

Women's Resistance to Feminisms in the United States, 19th-21st centuries: Invariance and Evolution

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The articles in this issue are a selection of papers given at an international conference that took place in April 2021 online, due to the pandemic. This conference, organized by Claire Sorin and the team *Women and the F Word* (Aix-Marseille University, France), was part of a research project on the mechanisms of women's resistance to feminism in the English-speaking world since the 19th century.¹

The choice of the term "resistance" signals a wish to go beyond the binary frame simply opposing feminists to antifeminists. It seeks to examine the multiple ways in which women position themselves towards or against a movement that fights supposedly in their name. Women's attitudes towards feminism(s), as a concept and/or a movement, can range from indifference and apathy to downright hostility and opposition. The idea of resistance implies that feminism is *perceived* as a force that needs to be criticized or countered. What can account for this perception? As Christine Bard notes, hostility to feminism probably precedes feminism itself (11); thus if antifeminism precedes feminism, resistance to the movement can primarily be interpreted as a conservative project, a means to preserve the status quo. This dossier shows, however, that this is not always the case.

In a book to be published in 2025, Marc Calvini-Lefèbvre (a member of the *Women and the F Word* team) proposes a typology of resistance using the adjectives "active," "ordinary," and "critical." "Active" resistance corresponds to the actions, discourses, and mobilization of women who openly fight and organize against feminism; it is synonymous with antifeminism and is the type of resistance that has been, by far, the most researched, especially in the United States.² "Ordinary" resistance refers to the positions of women who do not identify with feminism but do not actively fight it. They are the ones likely to say "I'm not a feminist but...", because they consider feminism an outdated cause, and/or position individual success over collective solidarity. Ordinary resistance, which has been researched less than active resistance, has mainly interested specialists in social psychology and sociology, such as Pamela Aronson and Angela McRobbie, who have explored and criticized the complex and polysemous notion of postfeminism.³ Finally, "critical" resistance applies to the women who defend women's causes but disagree with the feminism they perceive as dominant in their culture because, for one reason or another, they do not identify with the movement. One obvious example can be found in the relations that non-white women have with feminism.

¹ For more details on this conference see : <https://wfw.hypotheses.org/347>

² See chapter 7 in Calvini-Lefèbvre, *Comment penser les résistances ?*, which proposes a precious bibliometric survey of the literature about women's resistance to feminism in Europe, Australia and the United States. The book also offers a complete and updated bibliography.

³ For definitions of postfeminism also see Gill and Scharff (1-17).

Perceived as a movement historically driven by, and centered on white, middle-class women, some Black women have turned to other forms of activism and embraced a new label—womanism, coined by Alice Walker⁴—anchored in intersectional theory and more adapted to the specific place they occupy in a racist and sexist society (Martin; Cooper; Crunk Feminist Collective).

As we shall see, the articles in this issue mainly explore forms of active and critical resistance, but they also hint at the presence of ordinary resistance. Focusing on the question of resistance supposes that we give a definition of the object of resistance (feminism) and of its subjects (women). Both terms actually resist any simple definition. As McAfee notes: “so far any search for a unified or unifying theory of feminism has yet to bear fruit.” When looking for a kind of core definition that would combine the many types of feminisms that exist, even the apparently simplest proposition, such as “a commitment to women’s equal rights” (McAfee) fails to address all the implications of feminism as the question of rights only partially addresses the problem of male domination that shapes a society’s structures. Likewise, a definition such as “a movement fighting male domination over women” (my definition) is not necessarily adequate as a number of women do not perceive gender as the primary basis of oppression, but rather their race or class. The difficulty of finding a unifying definition of feminism also testifies to the difficulty of defining the category “woman”; for a long time, “woman” actually referred to white middle-class members of the female sex, leaving out Black women, women of color, and working-class women. Since the late 20th century, to the intersectional diversity of women have been added more recent discussions involving nonbinary and transgender people (Seidman; Dicker 124-128). The very term “woman” has become problematic to define and attempts at giving a definition can be detrimental; as Judith Butler warns, any attempt to define “woman,” is also an attempt to exclude some from that category (9). The difficulty in coming up with unifying definitions for such terms justifies the choice of the plural in this issue: it is indeed more relevant to talk about different feminisms and consider, along with McAfee, that “feminism is an umbrella term for a range of views about injustices against women.” Thus, resistance to feminisms can only be studied *in context*, contexts that constantly evolve and require that we ask the questions “who resists?,” “what are they resisting?,” “how and why?,” while still bearing in mind the political, social, and cultural specificities of a given moment in US history.

