

Book Review

Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction

by Rosemarie Tong and Tina Fernandes Botts (Westview, 2018)

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The terms “feminism” and “feminist” are thrown around quite a bit these days. But the referent is rarely obvious. For some, feminists are men and women who want generic equality between the sexes. For others, feminists are extreme political, female leftists who angrily propose laws to penalize a whole range of social inequalities—whether in public or private spheres. For still others, feminism is an academic ideology that is currently trendy, especially at universities, which may overlap with pro-LGBTQ and/or Neo-Marxist projects. The list could go on. At the very least, it is clear that feminists and feminism can be viewed positively, negatively, and everything in between, depending on context.

To help sort through the fog, Rosemarie Tong and Tina Fernandes Botts, both professors of philosophy, recently finished the fifth edition of a standard work on the subject, *Feminist Thought*. This edition involves some re-arrangement of content, slight revisions, and the addition of ch. 10, “Third-Wave and Queer Feminisms.” The book helped me to refine my thoughts on the topic and to better understand the diversity of feminist perspectives.¹ The research, organization, and style of writing are clear and straightforward, resulting in an outstanding introduction to a remarkably sophisticated and complex subject.

For many readers, the table of contents will reveal this sophistication, as each of the ten chapters represents a different variety of feminism (as well as subsets):

1. Liberal Feminism
 - a. First-Wave
 - b. Second-Wave
 - c. Third-Wave
2. Radical Feminism
 - a. Radical Cultural
 - b. Radical Libertarian
3. Marxist and Socialist Feminism
4. Women-of-Color Feminism(s) in the United States
5. Women-of-Color Feminism(s) on the World Stage
 - a. Global
 - b. Postcolonial
 - c. Transnational
6. Psychoanalytic Feminism
 - a. Classical
 - b. Contemporary
 - c. French
7. Care-Focused

8. Ecofeminism
 - a. Nature
 - b. Spiritual
 - c. Transformative
 - d. Global
 - e. Vegetarian
 - f. Environmental
9. Existentialist, Poststructural, and Postmodern Feminisms
10. Third-Wave and Queer Feminisms

Some of these categories are generally accepted among feminist scholars, while some are the authors’ unique attempt at synthesizing a number of complex strands into a (hopefully) helpful group. While the organization might give the impression of being encyclopedic, the book does not feel cumbersome. Though each chapter exhibits condensed, academic prose, the authors manage to keep the attention of their readers. Most of the chapters highlight key figures to each movement/category, and helpfully guide readers through some of the important works—what they have contributed, the influence they have had, and how they connect with ideas covered elsewhere in the volume.

The raw diversity of perspectives is a feature of feminism the authors are not afraid to confront. Some varieties of feminism dignify motherhood, heterosexuality, marriage, and criticize pornography, while other varieties *critique* motherhood, marriage, heterosexuality, and legitimize pornography. Similar division cuts through topics like the roles which homosexuality, race, and economic status have to play in the feminist enterprise, the meaning of gender, property rights (and rights in general), and the role of the state. The authors are careful to present each position as objectively as possible, and only rarely identify their own inclinations (e.g., 259). They avoid totalizing any ideas of feminism in their conclusions, which is both fortunate (since it avoids presumptuousness) and unfortunate (since it leaves readers with little sense of “basic feminism” and little hope for unity/collective action).

Two criticisms arise from my reading. First, there is virtually no discussion of the role of religious thought in any version of feminism. This is unfortunate because it is misleading for a book that specifically focuses on “thought” (ideologies, philosophies, theologies, etc.) as opposed to history, contemporary culture, or other facets of exploration. Many feminist movements in the late 1700s and 1800s were explicitly energized by a re-reading of religious texts (not least, the Bible), changing theologies, and religious institutions, as well as by new access to women’s education in the broader liberal arts and humanities fields, which include theological and religious studies. One cannot

honestly read some of the early feminist figures covered in the book—such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth (note her life-changing conversion to Christianity), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (author of *The Woman's Bible*), Lucretia Mott (a Quaker preacher)—not to mention the many others not covered (the Grimke sisters, Katharine Bushnell, Catherine Booth, Amanda Berry Smith, Pandita Ramabai, et al.) without coming to grips with the theological convictions that drove their own actions. One exception is a brief and negative discussion of Mary Daly's thought (45–46). There is also no discussion of influential contemporary feminist theologians, religious scholars, or pastoral figures (e.g., Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sally McFague, Anne Clifford, Elizabeth Johnson, et al.).

