

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*: The View from 2017

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I. Introduction

Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics* still matters, not just because it is a foundational feminist text, but because the intersection of sex and politics remains a site of struggle for feminists and even within feminism today. Though *Sexual Politics* began as a doctoral dissertation, its footprint in the popular media is much larger than its presence in academic publications and, watching how the book has moved in and out of the public discourse over ten decades, it is clear that Kate Millett struck a raw nerve. The conversation about her ideas, about sexual politics, was and remains a public one. It is an essential piece of radical feminist theorizing and I think every feminist could benefit from a review of *Sexual Politics* in its context as a ground breaking second wave text and in the applicability and limits of its arguments for contemporary feminist debates.

II. Radical Feminism as a Theoretical Framework

Kate Millett's work is one of the foundational texts for radical feminist theorizing. Analysis of *Sexual Politics* through the theoretical lens of radical feminism sheds light on both the theory and the book. Writing about its impact more than thirty years later, radical feminist activist and icon Andrea Dworkin (2003) said "Everything that feminists have done is foreshadowed, predicted or encouraged by *Sexual Politics*." Millett was the first feminist to receive widespread attention for what would become the basis of radical feminist theory: "analysis of how men's power over women can be seen in all areas of women's lives" (Calixte et al, 2010, p. 21). She defines politics broadly as a "power-structured relationship, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" and her thesis is that sex is a status category, like race and class, which determines whether one is powerful or subject to another's power (Millett, 1969/2016; p. 23). The force of her argument, which would become backbone of radical feminist theorizing as well, comes from her application of this logic to the act of sex itself, particularly in its portrayal in popular literature.

Millett was interested in understanding where the sexual revolution went wrong and her lens on this is literature. Her key innovation was the linkage of sexual politics in literature with sexual politics in the lived experience of women. Using the tools of literary analysis, Millett surveyed the evolution of the

sexual revolution and its backlash in literary history and revealed the hostile, patriarchal misogyny in contemporary literary fiction from D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. Their use of profanity and graphic rape scenes in their fiction put them on the literary and sexually liberated cutting edge, but Millett exposes the underlying power structure of the sex in their books and criticizes their reliance on the debasement of female sexuality as a foil for masculine sexual strength and superiority. As a counterpoint, she turns to French author Jean Genet and his writing about homosexual experiences in the Parisian underworld which, she argues, provides a truer revelation of the power dynamics at play in sexual politics (Millett, 1969/2016). Millett's exposure of the sexual control and violence underlying the power in these works laid the groundwork for radical feminists to fight against the real world incarnations of these themes in pornography, rape, prostitution, and violence against women (Jeffreys, 2011).

III. *Sexual Politics* in Context

Sexual Politics was ground breaking in both content and methodology. In Millett's own words, its content is "notes toward a theory of patriarchy" which "attempt to prove that sex is a status category with political implications," making it "something of a pioneering effort, [...] both tentative and imperfect" (1970/2016, p. 24). Reflecting on the book in 2003, Andrea Dworkin agreed that Millett had broken new ground, ground that had become well-tread in the intervening thirty years. Dworkin also remarked on the novelty of Millett's methodology: she makes her argument in *Sexual Politics* through a synthesis of the disciplines of history, anthropology, economics, psychology, and literary criticism (Dworkin, 2003). Millett started a conversation about sexual politics in American literature that continues in contemporary conversations about sexism, exemplified last year in Rebecca Solnit's withering criticism of *Esquire*'s list of "80 Books Every Man Should Read" for its exclusion of women authors and problematic representation of women (Doherty, 2016).

Millett's book became a sensation partly because this narrative served the mainstream media at the time. Women's liberation was featured for the first time in television news and on front pages after the Women's Strike for Equality on August 26, 1970, so *Sexual Politics* happened to be published at a time when the public had an appetite for radical feminism and journalists were looking to understand the

movement's context. In early August *The New York Times* published two separate columns on *Sexual Politics* and mentioned Millett, next to Betty Friedan, again in their front page coverage of the strike. *Time Magazine* featured her on their August 31 cover and hailed her as the "Mao Tse-tung of Women's Liberation" (Poirot, 2004). Thus Kate Millet the radical feminist spokesperson was unwittingly born. Stardom and the ensuing scrutiny from the public and within the movement did not suit her and Millett did not believe she had the right disposition or was as skilled a politician as Friedan and Gloria Steinem (Doherty, 2016). Her fall from grace came shortly after her rise, and was similarly media-driven, when she was outed as a lesbian at a feminist meeting that was featured in a December *Time* article. At the time, feminists were sharply divided on the issue of sexuality, with Betty Friedan's worries about "the lavender menace" undermining feminism's public credibility on one side and Radicalesbians "Women-Identified-Women" zap action at the Second Congress to Unite Women on the other (Poirot, 2004). The theme of media fascination anointing both feminist spokeswomen and representatives of the backlash is also a contemporary one which we will consider in greater detail below.