This is what the articles in this issue propose to do, covering a large historical period, from the 19th century to nowadays. Taken together, it could be said that they fall into two categories: those exploring resistance to feminist movements, made up of women who do not identify with the word feminist, and develop discourses hostile to feminism—this category would fall under the umbrella of active resistance (Claire Sorin, Blandine Chelini-

⁴ Alice Walker first used the term “womanist” in her 1979 short story “Coming Apart” and then expanded its definition in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. She defines womanist as a Black feminist or feminist of color and a woman who loves sexually and/or non sexually other women and appreciates women’s culture and strength. The very concept of womanism is shaped by the experience of being a Black woman and promotes inclusiveness (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* 7-8).

Pont, Amélie Ribieras, Eleonore Cartellier, Marion Douzou), and those examining internal forms of resistance, referring to self-styled women's rights advocates or feminists who criticize and resist specific aspects of the feminist movements that emerged during their lives. Claire Delahaye's, Mélanie Kasparian's and Jill Drouillard's articles exemplify different forms of critical resistance.

Between the 19th century and today, there has been remarkable persistence and coherence in women's discourse that is hostile to feminisms: those who resist feminism in the name of "woman's place" or "woman's privileges" usually rely on essential, biological arguments stressing women's "natural" motherly and domestic instincts. No wonder there is little variation in their rhetoric; we could even assume that this rhetorical persistence, founded on "nature," is part of the political strength of their resistance. Indeed, the invariability of their arguments gives an illusion of coherence while reflecting the supposed stability of the natural paradigm that it invokes.

The articles by Claire Sorin, Blandine Chelini Pont, Amélie Ribieras, Marion Douzou, and Eleonore Cartellier testify to the chains of rhetorical repetition that characterize the discourse of women opposed to feminism. Even before women's rights became a "movement" there were voices criticizing the very concept of women's *rights*, in the name of women's *privileges*. As early as 1837, the involvement of some American women in the abolitionist movement aroused the disapproval of well-known figures such as Catharine E. Beecher, who, in response to Angelina Grimké, recalled the moral and social necessity of respecting the hierarchy between man and woman ordained by God (*An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism* 96-97). While opposed to slavery, Beecher felt that women's place was not in the political arena. It was this conviction that she reaffirmed some fifteen years later, in 1851, in a work disavowing the women's rights movement, not on the grounds that it was unfounded (she acknowledged that the female sex was sometimes subject to unjust laws), but that its methods were questionable (*True Remedy for the Wrongs of Women* 21-23). Strongly rooted in a religious paradigm interlacing the ideal of Republican motherhood with the doctrine of separate sexual spheres, the discourse of Catharine E. Beecher, and that of the critics of nascent feminism as a whole, were rooted in the dominant values of the middle class which identified women with the domestic sphere, the notion of female education, and the complementarity of the sexes. Claire Sorin's article shows that as early as 1843, reformer Eliza E. Farnham defended these values in a debate with John Neal, a pioneering but little-known advocate of women's suffrage. Published in the newspaper *Brother Jonathan*, Farnham's articles not only described the struggle for women's suffrage as a "dangerous doctrine" destructive of "true womanhood" (defined through domesticity, piety, selflessness, and motherhood), they also sketched an American society in which women enjoyed privileges and men were in reality women's slaves. Sorin also shows that Farnham openly adopts the attributes of "true womanhood" to compensate for her incursion in the public realm and that her resistance to women's suffrage is part of this strategy.