At the very least, this lack of integration with the history of feminism may give readers a skewed impression of some “feminist thought.” It seems the book unconsciously commits the all-too-common fallacies in modernist scholarship of assuming the possibility of (a) the ability to isolate one's religious thoughts/convictions from a person's general character, being, and notable actions (a sort of Neo-Kantian compartmentalization), (b) assuming that theology plays a secondary and/or insignificant role compared to all other influences, and (c) a failure to understand one's perspective in the history of ideas. Granted, implementing religious discourse, debate, and literature would expand the volume significantly (making it a bit unwieldy for a course textbook).² But such implementation would show how integral theological thought really is to feminism. If Tong and Botts find religion and theology so easily separable from “thought,” perhaps the next edition of the book might at least indicate how and why they believe this to be the case, and how such a delineation might affect readers' perceptions about feminism, both in general and in certain subsets. Alternately, an eleventh chapter on religious feminism that implements scholarship from Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, etc., might do the trick.

Second, economic criticism regarding Marxist-socialist feminist thought is lacking. Given the authors' presentation, it appears there is little to complain about when it comes to the economic aspects of Marxist-socialist feminisms. This is somewhat odd because, as far as the book is concerned, the Marxist-socialist framework is primarily oriented in *economic* terms. But, Marx's nineteenth-century economic thought hinges on a number of outdated theories regarding the nature of entrepreneurship, money, the requirements of knowledge and calculation power required of the state, and the labor theory of value (which is, for all practical purposes, the equivalent of geocentrism in contemporary astronomy). In other words, the *first* kind of criticism directed towards Marxist-socialist ideas would naturally be economic criticism. But the authors provide none.³ There are only two short critiques on other issues—somewhat related to economic theory, but really only serving to sidestep the big elephants. (Contrast with six criticisms directed toward

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ecofeminism in ch. 8). If there is another edition, the authors might at least note the critiques of Marxist thought by twentieth-century female intellectuals such as Dorothy Sayers, Ayn Rand, Rose Wilder, and Isabel Paterson, as well as specific critiques of

Marxist-socialist feminism by libertarian/anarchist feminists,⁴ and implement insight from contemporary non-Marxist economists, feminist and non-feminist.

These complaints do not negate what the book achieves. Indeed, the authors should be commended for their bravery in providing frank (but not mean-spirited) critiques at the end of each chapter.

As a whole, *Feminist Thought* is a thoroughly-researched and concise treatment of a notoriously controversial and complex subject. Readers have professors Tong and Botts to thank for their tireless work on this extremely helpful volume. I highly recommend *Feminist Thought* if for no other reason than to put the brakes on judgment regarding what “feminist” might mean in today's highly fragmented and tribalistic culture. It will also be particularly valuable for those who want a generally balanced, easy-to read, well-informed, one-stop treatment of feminist thought.

Notes

1. Both my graduate and doctoral work included significant study of feminism in Christian ecclesiology, but were mostly limited to American evangelical contexts.

2. There are books, after all, that address this specific intersection. See Rita Gross, *Feminism and Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

3. It is sometimes unclear whether the “criticism” portions of the book are documented feminist criticisms or criticisms that exist “out there” (or possibly, merely criticisms by the authors).

4. E.g., the work of Sharon Presley (Executive Director of the Association of Libertarian Feminists), Elizabeth Nolan Brown, Mikayla Novak, and Helen Dale. As noted by Presley on Libertarianism.org, “If feminists want to reject ‘all forms of oppression as a whole,’ then from a libertarian feminist perspective, advocating ending patriarchy by using coercive government is inconsistent with that goal. We see coercive government as just another form of patriarchy. Whether a government of mostly men, as we have now, or even a government of women and men equally divided does not change the nature of such government. It is inherently coercive.” Presley, “How is Libertarian Feminism Different from Other Feminisms?” *Libertarianism.org* (Jan 6, 2015), <https://www.libertarianism.org/columns/how-is-libertarian-feminism-different-other-feminisms>. Cf. Jamin Hübner, “Christian Libertarianism: An Introduction and Signposts for the Road Ahead,” *The Christian Libertarian Review* 1 (2018): 55, and *Reason Papers* 18 (Fall 1993), which is themed around feminism.

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