In hindsight, it is clear that *Sexual Politics* was the crest of a massive wave of feminist theorizing and action. It was preceded by the work of feminist works like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), an early and thorough explication of sex as a class category, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which articulated the unhappiness second-class sex status produced in women. *Sexual Politics* would be followed a year later by Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), exploring female sexuality, and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), which applies a fierce radical feminist analysis to Freudian psychoanalytic theory and Marxist economics. In 1975, Susan Brownmiller would bring Millett's analysis of sex politics in literature to men and women's lives in the real world with the publication of *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975). All of these works have since been fairly criticized for their narrow understanding of the category of woman and preoccupation with white middle-class concerns, but at the time the ideas they introduced were fresh and radically revolutionary.

IV. *Politics Today*

Millett hoped that the second wave might succeed in abolishing sex subordination, achieving revolution, and creating “a world we can bear out of the desert we inhabit,” but it turns out this desert is vast and many of Millett’s radical feminist themes remain relevant today in 2017. Economic inequality and sexual violence are ongoing problems, though they look different now than they did in 1969. Women make eighty-seven cents to a man’s dollar in Canada today (Israel, 2017), up from fifty-nine cents in 1970 (Crawford, 1999), and the public discourse has shifted from arguing that women can and should have public lives to debating whether or not they can or should “have it all” (Slaughter, 2012). There is particular poetic resonance in the way this year’s “General Strike: A Day Without Women” on March 8th echoed the 1970 Women’s Strike for Equality, the event that primed the media to launch Kate Millett to popularity (Doyle, 2017; Poirot, 2004).¹ The conversation around sexual violence has changed in the past fifty years thanks in great part to radical feminist organizing and activism. Still, about 1 in 3 women experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime (World Health Organization, 2016). Today, too, we have a better understanding of the diversity of women’s experiences and how intersecting identities can compound women’s marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989); women of colour make even less per male-earned dollar and are more likely to live in poverty than white women, while indigenous and trans women face violence at outstanding rates because of their low status in the patriarchal hierarchy.

The act of sex, especially, remains a contested site of both oppression and empowerment. By the 1980s, feminist thinking on sex had coalesced at two poles: “dominance feminism” and “sex positive feminism.” Dominance feminism, spearheaded by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, argued that the inequality between men and women amounted to coercion and they ultimately succeeded in changing the legal definition of rape to give victims a policy tool for recourse in cases of, for example, marital rape or sexual favour-seeking from an employer (Bazelon, 2015). Sex positive feminism rose in

¹ “A Day Without Women” was organized by the organizers of the January 21st Women’s March, in solidarity with the International Women’s Strike organizers (Women’s March, 2017), and thousands of women who marched in opposition to President Donald Trump, a man for whom Millett’s critique of the abuse of sexual power is unfortunately apt, participated.

response to the failed attempt by dominance feminists to pass an Indianapolis ordinance allowing the makers and distributors of pornography to be sued for degrading presentations of women's sexuality.² Sex positive feminists were concerned about the policy's limits on free speech, including the expression of diverse sexual orientations, and its acceptance of sexist stereotypes. Many of these women had found sexual freedom through feminism, in terms of their sexual orientations and in their connections with their bodies as sexual beings (Bazelon, 2015). Sex positive feminism was the victor in this culture war and today dominance arguments about porn and prostitution have receded to the background and positivity about women's choices about sex, bodies, sex work is the norm among young feminists (Goldberg, 2015).

