



100 Years of the Nineteenth Amendment: An Appraisal of Women's Political Activism

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190265144.001.0001>

Published: 2018

Online ISBN: 9780190265175

Print ISBN: 9780190265144

CHAPTER

8 “Feminism Means More Than a Changed World. . . . It Means the Creation of a New Consciousness in Women”: Feminism, Consciousness-Raising, and Continuity between the Waves

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190265144.003.0008> Pages 175–197

Published: February 2018

Abstract

Challenging the notion that public actions and political lobbying are the women's movement's main tactics, this chapter traces the history of an extra-institutional form of feminism—narrative-based consciousness-raising—from its inception in the 1910s through its contemporary online expression today. Rather than a product of second-wave feminism, narrative-based consciousness-raising has always been central to the women's movement, as the chapter shows. Narrative-based consciousness-raising as a strategy assumes that, in order to change fundamental societal institutions such as marriage, the nuclear family, and the state, men and women must first change their consciousness about themselves and society. This strategy utilizes personal life stories, or life narratives, to reveal the collective roots of personal problems in order to effect this personal change. The persistence of this strategy through three waves of feminist activism demonstrates the value of raising collective awareness for fighting gendered oppression. The author argues that this continuity is a result of institutionalized knowledge and a response to similar historical circumstances, rather than direct connections between waves.

Keywords: [feminist activism](#), [history of feminism](#), [consciousness-raising](#), [personal is political](#), [institutionalization](#), [continuity](#), [first-wave feminism](#), [second-wave feminism](#)

Subject: [Politics](#), [US Politics](#)

Collection: [Oxford Scholarship Online](#)

Spiritual freedom evolves out of consciousness of powers possessed, a sense of self and opportunity, and it is only out of spiritual freedom that the whole individual evolves.

—ROSE YOUNG, 1914

Agitation for specific freedoms is worthless without the preliminary raising of consciousness necessary to utilize these freedoms fully.

—SHULAMITH FIRESTONE, 1968

The simple act of talking openly about behavioral patterns makes the subconscious conscious. . . . Talking can transform minds, which can transform behaviors, which can transform institutions.

—SHERYL SANDBERG, 2014

p. 176

On a cold evening in February, hundreds of men and women crowded into the nearly packed Great Hall at Cooper Union in New York City. The subject: “What Is Feminism?” The event cycled through twelve speakers, six men and six women, each discussing what feminism meant to them. “Feminism means trouble; trouble means agitation; agitation means movement; movement means life,” said one. “Feminism means revolution, and I am a revolutionist,” said another. Feminism means access to more rights, the group agreed: we deserve the “right to a profession,” the “right to keep our own name,” the “right to ignore fashion,” and the “right to organize.” “We want woman to have the same right as man to experiment with her life,” concluded one speaker. Others spoke about how feminism would lead to more fulfilled lives for women: “We’re sick of being specialized to sex!” one of the women speakers cried. “We intend simply to be ourselves, not just our little female selves, but our whole, big, human selves” (“Talk on Feminism Stirs Great Crowd,” 1914: 2).

With language reminiscent of the freedom-loving activists of the 1960s, this event in fact occurred in 1914, fifty years before the second-wave feminist movement would permanently change American culture. This first event was followed three nights later by an equally well-attended meeting called “A Feminist Symposium.” These two “mass meetings” were arguably the first of their size to center on feminism as a distinct political identity in the United States, and they marked the beginning of a vibrant, but all too brief, feminist uprising.

This feminist movement existed alongside the more widely known, and better documented, suffrage movement. The suffrage movement comfortably fits the popular image of a “real” social movement: it sought a particular political change—the extension of the right to vote to women—and employed tactics common to many social movements: mass demonstrations, pickets, and political lobbying. In general, scholars who research nineteenth- and twentieth-century social movements, including those who study women’s movements, tend to focus their attention on these types of confrontational tactics.

If, however, we shift our attention from the suffrage movement as the center of the first-wave women’s movement, and instead focus on the early feminists who organized the mass meetings detailed above, we get a much different picture of the way women organize. These early-twentieth-century feminists did not march in the streets or lobby politicians; instead, they employed a strategy I call *narrative-based consciousness-raising*. This form of feminism asserts that, in order to change institutions and achieve complete equality, movements must first change the hearts and minds of individuals themselves. Narrative-based consciousness-raising uses personal life stories, or life narratives, to reveal the collective roots of personal problems in order to effect this personal change. More precisely, narrative-based consciousness-raising includes four main tenets: (1) knowledge should be grounded in the everyday experience of women, (2) sharing everyday experiences will expose the roots of personal problems in collective patterns of interpersonal social relationships, (3) this will in turn change women’s and men’s consciousness about their social position, and (4) only then will institutions such as marriage, the nuclear family, and the state change. Unlike suffrage, this strategy focuses on personal issues rather than political issues, and it identifies psychology and interpersonal relations as the driver of inequality, rather than states and political institutions.

In this chapter I trace the history of this form of feminism, from its origins in the 1910s during the first-wave women's movement, up to its most contemporary appearance. This history, I argue, demonstrates that, despite its extra-institutional focus, narrative-based consciousness-raising should be placed alongside demonstrations, picketing, and political lobbying as a staple social movement strategy. The history of narrative-based consciousness-raising challenges our understanding of social movements in three ways. First, it shifts this personal strategy to the center, rather than the periphery, of the women's movement as a whole. Second, it helps us better understand contemporary cases of the women's movement, as well as cases between heightened waves of activism. Scholars have attempted to contort the traditional view of social movements, which focuses on politics and confrontational tactics, in an attempt to convince others that phenomena such as self-help groups, "Lean In Circles," and Twitter hashtags are indeed social movements. The story I tell in this chapter instead suggests that this type of organizing is simply a continuation of a form of feminism that has always been a core strategy of the women's movement. Third, this history reinforces the notion that the women's movement has been a continuous movement over time, and provides an alternative way of understanding social movement continuity. Scholars have sought to explain connections within women's movements over time, proposing concepts such as overlapping generations (Reger 2012) and abeyance structures (Taylor 1989) to explain movement continuity. To these concepts I add another concept: the institutionalization of knowledge. In addition to direct connections between generations of women, women also draw on institutionalized knowledge to form their own organizations and movements, producing a "rolling inertia" that leads to movement continuity over time (see, e.g., Greve and Rao 2012; Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen 2000).