In the antifeminist movement triggered by the oft-called second feminist wave, the tenets of "true womanhood" and the idea of privileges were somehow resuscitated through discourse

that Blandine Chelini-Pont and Amélie Ribieras analyze. Chelini-Pont focuses on the work of a conservative Jewish writer, Midge Decter, who highlighted, like Farnham, that women's privileges would not exist without men's sacrifices and that feminism (here mainly understood as the women's liberation movement) was detrimental to women. Chelini-Pont shows that the texts by this secular intellectual probably influenced Phyllis Schlafly's own fight against feminism as Schlafly took up many of Decter's arguments in her 1970s campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment, and avoided a religious tone partly to promote, Chelini-Pont suggests, her own political agenda. Amélie Ribieras gives a more detailed analysis of Schlafly's discourse as a carefully constructed site of resistance. Drawing on discourse analysis and research on social movements, she identifies a number of rhetorical frames that enabled Schlafly to successfully promote the ideal of the traditional woman and mobilize a collective identity. Schlafly is often considered as the archetype of the female antifeminist and her influence can still be felt among the younger generations of women hostile to feminism, as Marion Douzou's and Eleonore Cartellier's papers show. Both articles focus on contemporary conservative women and the strategies they adopt to spread their message through the media. While the discourse remains essentially the same, the means of communication and the landscape of feminism have greatly evolved since the early 21st century, enabling these women to reach a wider audience, targeting young girls in particular.

Many of these contemporary antifeminist voices respond to the increased weight of feminist discourse that movements such as *#MeToo*, *#Time'sUp*, *#YesAllWomen*, *#HeforShe* spread. Partly following the logic of the backlash studied by Susan Faludi in the 1980s, an antifeminist wave especially active on the internet has surged over the past decade or so.⁵ Women, who have grown up benefitting from the advantages of feminism, play a central part in this antifeminist cyberactivism (Michaud, Sorin). Marion Douzou's article sheds light on the Tea Party galaxy and shows how a figure like Carla d'Adesi, a conservative, Christian, pro-life activist, has managed to increase her influence through the publication of a children's book series and the creation of a clothing line called COL 1972 (Culture of Life) a reference to ante *Roe v. Wade* America. While the recent decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* has rendered her fashion collection somewhat irrelevant, D'Adesi's initiatives must be understood as a form of cultural resistance that ironically and occasionally borrows some feminist slogans.⁶ Additionally, Cartellier's paper explains how "internet missionaries" cleverly convey their messages glorifying a traditional type of femininity dedicated to domesticity, submission, and religion. From the comfort of their own homes, these women,

⁵ In a 2020 article, Susan Faludi herself stressed that the Trump era corresponded to a period of feminist backlash somewhat similar to the one she had studied in 1991. She noticed, however, that the Trump era was characterized by a more overt and aggressive form of misogyny.

⁶ The line between feminism and antifeminism sometimes gets blurred because of the attempt by some activists to appropriate feminist concerns about women, such as pro-life groups that fight under a feminist label (e.g. Feminists For Life, Susan B. Anthony's List). In her study of right-wing women, Ronnee Schreiber suggests that only a few conservative women openly define themselves as feminists and she stresses the difference between being "pro-woman" and feminist, urging feminists to clarify their goals (Schreiber 2018).

many of whom support the Tradwife movement, exhibit images of their domestic bliss and spread conservative values while actually living lives that do not correspond to their principles since the time and energy they spend editing their blogs and videos not only enable them to earn money but also prevent them from behaving as full-time housewives and mothers. As in the past, the articles confirm that organized opposition to feminism is often carried out by white, upper-middle and middle-class, college-educated women. Susan Marshall's pioneering study showed that antisuffragists mainly belonged to the upper class because they were afraid of losing their own privileges within the political and social circles they navigated. Schlafly's campaign, STOP ERA (Stop Taking Our Privileges) was fought in the same spirit, although the nature and scope of the privileges had changed. Today, as Cartellier and Douzou show, most of the outspoken antifeminists are still white and middle-class activists clinging to a traditional lifestyle they deem precious and threatened.

