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Re-presenting Feminisms: Past, Present, and Future

Catherine Harnois

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Abstract

In this article I investigate what are thought to be generational differences within contemporary American feminism. I identify three dominant approaches to understanding “third wave” feminism: cohort-based, age-based, and theory-based, and then analyze empirical data to discern the extent of difference within and across “waves” of American feminism, using each of these approaches. Drawing from a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, I argue that third wave feminism might be better understood as an identity, rather than a distinct theoretical perspective, age group, or cohort. My findings suggest that feminists of all ages share many important aspects of their gender and political ideologies. Moreover, my analysis of “third wave” feminist texts and those “second wave” texts that directly speak to generational differences reveals that, in many cases, feminist scholarship itself reproduces the very differences it aims to understand. To the extent that feminist scholarship has failed to question adequately dominant portrayals of “other” feminist generations, and has failed to recognize the diversity of people and perspectives within all feminist generations, feminist scholarship has, in effect, reified distinct, static waves of feminism.

Re-presenting Feminisms: Past, Present, and Future

CATHERINE HARNOIS

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Keywords: third wave / generations / identity

Introduction¹

Despite the recent publication of numerous "third wave" feminist anthologies (e.g., *To Be Real*, *Third Wave Agenda*, *Listen Up! Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, *Colonize This!* and *The Fire this Time*) and a handful of articles that take a more representative approach to analyzing generational differences (e.g., Huddy, Neely, and LaFay 2000; Peltola, Milkie, and Presser 2004; Schnittker, Freese, and Powell 2004), there remains a pressing need for more systematic analyses of the relationship between "second-wave" and "third wave" feminisms. Indeed, a good deal of confusion still remains concerning what is actually meant by second wave and particularly third wave feminism. Using a combination of sociological and feminist research tools, I problematize the notion of distinct "waves" of American feminism. I identify three dominant approaches to understanding "third wave" feminism—cohort-based, age-based, and theory-based—and then analyze empirical data to discern the extent of difference within and across these waves. Drawing from a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, I argue that third wave feminism might



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2715 North Charles Street
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[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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