In the 1990s, this conversation continued with the development of a postfeminist movement whose spokeswomen were published to media frenzy reminiscent of Millett's rise to fame. In the United States, the rebellious daughters of feminism were women like Katie Roiphe and Danielle Crittendon who left Women's Studies programs questioning feminism's relevance. In Canada, academic Amy Friedman and journalists Kate Fillion and Donna LaFramboise all published books and received media acclaim for their arguments that feminism had become too radical, that women were not victims nor saints, and that sexuality was not the site of oppression the second wave feminists claimed it was (Steenbergen, 2006). These arguments are a direct refutation of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, but almost thirty years into the alleged postfeminist era the American president is a man who doesn't see a problem with grabbing women "by the p***y" (Trump, 2005/2016) and Kate Millett's work feels astonishingly relevant. The phenomenon of media attention for feminist dissent and dissenters also feels perennially familiar.

While the media was promoting post feminism in the nineties, third wave feminists were carrying on with their project of understanding lived sexuality in the messiness of violence and desire in women's lives (Steenbergen, 2006). Like every iteration of feminist ideology, sex positivity has its discontents.

Ruth Hills argues in her book *The Sex Myth: The Gap Between Our Fantasies and Our Realities*

² Kate Millett was one of a number of prominent feminists, including Alice Walker, Gloria Steinem, and Susan Brownmiller, who signed an unpublished letter to *Time Magazine* in 1985 in support of Dworkin and MacKinnon's civil rights approach (Jeffreys, 2011).

(discussed in Goldberg, 2015) that for some young women “the compulsion to appear ‘liberated’ is a form of regulation of its own.” Hills suggests that women have shifted from sexual objects whose sexuality is policed by other people to sexual subjects who police themselves to fit the cultural ideal (Zakaria, 2015). The pressure to appear sexually liberated may contribute to the rise in claims to identities like queer, asexual, and sexual assault survivor among young women; in addition to being valuable descriptions of lived experience and identification, these are socially acceptable ways to express sexual discomfort or acknowledge the complexity of sexuality (Goldberg, 2015). Other young feminists, like Laurie Penny, argue that sexual liberation has only modified the manner in which women are consumers and consumed. Under modern capitalism, female sexuality is a lucrative corporate product that feeds a social mandate to keep women small, silent, and sexy or marginalised (Penny, 2010).

Compulsory sexual liberation also excludes young women from outside the dominant white, secular cultural background. Muslim feminist Rafia Zakaria reflects on her experience of alienation in a feminist graduate seminar where it felt like “it would be impossible [...] to explain that my oppositions were not at all to sex or sexual pleasure, but to its construction as unproblematic, un-colonized by patriarchy, the entire measure of liberation” (2015). From her perspective, the celebration and practice of sexual freedom among Western feminists does very little, for instance, to contribute to the freedom of Pakistani women who are criminalized and imprisoned under Pakistani law as participants in fornication or adultery when they report rape. Zakaria argues that addressing this oppression in practical terms might mean giving Muslim women the platform and space to argue that the law is a corruption of Islamic religious doctrine, making reclamation - not rejection - of Islamic practice a radical feminist act. She references Millett’s *Sexual Politics* explicitly to argue that addressing this oppression means applying a theory of patriarchy to the social institution of sex (Zakaria, 2015).

V. Limits of *Sexual Politics*

At almost fifty years old, the radical analysis in *Sexual Politics* is in some ways limited when applied to some aspects of the evolution of contemporary feminist thinking. As previously mentioned, *Sexual Politics* and its cohort of second wave radical feminist texts have been criticised for their

preoccupation with the condition of white middle-class women. Rosenberg and Duffy (2010) argue that second wave feminists did essential work in exposing the extent and complexity of violence against women and laid the groundwork for third wave feminisms to develop more nuanced understandings of the varieties of women's experiences of sexual violence and back away from the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism. As a result, it doesn't make much sense to talk about sex as a political space without reference to colonialism, globalization, imperialism, heterosexism, ableism, and racism today. We now have a clearer understanding of the ways that sexual violence and women's experiences of sex as a class category are "complexly interwoven with local, national, and international axes of power, privilege, and oppression" (Rosenberg and Duffy, 2010; p. 161). A lot of current feminist work investigates and theorizes on precisely these particulars. Kate Millett, however, did not have access to this kind of intersectional theorizing when she wrote the book so *Sexual Politics* is limited in this way.

