

Campus Women



Yes to feminism, no to feminists

Written by Michelle Dumont excerpt from *The Montreal Massacre* edited by Louise Malette and Marie Chalouh.

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Since the sixth of December, the word FEMINIST has shown up everywhere in the media, ranging in meaning from a condemnation (condemned to death, literally) to a proclamation. Between these two poles, the real nature of feminism has been overlooked—for it is true that, most often, feminism is ignored. Be that as it may, I wish to look at the ways in which History has tried to accommodate this important social movement.

The word feminism is about a hundred years old. It is thought to have been used for the first time by Hubertine Auclert in 1882 in a letter to a women's rights activist. It is important to note that this word was applied to a movement whose theoretical origins could be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century, and whose first political organization formed around 1848. A women's rights movement has existed for a century and a half, despite the fact that most official accounts of history ignored this. The movement spread throughout the majority of occidental countries from the 1890's onward, and it gave rise to a network of national and international organizations, next to which present day feminism pales on comparison. The English suffragettes initiated at the beginning of the century—and this without government subsidies a core group of eighty people who were paid to work for the cause of women's suffrage. The French feminists published a daily newspaper, *La Fronde*, from 1897 to 1903 to publicize their principal demands. Other examples abound. Of note, this feminism, from the moment it first appeared, provoked virulent reactions on the part of several groups of men, which contributed to establishing a dichotomy between GOOD and BAD feminism.

If contemporary detractors of feminism were to read the feminist texts of that era, they would no doubt be dumbfounded by the reasonableness and timidity of the demands found in what was called BAD feminism. As for the GOOD feminism, it had already been co-opted by the religious and political authorities in order to give it a definition that would keep women connected to the private sphere, and in the context of family responsibilities. Women themselves supported this definition of GOOD feminism. To establish a distinction between several types of feminism is therefore not particularly original: it's a phenomenon that dates back a hundred years, and it is nothing more than a rudimentary strategy to divide the forces of protest. But let us continue.

Feminism, it appears, became lethargic not long after the First World War, after women were granted the right to vote. But this statement doesn't stand up to careful examination. Indeed, the collective mobilization of French women was considerable between 1920 and 1940, on the issues of votes for women, contraception, legislation and education. American women, from 1925 on, began the long struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment, and they established powerful women's associations. And the Quebecois began, against all expectations, to demand the right to vote in provincial elections.

After the disruption caused by the Second World War and the period of social conservatism which followed, it took women some years to point out the profound inequalities of a social system which exploited their competence both in the home and at their paid job outside it. New circumstances, brought about by the gains of the earlier feminists, called for a new analysis. The word feminism, which had been set aside, came back into use to once again put a name to this complex concurrence of women's demands. "Women's liberation, Year Zero!" wrote the French feminists in 1970; they were apparently ignorant of the feminism which had gone before.

Over the past nearly thirty years in Quebec, since 1961, new demands have been drawn up.

In 1966, the Quebecois endowed themselves with powerful organizations, such as the FFQ and the