

The Progressive Erasure of Feminism

by Phyllis Chesler



[Spinifex Press](#), a very honorable feminist press, has been in existence since 1991. Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne are the founding co-editors and they've published some of the best and most radical, woman-centered, lesbian, feminist minds of my generation. They asked me to contribute to an anthology titled *Not Dead Yet: Feminism, Passion and Women's Liberation*, a volume which welcomed Second Wave feminist warriors who still "have what to say" and are not dead yet. Here's a version of what I wrote.

They are marching across the streets of America, both women and men—for an end to police brutality towards black men and for an immigrant-friendly, ecologically sane, and a

'classless' society. Everywhere, criminals, anarchists, and left political operatives are moving among the peaceful protestors and toppling statues, burning cars, smashing windows, shooting people down, looting shops, and harassing civilians on the street and at outdoor cafes.

The marchers and their funders believe that bloodletting, even in the midst of a global pandemic, is well worth it in order to radically 'perfect' our society. And yet, none of this acting up and acting out constitutes a strategy for solving the problems of alleged structural racism, alleged police brutality towards African-Americans, the prison-industrial complex, the economic inequalities in America, as well as the problems of guns, drugs, prostitution, and black-on-black violence among racially marginalized African-Americans.

I have been here before. In the 1960s, I was once a protestor on the streets. I marched for civil rights for African Americans, joined the Northern Student Movement where I tutored young black children in Harlem, admired and supported the Black Panther movement, marched to protest the murder of Fred Hampton in his bed and the jailing of Angela Davis—until the violent, criminal sociopaths took all hope away, with the help of the anti-white, anti-Jewish, and extremely misogynist black male leaders. Their words and deeds helped so many of us to 'say goodbye to all that', and to form a Women's Liberation Movement.

It is now 2021. Yet try as I might, I do not hear the marchers calling for an end to rape or to woman-battering, which we all know were dangerously on the rise during the COVID-19 lockdowns. None of the Black Lives Matter marchers called for reproductive freedom for women in America or for an Equal Rights Amendment. I don't hear chants protesting the high rates of black/African infant and maternal mortality. Protesters who favor "sex work" seem to ignore the fact that

most girls and women who've been trafficked into prostitution are women of color, mainly black/African, but also Asian and Hispanic. I see no signs which condemn FGM and honor killing both in America and globally. Childcare? *Quality* childcare?

As I write, the National Organization for Women and the Democrat Party both endorse the Equality Act, which will expand civil rights in American to transgender and LGBTQIA people. This will dangerously privilege a minority over the majority by endangering women's sex-based rights in terms of sports, and women-only safe spaces in prisons, DV and homeless shelters, and in the military. In addition, the highly decentralized Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has issued individual statements in many American cities whose guiding principles are "trans affirming" and "queer affirming;" concerns for women, if they are mentioned, come later or last.

Did I only dream that we had embarked on a radical feminist revolution more than fifty, nearly sixty years ago? That the three rivers that made up the Second Wave once roared with a mighty joy? I am referring to the demand for legalized sex-based civil rights, left-style feminist activism, and the feminist transformation of formerly male-only professions. What happened to us?

In my 1950s college and 1960s graduate school days, we knew absolutely nothing about our feminist foremothers or forefathers or about their campaigns for equality and freedom. No one told me that women were oppressed and that feminists had battled for women's rights for many centuries. Earlier feminist writers such as Aphra Behn, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the British and American suffragists were unknown to most of my generation in the West. We did not know how hard they had had to fight and how much and how often they disagreed with

one another.

My generation (1963-1980) wrote books and articles, launched a National Organization for Women, sponsored 'speak-outs' on sexual and physical violence against women, established rape crisis hotlines and shelters for battered women, brought class-action lawsuits, implemented feminist ideas within our professions, pioneered Women's Studies, fought hard to keep abortion both legal and funded, and battled for—but failed to—pass an Equal Rights Amendment. We also fought for lesbian and gay rights and launched daring sit-ins and 'occupations'.

In 1982, in [*Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*](#), the great Australian scholar Dale Spender documented how pioneering feminist work has always been systematically disappeared, century after century. Guess what? By the mid-1980s, most of the *radical* feminist analyses by the best minds of my Second Wave generation were out of print and/or not being taught in college or graduate schools. By the mid-to-late 1980s, professors and their students were largely unfamiliar with most of our work.

