



## **Book Review: Testing Ground for Feminism**

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person, giving up grandiosity, the idea of an 'Antigone' complex and implications for attachment theory. The book deserves to be widely used and debated.

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## TESTING GROUND FOR FEMINISM

Judith Ezekiel  
*Feminism in the Heartland*

Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002, 300 pp., ISBN 0-08142-5098-X

As an average American city, Dayton, Ohio gained fame as a testing ground for new products. Judith Ezekiel uses this typical town, far away from the well-known centres of American second-wave feminism, to test some of our general ideas about the US women's movement. Ezekiel's book makes a fresh and original contribution to the existing literature on US feminism, because it demonstrates that American feminism is more than the New York or East Coast groups, thereby challenging some of the prevailing myths about US feminism. In her reconstruction of the history of Dayton feminism, Ezekiel makes a fascinating counterpoint to 'the assumption that feminist ideas take on the same meaning in different times and places' (p. ix). Feminist ideas and practices that travel across time and space are not simply adopted, but take on a different shape in each context. They are interpreted, adapted and combined with personal experiences and resources. The history of Dayton feminism challenges the idea that away from the progressive centres only some diluted version of liberal feminism that focused on equal rights issues could take hold. Heartland feminism is neither a 'small-scale version of the "national" movement' (p. viii), nor a watered down version where radical ideas are toned down to make them acceptable. Ezekiel's detailed and rich study makes clear that feminism in the Heartland was far more diverse and unique in its own right:

The story of Dayton forcefully cracks open the apparent historiographic consensus around a universal, two-part movement, one in which liberal feminism is the earliest, the most durable and hence for many the most important part of the movement. In contrast to the two branch pattern so often described, a single strand of feminism emerged in Dayton, drawing inspiration from diverse philosophies but most closely resembling in scope and structure what various scholars have called the women's liberation, radical, or collectivist branch. (p. 242)

Ezekiel has gathered a wealth of original primary resources that were not brought together in any archive before: newsletters, minutes from meetings,

leaflets and articles. This material was completed with 59 oral history interviews, which she conducted with activists from different generations. In the stories of the women who were the driving forces behind the Dayton women's movement, history comes alive. These stories are splendid illustrations of how personal experiences were transformed into politics. The book draws a lively and detailed picture of the rise and development of Dayton's women's movement, comparing and contrasting its particularities with findings from other research on US feminism.

The book chronologically recounts the history (1969–80) of four successive, overlapping organizations originating from one umbrella organization: Dayton Women's Liberation. This group created the Dayton Women's Center from which two other groups emerged: Dayton Working Women and Freedom of Choice. Also, some 'para-feminist' services like an abortion referral service, an abortion clinic and a rape crisis centre were established. At first sight, these four central organizations seem to be the result of a functional division, i.e. groups with different goals and tasks. Ezekiel's reconstruction makes clear that, in reality, these divisions also arose from personal and ideological conflicts.

The Dayton movement typically started with consciousness-raising (CR) groups. The first group of 20 women met in September 1969. After this first meeting the group started to gather regularly and adopted the name Dayton Women's Liberation (DWL). Their inspiration came from New Left ideas on participatory democracy and early feminist texts. Also, religious ideas on social justice were an important source of inspiration. According to Ezekiel, this was one of the most surprising characteristics of DWL activists: 'I know of no study on the influence of religion on feminist consciousness and on the second wave women's movement' (p. 35). Religion and church connections are mostly seen as insignificant, whereas in the Dayton case these connections were vital, both in personal and financial aspects of organizing the movement. Another defining and differing characteristic of the Dayton movement is that it kept a positive relation with its New Left base. 'The feminist-politico rift has been portrayed as fundamental in the early women's liberation movement nationally, but in Dayton, no such clear-cut lines can be found' (p. 24).

For four years DWL was the central motor of Dayton's emerging movement and covered an expanding range of issues like abortion, birth control, sexuality, childcare, divorce and racism. The group developed a radical identity where liberal and radical ideas coexisted. However, at the end of 1973 difficulties emerged and conflicts arose between early members and newcomers to the movement. Older activists lost their interest in CR as a strategy as it brought them 'no new discoveries' (p. 75). New activists accused earlier members of 'elitism' and controlling the movement. In 1974, DWL created the Dayton Women's Center (DWC) which was viewed as a 'utopian institution to carve out free space for women' (p. 80). It made the movement visible and open to a wider public, but also caused a major split in DWL. This stage in the Dayton movement is particularly interesting because it illustrates some of the basic dilemmas feminism faces when moving towards institutionalization.

Ezekiel pays considerable attention to the complicated questions of money and power in feminism. While these are well-known problematic issues, they are not very often highlighted in research on feminism. Ezekiel's detailed reconstruction of how the different Dayton organizations were set up challenges a vision of US feminism as depending less on state-funding than its European counterparts. The Dayton case makes clear that many feminist initiatives were founded with the help of state subsidies. Ezekiel draws a somewhat implicit picture of a 'market-economy feminism' as she describes the fate of the DWC, which ironically, despite

the dominance of socialist-feminists in its leadership, was heavily determined by market mechanisms. While in the beginning, the money question sparked a lot of debate about the risks of cooptation and 'selling out', gradually financial arguments came to dominate major decisions. Programmes began to be judged by their profit and money became 'an essential consideration in all decisions' (p. 170). Dependence on funding and cooptation are often described as 'iron laws' or as natural, inescapable processes. However, Ezekiel demonstrates that reality is far more complex. Rather than victims of vile cooptation efforts, feminists are active agents whose choices may well contribute to these processes. Within the DWC, principles were repeatedly sacrificed to the survival of the movement. For instance, accepting *Playboy* money to pay a printing bill caused little debate. And more and more, the 'obsession with finances prevented some Center members from setting political priorities' (p. 171).

Opportunistic strategies also played a role in creating a branch of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in Dayton. The rationale for this step was to have a taskforce for clerical workers, which was one of NOW's largest successes nationwide. As soon as it started to attract new activists to the Women's Center, it was made independent from NOW. The group continued as Dayton Women Working. After this split, the Dayton NOW branch waned. Despite its national strength, NOW never bloomed in Dayton, a remarkable deviation for which Ezekiel does not provide an explanation.

The fourth organization that Ezekiel highlights, Freedom of Choice, illustrates another 'market mechanism' at work within the women's movement, not one of money, but of competition between movements and issues. The rise of the anti-feminist New Right created a 'countermovement dynamic' that revived the Dayton women's movement.

Ezekiel devotes considerable attention to the implicit racism in the Dayton movement. Despite the anti-racist ideology of the early movement activists and despite Dayton's significant black population, the women's movement remained predominantly white. According to Ezekiel, anti-racist discourse proved to be a facade with no real dialogues and only half-hearted efforts being undertaken to include women of colour in the movement.

While Ezekiel convincingly demonstrates that the Dayton case confronts the dominant narratives on American feminism, she comes up with few explanations for its particularities. Why, for instance, did a certain form of feminism prevail in Dayton and what characteristics of the Dayton context might have contributed to this evolution? Comparisons with other studies on second-wave feminism in the US would also have added to a better understanding of the Dayton case. It is remarkable that almost no references are made to Nancy Whittier's (1995) research on the women's movement in Columbus, Ohio. This having been said, however, Ezekiel's study makes an excellent contribution to the 'need for more history' (p. ix) and it will hopefully inspire other researchers to trace the local manifestations of a worldwide movement.

## REFERENCE

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