

Reviews

Lynn S. Chancer. *After the Rise and Stall of American Feminism: Taking Back a Revolution.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019. 245 pages. ISBN 978-0-8047-7437-6.

The result of the U.S. presidential elections 2020 included a feminist victory, also from an intersectional point of view: for the first time in the country's history the elected vice-president was a woman, and a woman with an Indian-Jamaican family history. For anybody who thinks Kamala Harris might in her new position help start a new chapter in American women's rights, Lynn S. Chancer's book *After the Rise and Stall of American Feminism* offers an interesting perspective, both critical and positive.

Being a 1960s child, Harris (who also as a schoolchild participated in Berkeley's comprehensive desegregation plan) actually is approximately as old as the "second and third waves" of the American feminist movement, the topic of Chancer's book. Harris' rise from a middle-class academic background to the top of the political system of the United States may also be read as the rise of American feminism – without the "stall" Chancer is also interested in. The agenda of her book is to find reasons for only partial successes of feminism in the United States, and even provide some ideas for ways to get beyond contemporary dilemmas of the feminist movement. The latter solutions, one could claim, may to some extent apply to feminism globally.

Chancer has written her analysis and critique in the context of Donald Trump's presidential term, and the major offences against American women's and minority rights that political period of time made possible. Nevertheless, this period marked also an era of remarkable resistance, including feminist mass demonstrations around the time of Trump's inauguration and the #MeToo campaign, which again can be seen as one of the impacts American feminism has made globally.

Throughout the book Chancer focuses on both the success of the feminist movement and the "tapering off, plateauing, or political pausing" (especially in this millennium) that has taken place since the 1970s. The

book is structured around four major themes: 1) political, economic, and educational gender equality, 2) liberating sexual and procreational choices, 3) ending violence against women *and* men, and 4) changing sexist imagery. These are also issues on which, Chancer points out, most feminists agree, even though they may disagree on others. Chancer's chosen tactics of writing is to bring up both accomplishments and setbacks concerning the four themes.

The American feminist movement may be credited with a major expansion of public freedoms for women in the U.S. These freedoms include a huge number of women moving into the workforce since the heyday of the "second wave" of the 1960s and 1970s. The wage gap between American women and men has also diminished up until now, being women's eighty cents to men's dollar. Still, professional segregation relying on old gender stereotypes remains a problem, and there are lots of hindrances for educational equality, if one looks at the situation through the lens of intersectionality. As an example of a major issue affecting women's lives, Chancer brings up childcare possibilities, also divided by class and race. Simply put: "The United States' lagging behind other countries in family care benefits may have diluted women's perceived and actual options over time, thereby contributing to inequalities and stalled progress" (67). From a Nordic perspective this sounds very convincing, considering the rather developed state of both family benefits (family leaves, kindergarten system) and universal healthcare in the Nordic countries.

It is an interesting and productive analytical solution of Chancer to deal with "intimate freedoms" of sexuality, gender identification, and reproduction in the same chapter. She strikingly shows that while through the 2000s and 2010s there has been an increase in general tolerance (by heterosexuals) for gay and lesbian rights, there are also many examples of a severe backlash against gender and sexual minorities (even among feminists a faction of trans-exclusionary politics has evolved). And just as alarmingly, the abortion rights have weakened during the past fifty years since the landmark *Roe v. Wade*, to the threshold of illegality. Chancer points out that bringing these problems together may amass collective feminist movement power and help in reducing divisions and separations within the movement. After all, it is personal, intimate, and public freedoms feminists have been committed to.

Chancer puts quite a lot of energy into arguing why feminist politics based on *both commonalities and differences* are worth building and fighting for.

This is a laudable goal, since as Chancer and many other feminist—and queer—researchers have shown time and again, there is still too much work to do for equality and equity, to let the feminist movement implode. Not only tolerating but respecting differences and the ability to be allies and work for solidarity in spite of disagreements have, after all, made it possible for different feminisms to live side by side, like “waves” that continue to affect each other.

In the chapter dealing with the problem of violence, Chancer firmly takes into account the intersectional standpoint positions of men, too. It is delightful that Chancer wants to use the term “masculinity” in a nuanced way: she emphasizes the fact that not all expressions of masculinity are sexist or toxic. In order to describe how cultural mandates bestow both privileges and oppression on men, she coins the concept of *compulsory masculinity*, building on the concept of compulsory heterosexuality launched by the lesbian theorist Adrienne Rich in 1980. The concept aptly describes the pressure boys and men culturally face in their everyday lives. At its worst this pressure leads to sexist, heterosexist, homo- and transphobic behavior and violence towards all genders. I would also have liked to see the writer develop possibilities of *male femininity*, the notion which remains underdeveloped in much of critical studies on men and maleness.

Chancer coins yet another concept, *looksism*, for her argument on changes needed in sexist, agist, and racist media representation. By looksism she refers to a cultural system whereby women are expected to conform to conventional standards of “beauty” or “attractiveness.” Media forms only one of the fora where this system is at work, but a very effective one. Chancer analyzes the correspondence between gender imbalance in who controls the culture industries and how looksism in cultural imagery reflects and re-produces sexism in society. She concludes that the disproportionate focus on women’s looks has changed relatively little in U.S. culture, and gender revolution in this field still waits to be happening.

Chancer’s book covers a broad spectrum of American feminist research and activism from the 1960s on, but some important feminist agents of change are surprisingly left missing. I especially wondered why there is no mention of Gloria Anzaldúa and the Combahee River Collective in the book, which otherwise takes intersectionality as its basic tenet. Now and then Chancer also falls into American exceptionalism, for instance repeating uncritically the idea of “distinctively American distaste for discriminating and treating people unequally on the basis of gender, race, religion,

or sexuality.” All in all, her own strong argumentation fortunately speaks against clichés like this.

Chancer emphasizes the power of education in continuing the feminist revolution. She reminds her readers that in the U.S. academy, millions of undergraduate and graduate students have already been taught by feminist professors, and insists that feminist ideas should be part of the mainstream curricula, from elementary school through all the levels of education. This would strengthen the means toward aims which are good for all genders: equality, intimate freedom and self-determination, and fairer representation.

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Nichole M. Bauer, ed. *Politicking While Female: The Political Lives of Women*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020. 200 pages. ISBN 978-0-8071-7291-0.

This book takes on a crucial aspect of American democracy in the twenty-first century: the revolution of women in politics, or “the pink wave”. While many studies on the current state of American democracy focus on the threats to institutional integrity, the freedom of the press, and the rise of authoritarian movements, this book is based on one of the more hopeful aspects of the current political climate – that a record-breaking 309 female candidates were on the ballot for the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterm election. Furthermore, the #MeToo-movement and particularly the rise of women of color in electoral politics are forcing us not just to question existing knowledge about women in politics, but about the very structure of the political system and our academic approach to understanding it. While the lack of female representation in electoral politics is obvious, the causes are not necessarily easy to pinpoint. This excellent anthology highlights just some of the many aspects of female representation in politics.

Much research on these issues in the last decade focuses on the political system fundamentally being created for and by men. With the exception of the studies such as Deborah Jordan Brooks’ 2013 book *He Runs, She Runs: Why Gender Stereotypes Do Not Harm Women Candidates* (which found that male and female candidates are not treated any differently), research has been focused on the inherent bias, in both politics and culture