For example, Harvard's 2018-2019 Gender and Sexuality course offerings included: "'Ain't I a Woman?' Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean and the African Americas"; and "Beyoncé Feminism, Rihanna Womanism: Popular Music and Black Feminist Theory." Stanford offered: "Intersectionality and Social Movements: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Collective Organizing." Yale offered: "Transnational Approaches to Gender and Sexuality." I could find no course which focused upon the writings of John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, Matilda Joselyn Gage, or Simone de Beauvoir.

Women's Studies was absorbed and neutered by the academy and our radical, woman-centered ideas never gained much

institutional or ideological traction. By the 21st century, an obsessive preoccupation with both race and gender *identity* had trumped biological sex which was, in fact, increasingly derided and denied. Women's Studies became 'Gender and Sexuality Studies' and 'LGBTQIA Studies'. Race, class, and sexual preferences trumped incest, rape, domestic violence, pornography, sex slavery, commercial surrogacy, and trafficking, despite the fact that women of all races and classes endure such assaults.

The American academy prides itself on its global consciousness; however, an internet search yielded not one 2018-2019 Ivy League course that focused on honor-based violence, including honor killing, female genital mutilation, forced veiling, forced marriage, child marriage, polygamy, 'Eve teasing' (a south Asian euphemism for sexual harassment), or rape as a weapon, not merely a spoil of war.

Our Second Wave plain-spoken analyses have been jettisoned in favor of incomprehensible, jargon-clotted treatises manufactured for and by cloistered academic elites who rail against objective reality and white, western civilization. The authors of such work refuse to consider that other tribal, patriarchal cultures may actually be more misogynistic and colonial than our own.

Our vibrant and visionary radical feminism has been hijacked – but by who or what? Younger feminists, i.e. pro-gender identity and pro-sex work activists, who consider themselves feminists; successful female performers who strut their Stuff half-naked and dance as if they were animals in heat—while their male counterparts wear formal suits or are fully covered up. Gender identity and sexual preference have preempted woman-centered concerns; identity has been balkanized in such ways as to render coherent female-centered activism and the intellectual and political alliances it requires impossible.

Today, celebrity feminists oppose racism, imperialism, colonialism, "orientalism," historic (but not contemporary) slavery (and then only in America), climate apocalypse—and they support gay, queer, and transgender rights. These are their well-branded buzz words. Fine, but everyday sexism has been rendered less important; motherhood – forgotten; abortion rights – lip service only, very little activism; domestic violence (male on female) is no longer fashionable. Economic inequality is paramount but not specifically *women's* poverty which inevitably leads to homelessness, rape, and prostitution. Are these concerns boring?

Racism is sickeningly real, complex, deep, painful, difficult to redress. However, the obsession with racial victimization *uber alles andere* and the demand that only white folk atone for historical slavery has chased away reason. Historically, Black African Muslims sold other Black African Muslims, Christians, and pagans into worldwide slavery. Barbary Pirates (swarthy-skinned North Africans as well as Turks) kidnapped Caucasian men and women and either kept them as slaves or sold them as slaves to others. Olive and dark-skinned ethnic Arab Muslims kept Black African slaves for centuries; some still do. Then, there is the long and sordid history of sexual slavery and the trafficking of girls and women and to a lesser extent of boys, a crime that is currently a pandemic that "sex-positive activists" often seem determined to ignore.

I have always been a politically incorrect feminist but also part of an honorable group of radical abolitionist feminists who oppose pornography and prostitution. I was both an academic and an activist, an author and an organizer. In 1969, I co-founded the Association for Women in Psychology. In 1970, at the annual meeting of the American Psychological

Association, I demanded reparations for women who had been harmed by patriarchal psychiatric and psychological practices. This demand made world headlines. I also taught the first Women's Studies course for credit at City University of New York. In 1971, together with Florence Rush, I delivered a keynote speech at the first-ever feminist Speak-Out on rape in New York City. In my 1972 book, *Women and Madness*, I was a pioneer in naming rape and incest, which I identified as the dominant form of sexuality under patriarchal rule. I had a chapter on therapists who rape their patients, which was hotly contested but eventually seen as prescient. Like so many feminists, I was everywhere, all at once, and our days and nights were filled with high hopes and sweet sisterhood.

