especially significant later scholarly interventions into the debates launched during the Sex Wars, such as Drucilla Cornell's (1995) *The Imaginary Domain*. Engaging this scholarly work as well as popular feminism in the early digital era—from responses to the Starr Report in the 1990s to the elaboration of concepts like enthusiastic consent in the feminist blogosphere and related anthologies (e.g., Friedman and Valenti 2008) in the 2000s—might reveal that sex-positive feminists adopted richer notions of consent and more nuanced theories of power that rightly overruled arguments like Califa's. Attending to these aftershocks of the Sex Wars might complicate the conclusion's critique of movements like #MeToo and SlutWalk, even while strengthening the book's central argument against liberalism. Of course, it is to Bracewell's credit that this criticism amounts to calling for a sequel!

References

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- Friedman, Jaclyn, and Jessica Valenti, eds. 2008. *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World without Rape*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.

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