



Joyce Antler: Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement

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In David Hollinger's "Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era," an important essay published in *American Jewish History* in 2009 in which he examines the place of American Jewish history in the broader field of American history, he describes the former as often, and problematically, taken to be "a thing apart" (12) from the latter. In response to such marginalization, Hollinger argues, those who are invested in the subject would do well to focus more attention on the roles of people not directly, or obviously, involved in communal Jewish stories—those, for example, who have not readily counted themselves, or been counted by others, as part of a Jewish narrative. Joyce Antler's new book, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*, takes up the cause, attempting to answer why Jewish women, who were overrepresented in the US women's liberation movement of the late 20th century, have rarely been acknowledged as Jews.

Antler's history not only employs Hollinger's recommended "dispersionist approach"; she also couples this method of writing an otherwise unrecognized Jewish history with a "communalist" approach, interweaving the accounts of women who self-identified as Jewish feminists with accounts by those who saw themselves, primarily, as radical women, part of what they thought of, at least for a time, as something of a universalist movement for equality.¹ With *Jewish Radical Feminism*, Antler presents a compelling, original, and urgent reexamination of the past. In doing so, she also demonstrates how, when used in combination, "dispersionist" and "communalist" approaches can ultimately foster richer, more textured historical readings.

¹ Antler directly references Hollinger's article in her introduction, writing that she hopes her book, as per Hollinger's call, "expands our understandings of American Jewish history" (6).

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In her introduction, Antler describes how the seeds for her revisionist feminist history were planted, in part, when she organized a two-day conference at New York University in 2011, titled “Women’s Liberation and Jewish Identity.” For this, she was described by participant Vivian Rothstein, a feminist pioneer who only belatedly identified as Jewish, as “an ‘instigator’ as well as a historian” (26). With this noteworthy gathering of radical women, Antler brought together 40 activists to speak of their individual motivations, backgrounds, and experiences in relation to what is commonly termed “second-wave” feminism (the book roughly covers events starting in the late 1960s and ending in the early 1980s, though the individual histories go back further). *Jewish Radical Feminism* builds on these narratives, organizing them into small clusters based on the groups and collectives that the individual women were involved with at one point or another. More broadly, the work is divided in two parts: the first half of the book, titled, “We *Never* Talked about It: Jewishness and Women’s Liberation,” covers the histories of women who did not often bring their Jewish identities into their radical politics at the time. The second half, “Feminism Enabled Me to Be a Jew’: Identified Jewish Feminists,” is comprised of the accounts of women whose senses of themselves as activists and agitators were almost always indivisible from their self-identifications as Jews. Antler acknowledges that some of the women grouped in the second half of the book would likely call themselves “liberal,” not radical, feminists, but she has included them under her umbrella term because “they were radicals in their religious dissent and innovations” (209).

What’s fascinating about Antler’s history is how she manages to highlight the diversity of backgrounds that can be traced between and across both groups of women even as she also makes evident the strong connections among women whose activism, and whose senses of self in relation to that activism, strongly diverged. So, for example, in their narratives, almost all of the women in the book emphasized some sense of feeling like an outsider in relation to a broader community, as well as investments in being aware of, talking about, and fighting oppression well beyond the bounds of their immediate spheres. Both sets of women also frequently found themselves at odds with, and needing to break from, the misogyny of the New Left, with these small, energetic communities of radical women offering alternative forms of kinship in lieu of often stifling familial, institutional, and political settings. Nonetheless, differences also become starkly apparent over the course of the book, as many women’s liberationists described how they rarely, if ever, brought up their Jewish backgrounds in public at the time. Retroactively, different women offered various explanations for this silence, citing it, in turn, as a response to antisemitic stereotypes of activist women, a symptom of internalized antisemitism, or a product of the desire to “build a broader movement than those we had grown up in,” in the words of Naomi Weisstein (52). In contrast, self-identified Jewish feminists—a category further divided by Antler into religious and secular feminists—refused to engage in feminist enterprises without calling attention to the ways that being Jewish shaped their lives and worldviews, and without attempting to bring their feminism back to their Jewish communities. For Antler, secular Jewish feminists especially, a category including women like Aviva Cantor, Susan Weidman Schneider, Irena Klepfisz, and Adrienne Rich, “emphasiz[ed] dual components of a hybrid identity” (247). This perspective connects them with the “intersectional feminism” that

characterizes more recent strands of feminism, and that women of color in particular have been the ones most often to theorize and highlight in discussions of inequality, discrimination, and oppression.

For all of the different strands taken up by the various women whose divergent stories and trajectories are at the core of Antler's work, reading *Jewish Radical Feminism* feels like witnessing a collective in the making. Those deeply committed to understanding, learning from, and building on the vital social and civil rights movements of the past would do well to invest in this captivating history.

Reference

Hollinger, David A. 2009. Communalist and dispersionist approaches to American Jewish history in an increasingly post-Jewish era. *American Jewish History* 95(1): 1–32.

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