This—and thousands of similar 'firsts'—have rarely made their way into history books and are not being taught in university classes, which fail to accurately portray our history. Present-day activists will fail to learn anything from the past, because it is being systematically erased and hidden from them.

While I expected patriarchal opposition, I did not expect attacks from other feminists. I was so naive. I cared so deeply about what other feminists thought (and I still do), that I therefore really suffered unjust feminist critiques and attacks. I wanted to please other women but that was easier said than done. What could I make of demands that I publish *Women and Madness* anonymously? Or of accusations that I'd betrayed feminism because I became, momentarily, 'famous'? Or because I'd dared to marry a man? Or had the effrontery to give birth to a son and not a daughter?

As Juliet Mitchell moved from economics to psychology, so I moved from psychology to economics. In *Women, Money and Power* (1976), together with my co-author, Emily Jane Goodman, we documented the nature of women's economic status and

women's psychological relationship to 'filthy lucre'. Some feminists thought that we'd been taken over by the Dark Side of capitalism; others thought that women did not need much money given that our revolution was surely 'imminent'. Many feminists did not want children in their lives and envisioned living with other feminists collectively for the rest of their lives. They, too, did not believe that money was that important. Alas, so many are now living alone and struggling to get by on very shrunken pensions and/or on social security.

Moving along: I then thought deeply about the psychology of the dominant sex – men; I published a book titled *About Men* (1978). Some of my favorite feminist bookstores hid the book, thinking that somehow I'd deserted the cause of womankind by writing about male uterus envy and the scapegoating of women for the crimes of men; or for taking the time to understand why men obey other men even if it leads them to their deaths.

By the mid-1970s, I was asked to testify in a lesbian custody battle. Heterosexual mothers who were trapped in custody hell also came calling. A new theme had found me. I wrote three books about motherhood under siege, all from a feminist point of view: *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood* (1979), *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody* (1986, 2011), *Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M* 1987, 2015).

Some feminists now insist that both the suffrage movement (First Wave feminism) as well as our own Second Wave was led by women of color, and by African-American women in particular. Maybe there are countless stories which are unknown to me. But based on my own experience in New York City and in about ten other major cities in America, I do not think these claims are exactly true.

Feminist women of color were definitely present in the Second Wave, but they were in the minority between 1963-1980, certainly as authors and sometimes as activists. The reality of their lives forced them to wrestle with race as well as sex; the demand for loyalty to their race-based community also claimed their attention. White girls were always apologizing – and being castigated – for how few women of color joined us at marches and conferences. Yes, there were high profile but mainly symbolic exceptions such as Flo Kennedy, Dorothy Pittman Hughes, Margaret Sloan, and Dolores Huerta, all of whom were, to her credit, connected to Gloria Steinem in one way or another.

In the 1970s, some African-American and a handful of Asian-American feminists published radical position papers, novels, poems, and anthologies: Toni Cade Bambara (1972), Frances Beale (1969, 1975), Combahee River Collective (1974), Nikki Giovanni (1968, 1970), Gayle Jones (1975), June Jordan (1970), Maxine Hong Kingston (1975), Audre Lorde (1970, 1978), Toni Morrison (1970, 1975), Pat Parker (1972, 1978), Alice Walker (1970, 1976) Michelle Wallace (1978).

I taught their work and cited them in my early work. While some of these precious names may have been forgotten, their primary insistence that race and ethnicity are as important—perhaps even more important—than sex has prevailed in the academy. However, women of color in America such as Beth Brant (1985), Kimberly Crenshaw (1995), Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1993), Paula Giddings (1984), bell hooks (1981), and Barbara Smith (1983) really began to come into their own *in print* in the 1980s—and beyond.

In 1991, I became ill and for many years thereafter could no longer travel or teach as I once did. I still kept working as best I could. Together with Ellen Cole and Esther Rothblum, I co-edited and wrote for an important anthology *Feminist*

Foremothers in Women's Studies, Psychology and Mental Health (1994) and, because I thought I might die, I wrote *Letters to a Young Feminist* (1998). Some younger feminists either ignored it—or savaged it in print. It seems that I had no business telling younger feminists what had been important to us, that doing so was 'matronizing'. I viewed their perspective as matricidal and told them so.