The chapter is structured as follows. I first provide the historical and theoretical background necessary to understand why discussing the continuity of narrative-based consciousness-raising is important. I then describe a group of feminist activists in the first wave who developed this particular form of feminism, followed by a discussion of similar activism in the second wave and third wave. I end by suggesting how institutionalized knowledge, not overlapping generations, may have led to the continuity of this strategy over time.

Women's Movements over Time

Despite multiple challenges (Cobble 2005; Roth 2004; Staggenborg 1996; Taylor 1989), the wave metaphor remains the dominant way of describing the history of the US women's movement. There have been at least three peaks, or waves, of heightened political activity by women, and each wave has focused on different issues and introduced new social movement tactics. The first wave, existing from roughly 1837 to 1920, is commonly known for its focus on woman suffrage and the variety of tactics—including large parades, lobbying, and direct action—used to win suffrage. The first wave went far beyond suffrage, however, addressing the right to an equal education, equal property rights in marriage, equal access to jobs, and legalizing access to birth control (Stansell 2010). The second wave, which began in 1964, is known both for mass-membership organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) and smaller, local organizations that focused on "raising consciousness" and making "the personal, political" (Evans 1980; Ferree and Hess 2000; Rosen 2000). This wave addressed issues around equal pay, sexual harassment in the workplace, and images of women in the media. The third wave, beginning around the 1990s, shifted to a more micropolitics approach, favoring acts of personal expression and the recognition of intersecting identities over political lobbying and mass demonstrations (Reger 2005, 2012).

The woman suffrage movement, culminating in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, is viewed as the center piece of the *first wave* of the women's movement. The first wave began around the mid-1800s, with the first conference discussing women's rights held in 1837 in New York City (Gordon 1996; Giddings 2007) and the first convention devoted to women's rights in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. The Seneca Falls convention focused on a number of rights that at that time were denied to women, including the right to own property, keep their own wages when married, receive an education, and divorce on the same grounds as men, among others (Stanton, Gordon, and Anthony 1997). While the vote eventually became the movement's focal point, the first-wave women's movement as a whole focused on many issues, including reproductive rights, equal pay, and social issues such as marriage, sex, and prostitution. These women worked through established mainstream groups like women's clubs and settlement houses, leftist organizations such as the Socialist Party and the Liberal Club, as well as their own feminist organizations such as Heterodoxy and the Feminist Alliance.

After women won the right to vote, women's movement activity waned, and while women remained active in politics, they were not as publicly visible as the pre-1920s' years (Rupp and Taylor 1987). This changed in the early 1960s when the second-wave women's movement rocketed into the public sphere. This *second wave* was started largely by what scholars call *liberal feminists*—feminists who work for women's equality through political, legal, and customary reforms (Tong 2013). This wing of the second-wave movement, called the *women's rights wing*, consisted of large, mass membership organizations like NOW and the Women's Political Equity League (Evans 1980; Ferree and Hess 2000; Stansell 2010).

An additional wing of the second-wave movement expanded the scope of women's rights activism to include social, cultural, and in particular, interpersonal issues; this wing is commonly called *women's liberation* (Evans 1980; Echols 1989). Women's liberationists were typically younger than those in the women's rights wing, and many had been active in the civil rights and new left movements of the 1960s. Those involved in the women's liberation wing wanted more than reforms; they wanted a complete social revolution, believing in the need for system-wide changes that would penetrate every social institution, including marriage, sexual relationships, and the nuclear family (Echols 1989; Rosen 2000).

The second-wave movement, composed of both the women's rights and the women's liberation wing, peaked in the late 1970s. Following a failed attempt to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), by the mid-1980s the movement was in retreat and a full-fledged backlash was under way (Faludi 2006). Starting around the mid-1990s the purported *third wave* of the US women's movement began, and it continues today. Drawing on work produced near the end of the second wave (e.g., Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982; Lorde 1984; Moraga and Anzaldua 1984; hooks 2000), the third-wave women's movement emphasized *intersectionality*: the notion that different social identities—for example, race, class, and gender—intersect in complex ways so that not all women experience gender oppression the same way. ↪ The third wave as a whole also shifted from a focus on political lobbying and direct action to more of a micropolitics approach, where women saw the expression of personal identity and cultural change as a way to “be” feminist and “do” feminist politics (Reger 2005, 2012). The third wave has also introduced multiple new tactics into the feminist toolkit, including the use of online tools to promote and practice feminist politics (Crossley 2015), evidenced in part by popular hashtags such as #YesAllWomen, #EverydaySexism, and #SayHerName, as well as offline tactics such as the rapid worldwide diffusion of the SlutWalk demonstration. We have yet to see the full range of issues addressed and tactics developed by the contemporary feminist movement, as it continues to grow and change today.