Feminist debates around trans women and sex work have also evolved beyond Kate Millett's work on sexual politics in *Sexual Politics* and her later books. In *Sexual Politics*, Millett argues that "the prostitute's role is an exaggeration of patriarchal economic conditions where the majority of females are driven to live through some exchange of sexuality for support" (1970/2016, p. 123) and she expanded on this understanding of prostitution as a hangover of male domination that would disappear with increasing equality in her 1973 book *The Prostitution Papers* (Jeffreys, 2011). This was a common feminist position at the time, although there was dissent even then. Organizations like HIRE (Hooking Is Real Employment) and COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) were the first to advocate for prostitution as a career option no different from any other employment, arguing for legalization and decriminalization so that prostitutes could be free to safely pursue their work as independent contractors or in cooperatives. They seem somewhat ahead of their time, being also critical of the penal system and concerned about the high proportion of women of colour who are jailed for prostitution while their white middle-class johns walk free (HIRE, n.d.). The debate about sex work as exploitation or agency continues today within feminism and is actually treated with some nuance in international law prohibiting human trafficking. This is a particularly sticky issue when it comes to the debate about whether a woman is necessarily

exploited or can choose to or consent to sell her body and be trafficked in order to live in another country where she will have access to a better life (Trépanier, 2006). Themes of racism, globalism, capitalism, and imperialism are also pertinent here. It seems that sex work is likely here to stay, in all of its complexity, and that Kate Millett's characterisation of prostitution as slavery is too simple and denies agency to women engaged in sex work.

Gender theory and trans identity and rights are another site of sexual politics where Kate Millett's reasoning comes up against some contested limits. Radical feminism, rooted in Millett's work, has become something of a pariah among feminisms for being exclusionary and hostile towards trans people and sex workers and the acronyms TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) and SWERF (Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminist) have gained currency as slurs, especially on social media like Twitter (Goldberg, 2014). Trans activist Juliet Jacques (2014), responding to Goldberg's reportage on the disruption of a RadFem conference and the conflict between radical feminists and trans activists, notes that the histories of trans activism and radical feminism are both more complex and nuanced than the coverage of the conflict between them reveal and that, unfortunately, the loudest and most hostile voices dominate the discussion. I suspect Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* would fall into the category of "good political theory and work" done in and around radical feminism that Jacques claims the term TERF was originally created to differentiate exclusionary radical feminists from (like Sheila Jeffreys, also cited in this paper). Sexual politics is a highly contested space where gender identity is concerned but Jacques contends that "the very fact that it was so hotly debated suggests that actually, feminism probably could include trans people and not disintegrate" (2014). Julia Serano (2012) characterises transgender perspectives on feminism as one of the many strains of third wave feminisms that - along with sex-positive feminism, queer theory, postmodern/poststructuralist feminism, and intersectionality - are critical of the second wave theorist's simplistic understanding of men as the oppressors of women. The limits of *Sexual Politics'* analysis is clear here, and I don't know how it could be fully integrated into this contemporary understanding except, like Jacques suggests, as one of a plurality of theories about sexism.

Then again, perhaps this dispute between feminisms is inevitable because, as Millett says “revolution is always heresy, perhaps sexual revolution most of all” (1979/2016, p. 127).

Conclusion

In 1999, writer Leslie Crawford went looking for a copy of *Sexual Politics* and found instead that Kate Millett had become a footnote in the feminist movement while her contemporaries continue to be household names and feminist celebrities.³ Twenty-five years on, *Sexual Politics* returned to print yet again, after a seven year interlude, just last year in March 2016 (Millett, 1970/2016). Millett herself is still alive and living in New York. She is quoted in the media occasionally, most recently having spoken at the funeral of her friend and fellow radical feminist Shulamith Firestone (Faludi, 2013). In contrast to Crawford, I am heartened, but after writing this paper not surprised, to find that a Google search today turns up several pages of links to articles mentioning Kate Millett and *Sexual Politics* in the last year and a half. Feminism and its discontents, and the discontents among those discontents, are still reliably recurring figures in mainstream media’s quest for coverage and clicks. More than that though, Kate Millett’s arguments remain at the core of current feminist concerns with sexual violence, economic equality, and sexual liberation and I believe her contention that sex is a site of oppression has relevance even in the debates about trans issues and sex work where it comes up against the limits of its interpretation. Even if feminists were to forget *Sexual Politics*, sexual politics would still undergird our reality and our activism. I think we are better off for remembering Kate Millett, the mainstream media’s role in her explosive entrance into popular culture, and, beyond the media coverage, her wonderfully radical ideas.

³ The University of Illinois Press reissued all eight of Kate Millett’s books in 2000 (Doherty, 2016).

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