My God! What I wouldn't have given to hear a lecture by a First Wave British or American suffragist while she was still alive! But no, with some exceptions, my Second Wave generation was meant to have exited the stage long ago. Our continued existence constituted unacceptable competition for attention.

Anselma Dell'Olio and Jo Freeman (Joreen) had both written about 'trashing' in the 1970s. I also wrote about it in *Women and Madness*. In my view, the primary *psychological* reason for the failure of Second Wave feminism to become more of a mass movement has as much to do with the ways in which feminists, like women in general, used their powers of shunning and slandering each other. Having an entire group shun you for some Thought Crime did in many a good feminist.

Revisionist history also demoralized many feminists. Something that one feminist did was claimed, for all time, by another feminist who had not done that particular thing, whether it was coin a phrase, strategize an action, write an analysis, or organize a demonstration or a conference. Just on and on, feminist history was constantly being rewritten by those with superior access to the media, funding, and publishing houses. History itself is far poorer for this reason. The fact that non-feminist men do the very same thing is cold comfort.

From about 1981 onward, I spent 20 years, on and off, researching and conducting interviews about female-female

aggression, competition, envy, slander, the power of shunning, and women's internalization of sexism. Many feminist leaders tried to warn me away from this subject fearing that I would only expose *feminists* and hurt 'the movement'. Some asked whether I was going to 'name names'. My invariable response was: "I have no intention of publishing the phone book." Other long-time feminist colleagues refused to even read it. Feminists at the publishing house that finally brought the work out, tried to stop it in every way possible.

I finally published *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* in 2002. It was the first of my 21st-century books that was not reviewed in either the mass or in the feminist media. I was on my way to becoming an "invisible" feminist.

In the late 1980s, I became involved in a grassroots and legal struggle that I was privileged to help lead. We became known as the Jerusalem-based Women of the Wall—or the Original Women of the Wall. We had prayed in an all-female group out loud with a Torah for the first time in Jewish history at the Kotel (the Western Wall) in Jerusalem. What we did was perhaps the equivalent of a group of nuns officiating at Mass in the Vatican.

At the time, in 1988, many feminists, both here and in Israel, did not understand the importance of our actions. Some feared that I'd 'taken the veil', or returned to fundamentalist patriarchy. They did not consider that the right of women to be religious leaders and to practice their religion free of male authority was as important as the right not to be coerced into a religious practice against one's will.

The patriarchy fought us bitterly and that fight still continues. Together with Rivka Haut, who had envisioned and

initiated this struggle, we published *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*.

Long ago, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett favored relocating women away from the Haredi-controlled Kotel to Robinson's Arch where we would be able to pray in mixed gender minyanim. The Reform and Conservative movements have long been praying there—but there is still no place for women-only group prayer, neither at Robinson's Arch nor at the Haredi-dominant Kotel proper.

In the 21st century, my work was increasingly no longer reviewed in or welcome in many feminist and progressive venues—but for new reasons. I finally published a book about rising anti-Semitism titled *The New Anti-Semitism*. This phenomenon was being driven by the western intelligentsia, both leftists and feminists, as well as by Islamists. Zionism became the greatest of Thought Crimes. In my view, anti-Zionism = antisemitism in our times. And the battle is both hot and fierce. I said so early on and was challenged and condemned. By now, far more people have come to this conclusion—but the cognitive war against the Jews and against the single Jewish state is still very hot. The United Nations is about to celebrate the Durban "Hate Fest" 20 years later.

In 2018, I also published *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*. The publisher did not want me to include my critique of the politically correct 'gender identity' madness, nor could I write about most of my 21st-century work—because it was simply *too* politically incorrect. What they wanted was not an intellectual autobiography but something more like a long and lively gossip column about famous feminists. And so, I described some of my feminist pals as real human beings, not as picture-perfect icons. I did so with love but tempered by honesty. It was endorsed by some distinguished feminists of my generation but really, it was beyond the pale. It received no

reviews in the mass media, very few reviews in the feminist media, and was savaged in a progressive Jewish newspaper by a former employee of *Ms. Magazine*. One always pays a price for exposing the hypocrisy and failures of one's own 'side'.