Continuities between the Waves

The wave metaphor, while useful in describing the general shape of feminist activism over the years, can also be misleading. Almost as soon as the wave metaphor was used to describe feminist activism, researchers have challenged it, looking in particular at the different temporal shape of nonwhite feminisms (Roth 2004), identifying important activity that happened between major waves (Cobble 2005), and recognizing crucial continuities between these waves (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Staggenborg 1989; Taylor 1989; Whittier 1995; Reger 2012; McCammon 2012). This work has collectively demonstrated that each moment in the history of feminism has consisted of *overlapping generations* (Reger 2012), where individuals and organizations from an earlier wave coexist with individuals and organizations from the new wave. These overlapping generations exist in and through *abeyance structures* (Rupp and Taylor 1987), defined as organizations and institutions that persist through periods of backlash against social movements and provide support and structure for movements as they reemerge in times of general political upheaval.

Research on feminist activity in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that these abeyance structures are often not formal social movement organizations but institutions such as feminist subcultures, feminist-owned businesses, and cultural festivals that enable feminism to persist through these decades of popular backlash (Staggenborg 1989; Whittier 1995; Reger 2012).

The Multi-Institutional Approach

These *extra-institutional* abeyance structures, structures that exist outside of the formal political sphere, emphasize something that social movement scholars have long asserted: social movements use a variety of strategies and tactics, and have diverse goals, that often go beyond coordinated public action targeted at explicitly political institutions. Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) articulate this in their call for a “multi-institutional” approach to social movements, highlighting social movement goals that go beyond changing public policies or laws, such as building identities, challenging cultural categories, or seeking symbolic change in the larger culture. In line with the multi-institutional approach, Staggenborg and Taylor (2005) argue that the feminist movement has been so successful, and has lasted for so long, precisely because it has developed a wide range of tactics that include less visible, but no less important, tactics and goals, and they urge researchers to include these less visible tactics in their analysis of the women’s movement. Because this extra-institutional activity often happens outside of the public view, however, it is not easy to find or measure.

In the next two sections of this chapter I use writings and documents produced and published by feminists in the 1910s and the 1970s to trace the history of a type of feminist activity that centers on a less visible source of extra-institutional change: collective self-expression. I argue that, far from being peripheral to the women’s movement, or a product of any one moment in history, collective self-expression was in fact central to every moment in the history of US women’s movement. This form of feminism, narrative-base consciousness-raising, represents both a staple tactic of this movement and a key aspect of continuity within this movement over time.

Self-Expression in the 1910s: “Creating a New Consciousness in Women”

The 1910s were a crucial decade for the woman suffrage movement. During this decade, the suffrage movement introduced a variety of new and influential tactics, including massive suffrage parades and direct-action “Silent Sentinels” in front of the White House. These innovative tactics, combined with the aftermath of World War I, resulted in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, ending a battle that had been waged for over sixty years.

This decade, however, was not just important for the suffrage movement or for these public, confrontational tactics; the 1910s also saw the introduction of the word *feminism* into the United States for the first time, the subsequent rise of feminism as an identity distinct from the movement for suffrage, and the introduction of a less visible tactic into the social movement repertoire: “background talks.” Before describing this new tactic, I first describe the general importance of feminism to the historical moment.

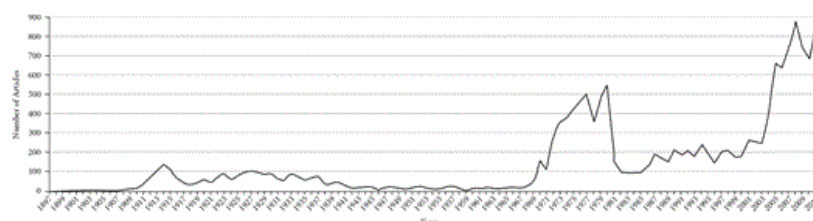
According to historian Nancy Cott, the introduction of the word *feminism* was a turning point for the women’s movement, providing a label that named a group of women who believed that women’s shared socially constructed position provided the opportunity to develop a common consciousness among women that would, in itself, “impel change” (Cott 1987: 5). The impact of these early feminists is recognized now by a few notable historians, but according to their contemporaries, feminists made a deep impact on the Progressive Era left, beyond what historians recognize. While rare in 1910, by 1913 the word *feminism* appeared frequently in the United States (Cott 1987), and by 1914 the left and the general press agreed that feminism, distinct from suffrage, had become a significant social movement. Figure 8.1 illustrates this rapid rise (and then decline) of the word *feminism* in the mainstream press.¹ In 1910, 15 articles in the *New York*

p. 181 *Times* mentioned the word *feminism*, usually referencing feminism in France. In 1912 the number of

p. 182

articles mentioning *feminism* had more than tripled to 68, and in 1914 that number again more than doubled, with 142 articles mentioning the word *feminism*. This level of frequency was not reached again until the 1970s, six years into the second-wave movement.² Beyond the *New York Times*, by 1913, articles about feminism occurred in periodicals as diverse as *Harper’s Weekly*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McClure’s Magazine* (credited with having started the tradition of muckraking), and the *Century Magazine*.

Figure 8.1



Mentions of Feminism in the *New York Times*

There was a general feeling at this time, particularly on the left, that feminism was becoming one of the most important social movements of the time. In August 1911, for example, when feminism was still associated with suffragists, socialist Josephine Conger Kaneko wrote in the popular left magazine *The Masses* that there “are two significant movements in the world to-day—that of the working class for economic freedom, and that of the woman for political freedom” (Kaneko 1911: 16). In December of that year, *The Masses* devoted an entire issue to women. In February 1913, when feminism as a theory distinct

from suffrage was gaining momentum, the popular magazine *McClure's* started a Department for Women, headed by feminist and famous suffragist Inez Milholland.³ The goal of this department was to treat the new feminist movement in “a sensible, straightforward manner,” claiming, “No movement of this century is more significant or more deep-rooted than the movement to readjust the social position of women” (“A New Department for Women” 1913: 185). By May 1914 feminism had fully infiltrated US culture. In an editorial titled “The Revolt of the Woman” printed in *The Century* magazine and republished in the *New York Times*, editors declared that feminism would win, and that when it did, the world would be a better place: “The time has come to define feminism. . . . The germ is in the blood of our women. . . . The doctrine and its corollaries are on every tongue. . . . Like every demand for human freedom, feminism will succeed; and, when it does come to pass, the human race will attain for the first time its full efficiency” (“The Revolt of the Woman” 1914: 964–965). By 1914 the left and the press were generally united in the belief that feminism (distinct from suffrage) was a significant and profound new movement, and was one that would change society for good.