Three articles in this issue deal with forms of resistance that can be called critical. Although uttered by different women and in different contexts, these forms of critical resistance have a common point as they clearly denounce feminism as a non-inclusive movement. Claire Delahaye, in her analysis of Anna Julia Cooper's article, highlights the point of view of an African American intellectual whose experience of marginalization is transformed into a site of situated knowledge and resistance. In a carefully crafted text, Cooper strongly denounced the racism of her contemporary white suffragists whom she saw as agents of oppression, complicit in the system of physical violence and political injustice that crushed Black people, especially in the segregated South. The particular, situated experience of non-white women is also studied by Mélanie Kasparian who focuses on a group of contemporary Chicana writers. Kasparian shows that these writers express their resistance to Euro-centered feminism by celebrating the kitchen as a place of empowerment and creativity especially suited to working-class women of color. Rejecting the negative, carceral vision of the kitchen spread by second-wave feminists, these Chicana authors express the pleasure offered by food and domestic activities and glorify a form of reclaiming their bodies which can be seen as their own brand of feminism. The non-inclusive nature of some brands of feminism is finally targeted by Jill Drouillard who proposes to consider gender critical feminism as a form of resistance to feminism (sometimes referred to as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists). Arguing that the rejection of transwomen from the category "women," founded on a traditional conception of biological sex, amounts to negating the existence of all transwomen. Drouillard also suggests that gender critical feminists, because of their vision of man as the *sole* oppressor (excluding other sources of oppression such as white supremacy), fail to consider the experiences of black and brown bodies. Ultimately, she argues that the values of gender critical feminism align with many of the conservative values characterizing Trumpism. The traditional, "commonsense" definition of woman, exclusively based on biology, echoes a "politics of simplicity" that Drouillard describes as "the corner stone of Trump's campaign." Besides, she explains that "the focus on sex/gender as a self-evident stand-alone category irrespective of other intersections such as race align(s) with conservative values inherent in Trumpism." This does not mean that all gender critical feminists voted for Trump but that they defend views on sex and gender that "feed into conservative dialogue" and support exclusionary dynamics. Positing that transwomen *are*

women, Drouillard demonstrates that gender critical feminism fundamentally resists the cause it seeks to defend.

Finally, because they explore a variety of historical contexts, these articles reflect the invariance and evolution of the discourse and practices that resist feminism. Many of the papers highlight that religion has consistently been, and to a certain extent still is, a site of resistance to feminism.⁷ However, and this is a major evolution in the ideological nature of women's resistance to feminism, by the 1980s and 1990s, a secular opposition to feminism gained strength, rooted in neoliberal and libertarian ideology (Schreiber 2008). While neoliberalism and libertarianism are not identical—for instance, neoliberals are friendlier to the nation-state than libertarians (Vallier)—they share a set of common values including individualism, emphasis on free choice, liberty, and small government that tend to ascribe persisting disparities between men and women not to patriarchy but to individual responsibility (Sorooshyari). The rejection of systemic oppression espouses a postfeminist stance positing that feminism is no longer necessary (Anderson 20). At the same time, a number of conservative women's organizations such as Independent Women's Forum have managed to speak in the name of women and discredit feminists as representatives of women's interests (Schreiber 20). As Schreiber shows, the libertarian-leaning IWF, driven by economic rather than social conservatism, has developed a secular discourse that does not attack abortion rights (5). In her article on Midge Decter, Blandine Chelini-Pont explores such conservative voices and shows that, although loyal to her Jewish heritage, Decter, a former board member of IWF, did spread such secular discourse. Finally, antifeminist cyberactivism and the contestation of LGBTQIA+ rights, which certainly represent the latest evolutionary trends, can be perceived as potentially dangerous sites of resistance to contemporary feminism, especially as they effectively target young girls whom they feed with arguments likely to strengthen, at the very least, ordinary forms of resistance. The danger, according to some feminists, is that antifeminist women are waging a cultural war that they could win. Addressing the current Tradwife movement, Jill Filipovic writes:

The tradwife movement is more than just eye-catching images of open land, barefoot kids, chickens, and sourdough perfectly cultivated for an Instagram grid. It's a cultural movement to influence young women to willingly check out of the workforce and give up their rights and agency [...]. And if that continues, the #tradwives and (more importantly) the well-resourced conservative movements behind them that want to

⁷ In the late 20th century, rootedness in religious networks was defined by Jerome Himmelstein as a determining factor when it comes to distinguishing between abortion and ERA opponents and proponents. For Himmelstein, religion was more important a basis of antifeminism than social position or personal dependency. This trend seems to have evolved, however, as more and more young, secular female activists embracing a feminist label oppose abortion rights on ethical grounds (Graham). Besides, it is important to bear in mind that religion and feminism are not incompatible. In fact, the suffrage movement was historically dominated by women who openly identified as Christian women. In the late 20th century, there were likewise religious branches of feminism, such as feminist theology and Christian feminism (see Ruether; Daly).

take away women's agency and rights are going to win. And it will be our fault too (Filipovic).

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