Once I began writing about post 9/11 terrorism, the global rise in anti-Semitism, the hijacking of radical feminism, gender and religious apartheid among Muslims, hate speech as free speech, I was sometimes forced to have police protection on campus, and my purely feminist work on FGM, gang-rape as a weapon of war, femicide among tribal people, was no longer published in progressive and feminist places.

Younger and institutionally well-perched feminists now believe that prostitution, which I view as the most extreme form of violence against women, is 'sex work', and that it is a woman's right to sell her orifices for money, just as it's her right to sell the 'products' of her uterus for money, too. How progressive. 'Restorative' justice for rapists, batterers, even murderers are the catchwords *du jour*. There are now even two so-called feminist books that argue for the decriminalization of domestic violence because this charge has led to the imprisonment of too many black men in America. I admit: I ordered them but have not been able to bring myself to read them.

I was recently interviewed by feminist author and academic Breanne Fahs about some of the themes in my most recent book, *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer*. We began corresponding. I asked her what she thought feminism has lost. She wrote:

I'd say, 'I worry most about the possibilities women imagine for themselves and how those get shaped and molded by

patriarchal fantasies. I also worry that the Second Wave has been characterized by its more (flawed) liberal perspectives without its radical perspectives. Most deeply, I want the feminists of today and tomorrow to imagine space for a genuinely radical feminism, one that looks at the roots of oppression and embraces the margins, allows room for anger, and worries a LOT less about the respectability of feminism."

But she was also very glum about the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and about the fate of our nation in the hands of 'dudes who want to destroy us all'. Here was my response:

Chin up. Don't let the bastards get you down. There is so much to be done. Everything always changes, nothing ever remains the same—and even we precious few are not eternal, it is only in our hands while we are alive and all we can ever count upon is the struggle, not the victory.

I admire many young feminists, just not the ones that progressive (regressive) "woke" culture often chooses to highlight. [WOLF](#) (Women's Liberation Front) and [4W](#) have come into existence. They, and the academic journal *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* are the true torchbearers of radical feminist ideas and activism.

WOLF hopes to "abolish regressive gender roles and the epidemic of male violence" through law, policy, and education. They focus on that violence, defend the segregation of women-only spaces and support free speech, as well as de-transitioners. They also favor women's reproductive freedom, the abolition of prostitution, and promote civil remedies for the harms caused by pornography.

WOLF has successfully petitioned the U.S. Department of

Housing and Urban Development in terms of restoring the right of emergency shelters to have eligibility “determined by sex rather than claims of transgender status;” released polling data from likely voters in California and Idaho that documented their lack of support for allowing boys and men to identify into female-only sports; submitted legal briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court calling for the “preservation of sex-based civil rights;” testified in support of the Vulnerable Child Protection Act in South Dakota, and helped “defeat a proposed law change in the District of Columbia that would have legalized pimping and brothel-running activities.”

4W is an internet platform for feminists who “are stepping outside of the liberal mainstream.” They provide free, radical, Fourth Wave feminist material on such subjects as censorship, gender, sexuality, and male violence. They stand apart from most Third Wave feminists, whose movement they believe is “male-centered” and “politically correct.” 4W believes in the need for “quality independent journalism,” one that analyzes this moment in history through a “modern, radical feminist lens.” Although 4W has only been in existence for about two years, they publish many radical feminists, (myself included), and welcome authors and articles that may be considered too controversial by the mainstream media.

To end, I’d like to quote from the Introduction to *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*. I write:

“I was utterly naive and ill-prepared for the life I was destined to lead. Angels must have watched over me; I can offer no better explanation for why I survived and flourished.

For more than half a century I’ve been a soldier at war. I carry scars; all warriors do. Most of us were felled, daily, both by our opponents and by friendly fire.

Despite everything, despite *anything*, I wouldn't have missed this revolution, not for love or money. I remain forever loyal to that moment in time, that collective awakening which set me free from my former life as a "girl." Allow me to paraphrase Shakespeare's King Henry the Fifth's most memorable speech:

'(She) that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Then will she strip her sleeve and show her scars.

...

And (gentlewomen) everywhere now-a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their (humanity) cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us...'"

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