All of these feminists were suffragists,⁴ and many, like Milholland, were quite central to the suffrage movement. But feminism was much broader than the suffrage movement. One of the main features that distinguished feminists from suffragists was their insistence that political reforms, such as suffrage, would not be enough to reach gender equality; a much broader and deeper revolution was needed. In an article in *Harper's Weekly* titled “The Younger Suffragists,” Winnifred Harper Cooley argued that women's suffrage, while important, was only one part of a larger revolution. Feminists, she claimed, “consider the vote the merest tool, a means to an end—that end being a complete social revolution” (Cooley 1913: 16). Suffrage was only the beginning of a social revolution that Cooley believed was “sweeping every civilized country, and is the prophecy of the dawn of a to-morrow far brighter and better than yesterday or to-day” (Cooley 1913: 19). This social revolution did not mean a few changes allowing more equality for women; it rather meant an entirely new definition of what it meant to be a man and a woman: “Feminism is not a female with fewer petticoats; it does not seek to crinoline men,” claimed one prominent feminist. “It asks a new fashion in the social garments of each” (“Talk on Feminism Stirs Great Crowd” 1914: 2).

While feminists active in the 1910s agreed on the need for a revolution, like the feminist movement in the second wave and again today, these activists disagreed on how to achieve that revolution. In the remainder of this section I focus on a specific strategy and tactic used by 1910s feminists, a form I call *narrative-based consciousness-raising*.

“Background Talks” and Creating a New Consciousness in Women

The feminist movement consisted of more than a few individuals writing for the press; there were also feminist organizations in New York City with membership lists in the hundreds (Cott 1987). The earliest, largest, and longest-lasting feminist organization of this period was an organization called Heterodoxy. Heterodoxy was founded in Greenwich Village, New York City, in 1912 by twenty-five women “who did things and did them openly” (Luhan 1985: 144). The membership list quickly expanded to over one hundred and included the most prominent leftist women of the time, including Crystal Eastman, Elizabeth Gurly Flynn, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, and Eleanor Roosevelt (Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley 2000). All of the members of Heterodoxy were self-sufficient in some way, and most were writers, educators, doctors, lawyers, and small business owners. Most of these women were fighting for larger reforms affecting women, such as working for suffrage or to abolish the Comstock Laws.⁵

Heterodoxy's main goal was to act as a support group for women who were breaking social, political, and professional norms, as well as to change and expand women's awareness about their social position as women. To do so, Heterodoxy had weekly meetings that commonly consisted of what they called “background talks,” where a member would narrate their personal histories and experiences, focusing on

intimate issues in a way they could not do in public. Heterodoxy member Inez Milholland articulated the theory behind these background talks. In order to achieve any sort of lasting social change, she claimed, women had to first inquire “into every phase of life,” in order “to act with some authority regarding it” (1913: 185). This form of inquiry, she claimed, would penetrate “into the remotest, obscurest corners of life, searching boldly under the premises of everything profane and sacred,” and once they understood their own lives, women could then broadcast “their discoveries” to the world (Milholland 1913: 185). First and foremost, she claimed, women needed to learn how to be frank with one another and talk about problems facing women, like sex and prostitution, abusive husbands, and beauty norms.

p. 184 Heterodoxy member Inez Irwin described how these background talks would start with a member telling “whatever she chose to reveal about her childhood, girlhood and young womanhood” (quoted in Schwarz 1982: 20). As women shared these experiences, the group would note the common themes that ran throughout the stories and would discuss possible collective causes of these themes. One theme that continually arose was childrearing, which was encouraged by Heterodoxy member and noted psychologist Leta Stetter Hollingworth. The members would talk about how they were raised with certain expectations because they were women, and how their brothers were raised with different expectations. They would then discuss why this was the case. Out of these discussions many of the members, more or less successfully, consciously attempted to raise their children in gender-neutral environments in order to break the cycle of gendered expectations (Schwarz 1982: 21). Women in Heterodoxy also used this woman-only protected space to examine how women internalized men’s and society’s view that women were inferior, with the goal of overcoming their “inferiority complex.” Their goal was to increase their own beliefs about what they, as women, could do, and then impart this knowledge to their children and other women (Wittenstein 1991). Their ultimate goal was the creation of an entirely new consciousness in women.

This focus on changing women’s consciousness was widespread among 1910s feminists. Feminist Ellen Glasgow, in 1913, claimed “the feminist movement is a revolt from a pretense of being—it is at its best and worst a struggle for the liberation of personality” (Glasgow 1913: 21).⁶ “Spiritual freedom evolves out of consciousness of powers possessed,” claimed Heterodoxy member Rose Young, “a sense of self and opportunity, and it is only out of spiritual freedom that the whole individual evolves” (1914: 25, emphasis in original). If women did not know their own capabilities, if women believed in the inferiority prescribed to them by men, women could never utilize political rights or achieve true equality. At its heart, claimed Heterodoxy founder Marie Jenny Howe, “feminism means more than a changed world. It means a changed psychology, the creation of a new consciousness in women” (Howe 1914: 29).

