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Review: Marketplace Feminism

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Marketplace Feminism: A Crucial Intergenerational Conversation

Sara Evans, *University of Minnesota*

Andi Zeisler is a wise, learned, and funny woman. She is also a prophet, in the sense of one who points to the evils and injustices of her time. Her book, *We Were Feminists Once*, lays bare the waxing and waning of feminism in American popular culture since the 1970s as context for evaluating the current feminist zeitgeist in which numerous major public figures from Beyoncé to Taylor Swift, not to mention major corporations like Dove and AOL, have embraced the label.

Zeisler clarifies the deep dilemma of feminism's relationship to mass media. Early on, feminists understood the power of the media to shape women's self-perceptions and frame their possibilities. Betty Friedan ([1963] 2003) eviscerated the advertising industry's efforts to shape the spending habits of female consumers by tying them to their domestic responsibilities, inducing and using insecurity to plug household appliances, cake mixes, deodorants, makeup, and soaps and detergents for every possible surface of home or body.

Feminists fought back both by opting out of consumption and by creating their own media: journals, books, music. In part as a result of those interventions, Zeisler's generation came of age with new and insurgent possibilities (zines, riot grrrls, etc.) that offered girls and young women a sense of possibility. By the mid-1990s all of this was amplified by the emerging Internet. Yet her narrative makes clear that the antifeminist backlash never lost its power, even in the face of feminist resurgence following Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas.

Since the 1970s, the dominant message in the mass media has been that feminism is antiquated, unnecessary, and even dangerous to women, while the

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right-wing media continuously roils with venomous antifeminism. Though feminism itself, of course, was never absent, just off the page or in the background (academic debates, nonprofits plugging away on issues like reproductive rights and equal pay), the recent embrace of feminism by celebrities and corporations alike has been startling for veterans of those earlier wars. After reading Zeisler, I have a much clearer understanding of what is happening and its dangers.

Zeisler traces the periodic reemergence of feminist impulses in the media, some insurgent and some cracking into the mainstream. For decades she has been an acute observer of this scene, and her deep knowledge is a revelation to people like me, whose lives rarely intersect with the world of mass media and popular culture. I seldom watch TV and am not a consumer of current popular music. The changing cultural messages for generations of girls has meant that each cohort has experienced a new mix of opportunities and challenges that are too often opaque to older generations. The result is that conversations across generations of feminists have always been difficult and complex. We see the world through different lenses depending on when we came of age.

An underlying drumbeat of this analysis, however, is the power of marketplace feminism. Each upsurge of protest has led to a new backlash (anti-feminist, postfeminist) in which the media has actively denigrated feminism, and in each case, the market has found ways to redirect feminist impulses in an individualistic, consumerist direction where “choice” displaces justice, rights, and equality.

Zeisler, as a long-term advocate of the power of media, ends up in a sobering place. The recent rise in celebrity feminism seems worth celebrating, at least in contrast to a time when any association with feminism was a stain on a celebrity’s brand. She argues that celebrities provide validation for movements. Individual celebrities can do a great deal to legitimize feminism, as long as they don’t simply wear it as a self-enhancing piece of their own brand. At the same time, as individuals with their own quirks and flaws, they never fully embody the ideal the movement wants to communicate. For a movement as diverse as feminism, with its long and sordid history of trashing its own leaders, no public figure can meet every standard. With every flaw magnified in the lens of social media, fallible women who emerge into the spotlight will inevitably suffer both scrutiny and blistering attacks.

Similarly, Zeisler explores the apparent embrace of feminist goals by numerous corporations and corporate leaders. I not only appreciated her excavation of ads from companies like Dove that openly challenge culturally imposed standards of beauty but ultimately and unsurprisingly place those challenges in the service of selling something (soap) that somehow promises

to make the viewer more beautiful, whatever her version of beauty. In the process, the empowering (oh, yes, Zeisler really does a job on that word “empowerment”) messages turn in on themselves to provoke the necessary insecurity that drives beauty product purchasing decisions. Ultimately, of course, we all knew that marketplace feminism would be about consumption, holding out individual choice as a goal that erases equality or the shadows of hierarchy and injustice from the feminist agenda. But to see it all laid out so very clearly—and wittily—is deeply unsettling. This is a wake-up call. The current flood of feminist-positive media is not only sure to be temporary, it also undermines the necessarily hard work that feminism as a social movement requires.

Zeisler, in the end, counterposes the fun and self-enhancement of consumerist choice to the hard work of collective action required by social movements. She is right that there is hard work to be done. She has also given us a brilliant analysis of the astonishing power of marketplace feminism to subvert and deflect, warning against any easy assumption that the current feminist-positive media world is a sign of deep change on which we can count.

If we redirect the conversation to underlying structures that shape the hierarchies of gender, race, and class, the enormity of the struggle is certainly daunting. But I would argue that social movements can also generate an intensely satisfying experience of community, purpose, and even fun. Reclaiming the powerful experience of collective action (Black Lives Matter is one of the current examples) and finding ways to do it that are strategic and effective is clearly a task that still awaits, but there are thousands already in the trenches laying the groundwork. Thank you, Andi Zeisler, for helping us better understand the terrain on which we must fight. ■

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Wannabe Feminist

Amy Richards, *Soapbox, Inc.*

Shortly after Monica Lewinsky’s tryst with Bill Clinton consumed our headlines and welfare “deform” rolled out in the United States, the Spice Girls came to fame with their catchy song “Wannabe.” Many feminists cringed at these scantily clad “girls” named Posh and Baby for misrepresenting feminism. To mark its twentieth anniversary, the song was recast

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