

# SeCond thOUghts aBoUt

by Rebecca Ellis

*L'auteure doute que la 3e vague féministe soit une vague et relève quelques uns des problèmes de ce mouvement très actuel. En particulier, elle critique l'individualisme présent dans quelques éléments de cette 3e vague.*

**Am I part of a "third wave" of feminism? Although, I want there to be a new wave of feminist struggle and activism, I am very skeptical that there actually is one happening right now.**

I am a feminist of my generation. I am a 22-year-old woman. I read the magazines *Bust*, *Bitch*, and *Fireweed*. My favourite musicians include Ani DiFranco, Bikini Kill, and Sleater-Kinney. The books *Backlash*; *Fat!So?*; *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World*; and *Adios, Barbie* all line my bookshelf. I go to the annual December 6th vigil, International Women's Day march, and Take Back the Night march, and I have even helped to organize a few of these events. I think, talk, and write about feminist issues. I count *Hip Mama* and *I'm so Fucking Beautiful* as my favorite zines. And when I have the time, I work on my zine, *Resist!* (the web site and the paper version).

I'm a feminist and many other women my age are also feminists. Young feminists are exploring issues of sexism in a wide variety of interesting and ground-breaking ways. As young women, feminism has enriched our lives in numerous ways and we seem destined to enrich feminism as well. But am I part of a "third wave" of feminism? Is there a third wave of feminism? Although, I want there to be a new wave of feminist struggle and activism, I am very skeptical that there actually is one happening right now.

"Western" feminism has existed formally since Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* in 1793. Informally feminism, the struggle of women against sexist oppression, has probably existed since women have been oppressed. Yet, many feminists agree that there have only been two "waves" of feminism. The "waves" of feminism refer to periods when the feminist movement was a mass movement that drew a broad range of women into collective action, changing the world and changing themselves in the process. Within these waves of feminism, many significant gains for women have been successfully won such as the right to vote and reproductive

freedom and widespread attitudes towards women have been challenged and transformed.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, thousands of women in advanced capitalist countries began to fight against oppression. These first wave feminists fought for the right to vote, the right to an eight-hour working day, the right to access birth control, the right to be considered a legal "person." Feminists were also involved in revolutionary struggles like the Russian Revolution. The first wave of feminism was a time when tens of thousands of women organized collective actions against their oppression. First wave feminists were involved in many militant protests. Their actions, like hunger-striking, were notorious and had a widespread impact on society.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was once again a mass radicalization of women. Women, many inspired from other radical mass movements such as the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement (but disgusted with the sexism of some men in these movements), began to organize against their oppression as women. This "second wave" of feminism explored issues of sexuality, women's role within the family, sexual violence, and the right of women to control their own bodies. The right to have an abortion, the right to not be raped by one's husband, and the right to accessible child care were among the numerous gains fought for and partially won by women in the course of the second wave of feminism. Between these two waves of feminism, the feminist movement still existed. International Women's Day marches continued, women's organizations functioned and feminists still wrote, spoke out, and struggled for women's rights. In fact, during the period between the first and second waves of feminism Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, one of the bibles of the feminist movement.

However, between these two waves, the feminist movement existed in pockets. There was no mass radicalization of women, nor were hundreds of thousands of women all around the world protesting against their oppression. Women were not joining the feminist movement in large numbers and the impact of the movement was not very widespread or broad.

The feminist movement is once again in that kind of period. It is not a movement that is mass in action, orientation, or membership. Collective feminist actions, while crucial, are rare, confined mainly to a few annual

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events. Feminist organizations have weakened and/or dissolved since the early 1980s. Across the world, a backlash against feminism is being waged by neo-liberal governments, university administrations, bosses, and corporations eroding some of the hard-won gains of feminism. Often this happens with hardly a fight from the feminist movement, especially the feminist movement in the western world. For example, in the United States, although women have the right to have an abortion, it is very difficult to actually find a clinic that will perform abortions. The massive cuts to women's shelters imposed by the Tory government in Ontario in 1995 have not been reversed, *not have there been large, widespread campaigns* led by feminist organizations to demand such a reversal. Women all around the world are getting poorer and having a harder time accessing social programs. Although there are admirable feminist actions and organizations, there are not hundreds of thousands of women protesting, campaigning, speaking out, or creating feminist organizations as there were in the second and first waves of feminism.

So what about the claims that there is a third wave feminist movement? There certainly are pockets of feminism in which some women become politicized. Unfortunately, there is not a mass movement that is drawing in women from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences and there is little collective debate about strategy, action, and analysis.