The Personal Is Political

p. 185

One outcome of this tactic—using personal narratives to understand the collective roots of common problems—was to open personal problems to collective change, or in other words, to make the personal political. Milholland went on to argue that as women explored their own oppression they would find that “her ‘home’ has, in the complex of social life of our time, become entangled in a thousand ways with the outside life of the community and the nation” (1913: 188). As women explored their own lives and the causes of common problems, they would inevitably target interpersonal issues such as marriage, the home, and sexual relationships with men. Milholland emphasized this process in 1913: as women, as a political class, together dig into their own lives, they will, she claimed, naturally focus on the institutions most important to them: “home and marriage itself,” and change, she claimed, must be brought to these institutions (1913: 188). Society cannot liberate women, Milholland stated, “without ultimately finding ourselves facing radical changes in [women’s] relations with man” (1913: 188). Many women in *Heterodoxy* actively attempted to effect radical changes in their own lives by exploring alternative types of relationships with each other and with men. Some of them lived ↪ with men who were not their husbands, some lived apart from their husbands in order to maintain their freedom in marriage, some lived with other women, and some had multiple sexual partners in their lives, including married women living in open relationships.

In sum, while women in the suffrage movement were participating in parades, direct actions, and political lobbying, an influential subset of these women were additionally focused on extra-institutional change: changing patterns of relationships between men and women. They did so by using personal narratives to expose the collective roots of personal problems and to change men’s and women’s understanding of the social world and eventually interpersonal relations themselves. This form of feminism was reproduced in almost an exact form in the 1960s and 1970s.

1960s Radical Feminism: “Studying the Whole Gamut of Women’s Lives”

Women’s formation of discussion groups with the express aim of personal and social change was most memorably named during the second-wave movement, where it was coined *consciousness-raising* (Sarachild 1979; Evans 1980; Brownmiller 2000). Consciousness-raising was developed, theorized, and named by women in early second-wave radical feminist organizations in New York City. The first of these organizations was New York Radical Women (NYRW), formed in 1967 by feminists Pam Allen and Shulamith Firestone.⁷ In 1969 NYRW split, and one side changed its name to Redstockings. A separate radical feminist group called the Feminists was formed in 1968 by women who split from the New York City chapter of NOW, led by former New York City NOW president Ti Grace Atkinson. In late 1969 Firestone broke away from Redstockings and founded yet another radical feminist organization, New York Radical Feminists (NYRF), with the purpose of integrating the masses of women interested in radical feminist politics. Some of the women who formed these groups were committed activists and veterans of the civil rights movement and New Left; many were professional writers and artists, trying to make it in male-dominated fields.⁸

Women’s liberation was thrust onto the public scene during one of the first and most successful public actions led by NYRW and the Feminists: a protest outside of the 1969 Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Feminists targeted this event because they believed beauty pageants perpetuated the idea that beauty, grace, and aesthetically pleasing men should be women’s main life goal and the only measure of their worth. Outside of the auditorium hosting the pageant, feminists put “instruments of female torture,” like bras, girdles, false eyelashes, and high heels, into a “freedom trash can” and crowned a sheep “Miss America” to illustrate their claim that women in the pageant were mindless followers (Hanisch 1968; Freeman 1969). Inside the pageant, women unfurled a banner reading “Women’s Liberation,” which was

picked up by the TV cameras and broadcast to the nation, drawing national attention to the burgeoning movement. This action exposed ♫ what every young, well-off woman felt: women existed for men, not themselves, and men wanted them for their looks, not their minds.

While this public protest put women's liberation on the social and cultural map, sparking the lasting stereotype of feminists as angry, men-hating, bra-burners (Campbell 2010), the more common tactic used by radical feminists was in fact consciousness-raising. Kathy Sarachild, a member of NYRW, recounted the initial expression of the idea of consciousness-raising as a political tactic in the second wave. After the Miss America protest, women in NYRW were wondering what to do next. Borrowing from her experience in the civil rights movement, NYRW member Ann Forer spoke up and said, "I think we have a lot more to do just in the area of raising our consciousness" (Sarachild 1979: 144). Consciousness-raising, claimed Sarachild, involved "studying the whole gamut of women's lives, starting with the full reality of one's own," and was a way to prevent the women's movement from getting sidetracked by reforms and single-issue organizing (Sarachild 1979: 145). When women had a better understanding of how their lives related to the general condition of women, it would make them better fighters "on behalf of women as a whole," she claimed (Sarachild 1979: 145).

To put this idea into action, these radical feminist organizations began to organize consciousness-raising sessions. During these consciousness-raising or "rap" sessions, small groups of women would get together to talk about their personal experiences with various issues, like beauty standards, sex with men, sex with women, working as mothers, and so on. Their goals were to find common issues facing all women and to explore the common roots of these issues. It was out of these consciousness-raising activities that radical feminists coined the term *The personal is political*, which became a general rallying cry for feminists (Hanisch 1970). The goal of these sessions was to change the consciousness of women by revealing to them how their lives and their ambitions were shaped by patterns of social relationships that benefit men, a system that 1960s feminists labeled *patriarchy*. This change in consciousness was a necessary precursor to wider political and social change, claimed radical feminists, as women would not know what issues to target, nor would they be able to utilize newly won rights, unless they first expanded their idea of what it meant to be a woman.

As women explored and questioned their lives in these sessions, they found, just as the 1910s feminists concluded, that even the most intimate relationships between men and women were shaped by patriarchy. Sex, relationships with men, and the nuclear family were at the center of many of the discussions held in these groups (e.g., O'Brien 1978; Leon 1978). Some feminists, as well as the group the Feminists, played around with officially limiting the number of hours women could spend with men, some called for abstaining from sex altogether, and others advocated lesbianism as the only way women could be truly liberated (Echols 1989). Everything about the interpersonal relationships between men and women was up for discussion—and change—for the consciousness-raising feminists in the second wave.

