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Book Review

After the Rise and Stall of American Feminism: Taking Back a Revolution

By Lynn S. Chancer

Stanford University Press, 2019, 264 Pages. <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=17546>

Reviewer: Nancy Whittier, *Smith College*

Lynn Chancer's *After the Rise and Stall of American Feminism* assesses progress toward major feminist goals and suggests strategies for a resurging feminist movement. The book is organized by issue area, with an initial chapter on debates over feminism followed by chapters on gender equity in politics, education and employment; sexuality, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) and reproductive issues; violence; and media. Chancer accurately views these as the key goals of both past and present feminist organizing and as areas in which social change has been both "massive and incomplete" (p. 14). The overall argument is that progress on most of these issues was relatively rapid from the 1970s until the 1980s or 1990s, but that it has stalled or even reversed in the 2000s and 2010s.

The book's major strength is its comprehensive summary of the state of gender parity in employment, education, political participation, reproductive freedom, gendered violence, and cultural representation. In each case, Chancer diagnoses why progress stalled and suggests strategies for restarting it. In the chapter on women in the public sphere, she shows that gender equity in employment and pay, educational attainment, and political participation grew steadily between the 1960s and 1990s and then essentially plateaued. She convincingly argues that lack of affordable childcare has held women back and should be a priority for ongoing feminist activism. Similarly, the chapter on gendered violence concisely summarizes changing rates of violence against women over time and discusses feminist debates over relying on carceral responses (although little of this rich literature is cited). The chapter explores how constructions of masculinity contribute to men's violence and persuasively calls for cultural transformation of masculinity as a feminist goal.

Chancer consistently emphasizes that gender inequality should be understood in conjunction with racism, class inequality, and other forms of domination. The intersectional analysis is strongest when Chancer identifies issues that cross class and race lines and have a disproportionate impact on the most marginalized. Childcare, for example, holds back all women but has the greatest impact on

low-income women; as a more central feminist goal, it could foster more robust coalitions.

Chancer combines LGBTQ issues and reproductive justice in one chapter, asking why progress toward LGBTQ rights has been rapid while abortion rights and access have declined. In response to conservative religious arguments against abortion, she intriguingly suggests that feminists should abandon defensiveness over abortion's morality and instead frame restrictions on abortion as discrimination against women who do not view it as immoral. Indeed, she points out, religious and personal freedom could link LGBTQ and reproductive justice. Chancer's attempt to explain the divergent paths and outcomes of these two movements would be strengthened by engagement with the literature on the movements (not just the issues themselves) and on the multifactorial processes of policy and cultural change. Her call to bring these two issues together in coalition on the left (as they are on the right) is not unreasonable, but I wished for discussion of existing efforts in this direction, the barriers to this coalition, and how to overcome them.

Chancer begins and ends the book with appeals against divisiveness, and works especially to undermine the longstanding and often-unspoken divide between women who work outside the home and those who do not. Perhaps her most interesting chapter, on debates over feminism, suggests that it is the cultural and structural constructions of gender itself that animate conflicts among feminists and with anti-feminists. She argues that the essential feminist insight that the personal is political has too often led to rigid judgment over relationships with men, appearance, childbirth, parenting, and other aspects of daily life. Chancer posits both conscious and nonconscious processes that can lead activists to "displace anger and resentment" from powerful targets onto fellow feminists who are "more likely to listen" (p. 45). The discussion of feminist divisions draws mainly on research on the 1980s and earlier and on Chancer's personal observations; bringing in more contemporary work on women's movements would have enriched the account. Nevertheless, the attempt to think through how feminism's sometimes-unproductive divisiveness is connected to structural forces around gender is brave and insightful. I especially appreciated how Chancer brought her own experiences and emotions in, from recounting conversations with students to confessing difficulties in finishing the book. Her honest discussion of her fear of critique as a bad feminist of one kind or another will resonate with many readers.

The book is less successful in its assessment of the path of the feminist movement and why it has achieved only partial success. These topics have been extensively studied by sociologists and others, whose work might have enabled Chancer to untangle the multiple causes of feminist gains and losses. The book primarily relies on news coverage and governmental or nonprofit reports rather than scholarly research. Chancer talks about feminist activism mainly in terms of protest, with little discussion of other organizational formations and strategies. And while she emphasizes that feminism continued after the 1990s, the book is not informed by research on contemporary online and offline feminism, contemporary feminisms of color and cross-race and cross-class

coalitions, feminist engagement in other movements like climate change and gun safety, and numerous other important topics integrally connected to Chancer's analyses and hopes for the movement.

Despite its shortcomings, there is much to recommend the book. It speaks to two audiences: feminist activists and supporters (for whom the strategic recommendations are intended) and students and general readers interested in gender (for whom the concise summaries of each issue area are useful). Experienced feminist activists and scholars may be frustrated by the book's disconnection from recent writing and advocacy, but Chancer's creative strategic suggestions should spark conversation and thought.

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