The label "third wave" feminism has been adopted by some young feminists (not all!). It is a type of feminism that is hard to characterize because it is loosely organized. However, some generalizations, especially about the most visible advocates, can be made about the nature of this type of feminism. Identifying as a third wave feminist is a way to differentiate politics of younger feminists from the politics of second wave feminists. Sometimes, this is a positive thing especially when the racism, heterosexism, and/or conservatism of the previous waves of feminism are criticized. Sometimes, though, the critiques are about the collectivist way second wave feminists viewed power and social change.

Some third wave feminists seem to advocate a hipper version Naomi Wolf's "power feminism" which encourages individual women to "make it" as corporate executives, bosses, and Democratic or Republican politicians. The hipper version encourages women to be artists, rock

stars, zine creators, and funky small-business people. It says to women that we have the power; we just have to use it properly. A third wave feminist writing on the Third Wave Feminism web site,

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Our generation is coming to the earth-shattering conclusion that men don't have a stranglehold on women anymore. *We've got more than half the votes*, and a greater fraction of the money and political power every day. Money and power can be used for good or ill: as third wave feminists, we have the dual goal of increasing women's power and using it productively. (Allen)

But, many women don't have a lot of power or money. Many women experience poverty that limits what they can do. Many women also experience sexism from men—lovers, husbands, bosses, etc.—who remind us that men have more power than women in our society.

Many third wave feminists advocate for a highly individualistic type of feminism. This individualism encourages women to "do-it-ourselves" and to form our own zines, bands, make our own web sites, and to form our own businesses. Instead of advocating that women fight sexism in a collective and activist way, women are encouraged to explore and claim individual power and success. Women who can't individually claim this power are condemned, implicitly and explicitly. The fact that women historically have been most powerful when we fight sexism and other oppressions together is ignored or downplayed.

Advocates of third wave feminism focus much of their attention on individual style and self-expression such as makeup, fashion, art, and music instead of thinking politically about "personal" issues or exploring political issues. Political change is seen to occur from personal (and isolated) choices. A quick glance through "The Money Issue" of the third wave feminist magazine, *Bust*, found articles on fashion, the best type of vibrator, how to create

an at-home spa, tips on how to get rich, how to invest in funds, and advice from a "lady" trader on the stock exchange. While this stuff is certainly fun, there were no articles about the conditions of McJobs (where many young women are working), unions, critiquing any aspect of capitalism, or on equal pay, child care, cuts to education, attacks on welfare, issues that affect the majority of women.

While third wave feminist zines, web sites, writings, and art are fun, ground-breaking, and challenging, they aren't being met with a widespread renewal of feminist activism, organizing, or campaigns. This means that it tends to lead to individualist answers to problems women face rather than seeking societal change.

This individualism inevitably leads to individual solutions to and analyses of sexism, feminism, racism, class bigotry, homophobia, and social change. Social and political change is seen to occur from personal life choices and life successes. Although "diverse" and "inclusive" are catch-phrases of third wave advocates, the lack of mass action or radicalization of broad layers of women, has led to a feminism that represents few women while excluding many. This can be seen in the reclaiming of sexist words such as "bitch," "cunt," "pussy," and "girl." Outside of a large, widespread movement, when the majority of women experience these words as oppressive insults on a regular basis, the reclaiming of these words alienates many women.

There are young women who are pissed off about the oppression of women in all the forms it takes and are drawn to third wave feminism. Young women like myself are drawn into individualist activism and thought because

we have few other ways to channel our feminism. Obviously, there is a need to rebuild a mass feminist movement to fight against sexist oppression in which we can find a place to voice our anger and to struggle for change. We need a feminist movement that fights racism, class bigotry, homophobia, ableism, and other injustices. A movement that radicalizes a broad range of women and involves them in collective action. A movement where masses of women take to the streets to fight against oppression. Until such a movement exists, there will be no more "waves" of feminism. We need a feminist movement that descends on the world like a bomb, with an impact that is large and far-reaching.

In the absence of a third wave of feminism, we need to continue to build the feminist movement. Feminist politics must be brought into all areas of activism: the labour, anti-racist, and student movements, to name a few. We especially need to make sure that the exciting and growing anti-globalization movement has a strong feminist voice. We need to join, support, and to defend feminist organizations such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, women's shelters, university women's centres, and union women's caucuses. Women need to participate in and help to build feminist activism such as the International Women's Day march, Take Back the Night, and December 6th commemoration. We also need to continue to personally express our feminism through art, literature, zines, and alternative media. Initiating and developing feminist activism keeps the feminist flame burning bright to ensure that the next wave of feminism will set the world on fire.

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