Consciousness-raising as a political tactic partially arose out of, and partially shaped, the specific theory of women's oppression articulated by these early radical ♫ feminist organizations, a theory that set them apart from other women's liberation organizations such as the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. Radical feminist organizations claimed that women's oppression was caused by a system of interpersonal patriarchal gender relationships in which all men, politically, legally, socially, and morally, subordinated all women. This patriarchal system was fundamentally rooted in men's psychological need to dominate women, and women's psyches had long developed under the psychological domination of men (e.g., Redstockings 1969; Millett 2000 [1970]). Changing laws to better incorporate women, as organizations like NOW were doing, or even a full-fledged socialist revolution as other leftist organizations were working toward, would leave this patriarchal system, and thus women's oppression, intact. What was needed, believed radical feminists, was a revolution in the interpersonal relationships between men and women and a fundamental change in the psychology of both.

This history highlights four important continuities between 1910s feminism and 1970s feminism: collectively exploring the realities of individual lives as a way to understand women's position in society, their insistence that personal problems are in fact political, a focus on changing interpersonal relationships between men and women as part and parcel of overall social change, and, importantly, the insistence on the importance of changing consciousness as a prerequisite to larger social change (see Table 8.1 for a summary of these similarities).

Table 8.1 Continuities between the first and second waves

	Exploring your own life	The personal is political	Personal institutions	Raising consciousness
First Wave Organizations: <i>Heterodoxy</i>	“[Women will insist] on her right to inquire into every phase of life, and to act with some authority regarding it.” ¹	“[Women have] discovered that her ‘home’ has, in the complex of social life of our time, become entangled in a thousand ways with the outside life of the community and the nation.” ³	“. . . the institutions most certain to be touched and changed are the institutions in which the sex, as a sex, is most peculiarly and vitally interested. And these institutions, it is hardly necessary to point out, are the home and marriage itself.” ³	“Spiritual freedom evolves out of <i>consciousness of powers possessed</i> , a sense of self and opportunity, and it is only out of spiritual freedom that the whole individual evolves.” ²
Second Wave Organizations: <i>NYRW</i> <i>Redstockings</i> <i>The Feminists</i> <i>NYRF</i>	Consciousness-raising means “studying the whole gamut of women’s lives, starting with the full reality of one’s own.” ⁴	“One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.” ⁶	“When male supremacy is completely eliminated, marriage, like the state will disappear.” ⁷	“Agitation for specific freedoms is worthless without the preliminary raising of consciousness necessary to utilize these freedoms fully.” ⁵

Source: ¹Milholland 1913: 185; ²Young 1914: 25; ³Milholland 1913: 188; ⁴Sarachild 1979; ⁵Firestone 1968; ⁶Hanisch 1970; ⁷Kathy Sarachild quoted in Echols 1989: 146.

Contemporary Feminism: Self-Help, Lean In Circles, and Online Communities

As feminist scholars explore contemporary feminist groups and organizing, they continue to uncover examples of narrative-based consciousness-raising. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, there was a rise in women's self-help groups, which again employed a type of narrative-based consciousness-raising to heighten awareness of, but also change individual consciousness about, issues such as breast cancer and postpartum depression (Taylor 1996). Taylor, who explored postpartum depression support groups, claimed “self-help communities start out as sites where participants can find personal support through sharing their problems,” but “the experience of being intensely immersed in a shared women's community,” Taylor asserts, “offers participants the opportunity to reframe their individual biographies in socially and politically meaningful terms” (1996: 104). This was precisely the goal of narrative-based consciousness-raising in the 1910s and 1960s. Nonetheless, these self-help groups have never been incorporated into the common narrative of the history of the women's movement. Situating these groups in the framework of narrative-based consciousness-raising places them firmly in the continuum of the women's movement and highlights the importance of this tactic.

Today, as we are experiencing yet another period of heightened political action, we are again seeing a resurgence of a more public type of consciousness-raising as a women's movement tactic.⁹ As in the first and second waves, this tactic is

p. 188

being used by professional women who are in male-dominated careers or who are attempting to fight for women's rights in other areas.

p. 189

One example of this is Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* (2014) and the phenomenon based on this book: Lean In Circles. The home page of the website leanincircles.org describes their mission:

Lean In Circles are small groups who meet regularly to learn and grow together. . . . Women are asking for more and stepping outside their comfort zones, and men and women are talking openly about gender issues for the first time. (LeanIn.org 2016).

Women in these groups help each other ask for raises, ask for promotions, or develop organizations aimed at winning more rights for women, but the general aim of these circles is to understand common ways in which women are prevented from advancing in their careers and to help each other overcome those obstacles. The website claims that there are twenty-one thousand circles in ninety-seven countries, and more are forming every day (LeanIn.org 2016).

Sandberg explains the importance of women talking about their issues with one another in her book *Lean In*: "The simple act of talking openly about behavioral patterns makes the subconscious conscious. . . . Talking can transform minds, which can transform behaviors, which can transform institutions" (Sandberg 2014: 157–158). Here Sandberg is rearticulating an approach to feminism that, as we have seen, was first expressed in the 1910s.¹⁰

Another example of contemporary narrative-based consciousness-raising, with a modern technological twist, is the Everyday Sexism Project. The Everyday Sexism Project, started by Laura Bates in 2012, established an online platform where women can share their personal experiences of sexism with one another. Women from all over the world post stories of examples of sexism they have faced, from catcalls on the street to domestic violence to harassment in their workplaces. Their goal: to "show the world that sexism does exist, it is faced by women everyday and it is a valid problem to discuss" (The Everyday Sexism Project 2016). With project branches in twenty-five countries, the creators have grouped these stories into themes such as media, politics, and college campuses, and are publishing them in book format (Bates 2016).

In addition to this project, trending hashtags meant to highlight the experience of different groups of women on Twitter serve the same purpose: collective self-expression as a political act. #YesAllWomen, which details stories of sexual harassment, and #SayHerName, which publicizes police brutality against black women, are just two examples of how women are using Twitter to express common problems. These women are using the Internet to transcend geographical boundaries and provide a global space for women to collectively explore sexism through personal narratives.

Knowing the history of the feminism recounted above puts self-help groups, Sandberg's Lean In Circles, the Everyday Sexism Project, and hashtags in perspective. This approach to feminism has been at the core of the women's movement from its earliest moments; it continued to be central to the movement in the 1960s and 1970s, reemerged in self-help groups in the 1990s, and is still central today. While the history of mass demonstrations and political lobbying is a critical component of women's movements throughout history, I argue that so is narrative-based consciousness-raising.

p. 190

Disruption, Recurrence, and Continuity

We have seen that narrative-based consciousness-raising has been a central strategy of the women's movement from the first wave through the contemporary moment. What explains the continuity, or recurrence, of this strategy over time? An examination of how and why the first-wave feminist movement ended suggests that overlapping generations or abeyance structures, the popular ways of explaining continuity to date, likely did not contribute to the continuity of this form of feminism over time. To illustrate, I briefly discuss the political conditions in the United States following the First World War, and how this affected the feminist movement.

In the 1910s feminism as a political identity made an impressive, but brief, showing. The end of the decade was as bad for left-leaning political movements as the beginning of the decade was good. In 1917 all of American society, including large and vibrant Progressive movements, was interrupted by the entrance of the United States into World War I. This entrance shifted public attention away from government corruption and Progressive reform, the focus during the first years of the 1910s, and united public opinion firmly behind nationalism and the war effort. After the 1917 Russian Revolution raised the possibility of a socialist revolution in the United States, this hypernationalism quickly turned to suspicion of anyone not born in the United States and anyone involved in leftist movements. The public at large rallied behind this general fear, and the years between 1918 and 1920 are now called the *First Red Scare*.

The Sedition Act of 1918 made any speech-act criticizing the government or the war efforts an arrestable and deportable crime. Beginning in 1919 the Department of Justice, led by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and under the legal cover of the Sedition Act, raided the headquarters of leftist organizations, stealing literature, meeting notes, and other organizational property as "evidence" of seditious activity. Over ten thousand people were arrested during what were eventually called the Palmer Raids, and hundreds were deported for "offenses" as small as writing an article that criticized the government (Finan 2007). These expansive raids and the general nationalist hysteria following the war very effectively silenced the left, including the feminist movement. As early as 1919 political activists were using the term *postfeminist* (Cott 1987: 282), and much like the 1980s, there was a general backlash against feminism in the 1920s.

p. 191 In the 1920s the government continued to target social movements, feminism and women's movement organizations in particular. The Military Intelligence Division had begun collecting information on feminism and its connection to socialism during World War I. This information was compiled and published in May 1923 by a librarian at the Chemical Warfare Service of the War Department in a document that is now called the "Spider Web Chart" (Catt 1924). The chart focused on the Women's Joint Congressional Committee (WJCC), an umbrella organization connecting the work of a number of mainstream women's organizations, including the League of Women Voters and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. In the chart, individual members of the WJCC were named and connected to socialist and communist groups, and their "radical" opinions were quoted. The lines linking individuals and organizations made the chart look like a web, giving it its arachnoid nickname. At the bottom of the chart the librarian wrote a poem she called "Miss Bolshevik," which began,

Miss Bolsheviki has come to town,
With a Russian cap and a German gown,
In women's clubs she's sure to be found,
For she's come to disarm America. (Quoted in Catt 1924: 32)

This chart was published along with a detailed story about feminism and socialism in two installments (Catt 1924). This chart was eventually used as evidence by legislators who opposed the social legislation introduced by the WJCC, and it was read into the *Congressional Record* in 1926, accompanied by charges of

“bolshevism” and “socialized medicine,” during a hearing about renewing the Sheppard-Towner Act—pioneering legislation first passed in 1921 that gave mothers guaranteed health care for themselves and their children (Freeman 1995). During and following the tense atmosphere created by the First Red Scare and the Palmer Raids, a chart such as this, targeting mainstream feminist organizations, would have had a chilling effect. As a result, the women’s movement struggled during this period and the history of feminism recounted above was effectively buried and almost forgotten.

Second-wave women’s liberationists worked to publicize the history of women’s activism, and they believed they were continuing the work of presuffrage radical women, including the work by the National Woman’s Party (NWP). Interestingly, however, despite their commonalities with early feminists like Milholland, Young, and Howe of Heterodoxy, second-wave feminists did not reference these writers; as a result, second-wave feminists believed their focus on consciousness-raising and psychological change made what they were doing decidedly different from first-wave feminists. In 1968, Firestone, for example, the founder of three different radical feminist organizations, wrote an article taking inspiration from the early women’s movement but also describing how she thought her movement was distinct. The main difference, she claimed, was that the early movement was too focused on “hot” issues, such as Prohibition and suffrage, and failed to “raise the general consciousness” of women’s overall position in society (Firestone 1968). Kate Millett, another feminist involved with NYRW, had a similar analysis of what she called the “first phase” of the “sexual revolution.” The first phase was unable to last beyond winning the right to vote because, according to Millett, it failed to “challenge patriarchal ideology at a sufficiently deep and radical level to break the conditioning process of status, temperament and role” (2000 [1970]: 85).⁴ What was needed, and the first phase did not attempt, she claimed, was a change in “social attitudes *and* social structure, in personality *and* institutions” (Millett 2000 [1970]: 85, emphasis added). Given the dearth of information on women’s history available in the 1960s and early 1970s, second-wave feminists knew an impressive amount about the first-wave movement, and certainly learned from it. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that they got their focus on consciousness and “personality” directly from their knowledge of first-wave activists.

What, then, can explain the near identical use of consciousness-raising as a tactic and the focus on personal and interpersonal change in both the first and second waves? While decidedly answering this is not possible within the scope of this chapter, I suggest that this particular form of continuity was a result of the institutionalization of political knowledge.

The general institutionalization of knowledge leads to what Robert Merton calls “multiple independent discoveries” of the same ideas or the same solutions to a problem. Multiple independent discoveries happen when the knowledge and tools necessary for a discovery “accumulate in man’s [*sic*] cultural store” and when attention is focused on a particular problem by “emerging social needs” (Merton 1973: 371). This may be at work for the feminists in the second wave, who were facing similar historical and social circumstances as women in the 1910s and were able to draw on this institutionalized knowledge as they were building their political organizations. Once the narrative-based consciousness-raising approach was institutionalized by feminists in the 1910s, and as women were faced with similar problems in the 1960s, they (re)discovered the same solution, independent of their direct knowledge of these early feminists but as a result of drawing on latent (or hidden) institutionalized knowledge. This happened again in the 1990s, and once again in the 2010s. The women’s movement, thus, has exhibited a sort of “rolling inertia” as women draw on the same base of knowledge to form their movements in different periods (Greve and Rao 2012).

Conclusion

Taking seriously Staggenborg and Taylor's (2005) call to analyze continuities between feminist waves, I examined the continuity in one feminist approach—narrative-based consciousness-raising—through three waves of feminism. By emphasizing this history, collective self-expression as politics becomes a core, rather than peripheral, aspect of the women's movement over time.

Contemporary feminist theories reinforce that this form of feminist activism gets to the root of persistent gender oppression. Ridgeway's contemporary feminist theory, for example, focuses on the role of interpersonal behavior in continuing gender inequality: "Key processes at the interpersonal level," she claims, and "institutionalized cultural beliefs about gender that shape expectations for behavior at the interpersonal level . . . are especially important for the persistence of gender inequality in the modern world" (Ridgeway 2011: 16–17). Precisely these institutionalized cultural beliefs and interpersonal behavior are the targets of narrative-based consciousness-raising. The root of gendered oppression in these interpersonal institutions justifies the continued use of narrative-based consciousness-raising as a feminist strategy.

This approach to feminism and feminist activism, however, is one of many forms of feminism that has existed in the United States and abroad. Feminism is made up of a plurality of theories, and feminist activism includes a wide range of tactics; this particular tactic is not without its limitations. This approach assumes a sort of gender universalism—that all women will be able to relate to one another and find common ground between their experiences. Many feminists and women's rights activists have pointed out that not all women experience women's oppression in the same way, and gender universalism typically privileges a certain type of woman: most often white and typically middle to upper class (Lorde 1984; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1984; Roth 2004; hooks 2000; Cobble 2005). Indeed, it does take a certain type of privilege to have to talk about one's oppression in order to recognize it, and to have the time and resources to do so.

As women continue to raise awareness today by telling personal narratives, drawing connections between personal problems, and supporting one another through platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and other global organizations, this form of feminism includes underrepresented women, such as black and trans-women, and narratives of difference are being articulated alongside narratives of commonalities. As the movement continues to grow, we can be heartened and inspired by the traditions they are carrying on, even as we critique them. Hopefully we will reach the day when consciousness-raising is no longer needed.

Notes

1. This was done with a keyword search for "feminism OR feminist" using the *New York Times* online archives, recording the numbers of articles per year mentioning either of the words.
2. In 1970, 158 articles mentioned feminism, and this number continued to increase through 1980.
3. Milholland was the famous woman in white, wearing a long white cape astride a white horse, leading the suffrage parade in Washington, DC, in 1913.
4. Emma Goldman is one exception. She was a feminist but not a suffragist.
5. The Comstock Laws made it illegal to disseminate information about contraception, under the guise that this information was "obscene." Even doctors were forbidden from disseminating this information. These laws were not fully repealed until 1972, when the Supreme Court decision on *Eisenstadt v. Baird* finally allowed physicians to disseminate information about contraception to married and unmarried persons (Gordon 1976).

- p. 194
6. The word *personality* was a generally leftist term at the time, meaning the “full development of subjectivity, free from institutional constraints and all preexistent psychological forms and social expectations” (Keetley and Pettegrew 2005: 4).
 7. Historical details come from Echols 1989; Rosen 2000; and Stansell 2010.
 8. Ellen Willis, for example, was a popular music critic when the field was dominated by men and was the first popular music critic for the *New Yorker*, Firestone was a trained painter and author, and Robin Morgan was an author and involved in the publishing industry.
 9. Figure 8.1 suggests that we are indeed in the middle of a third wave of feminism, as evidenced by the number of mentions of feminism in the *New York Times*.
 10. There are plenty of valid criticisms of Sandberg and her movement, and many would not accept her as a bearer of the feminist tradition. The same criticisms of Sandberg, however, can be made of the radical feminists of the 1960s and of Heterodoxy: they mainly target middle-class, professional women; they ignore institutional constraints; and they ignore the diversity of experiences among women. Making the connections between these three moments in this way, I believe, can help us understand the place of this particular tactic in the larger feminist movement.

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