This book provides a history of the emergence of Third Wave feminism, firstly in the US in the early 1990s; it also outlines related movements: Riot Grrl and ‘Girlie’ culture. The latter also both originated in the US in the 1990s, a time when neo-liberalism was becoming firmly staked into the heart of society, taking a toll on all progressive, collective social movements, not least the feminist movement, already fractured by an anti-feminist backlash which continues to this day.

Budgeon identifies and analyses some aims of the 3rd Wave, how these are expressed, what conditions make another wave necessary and in what specific political and cultural surroundings this wave surfaces. She also considers how this version of feminism fits with other versions and who the 3rd Wave can speak to/for. There are no easy answers to these questions, due to the largely self-defined nature of the 3rd Wave; all too often it appears to simply be whatever any younger woman may say it is, usually in an online blog or zine.

Creating these sorts of safe spaces, countercultural clubs or websites, in which younger women can self-define and pursue their own identity projects emerges as a major concern of the 3rd Wave. Within this broad concern, Budgeon summarises three key aims of 3rd Wave feminism: encouraging younger women to become active producers of a culture of their own, rather than passive consumers of the mainstream; resisting hierarchical organising structures and boundaries, preferring to widen the borders of what constitutes feminist and feminism; and, thirdly, to focus (often through autobiographical writing/art/music) on self-expression and identity projects that occur within the safe spaces the 3rd Wave seeks to create.

Budgeon asserts that the 3rd Wave exists in tension with both postfeminism and 2nd Wave feminism. She takes time to explain the differences she sees between postfeminism, arguably represented by writers such as Roiphe (1993) and Wolf (1994), and 3rd Wave feminism as it is expressed in classic texts such as that from Baumgardner and Richards in 2000. However, despite her efforts, there do seem to be many overlaps between these two phenomena and indeed Budgeon acknowledges that 3rd Wave feminists borrow heavily from postfeminist discourse and culture, taking what they like and leaving what they don’t. Not that any 3rd Waver agrees on what should be adopted or rejected, since to do so would be prescriptive, which is an anathema to 3rd Wave feminists. Thus, everything seems to be up for grabs; or, as 3rd Wavers call it: re-appropriation and re-signification. The prefix of ‘re’ before these terms suggests a reclaiming of course, and it would appear that the object from which styles, behaviours and words are being reclaimed is usually 2nd Wave feminism.

What was previously rejected by feminists as sexist, can now apparently be reclaimed in an ironic fashion, for example, the wearing of high-heels, make-up, pink or the enjoyment of ‘Barbie’.
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Budgeon cites 3rd Wavers who argue that such things are taboo, thereby rendering their reclamation an act of resistance. Of course, such trappings of heterosexist femininity are not, and never were taboo in the wider culture, even when feminism was at its height in the West in the 1970s; therefore, it appears that the resistance such 3rd Wavers talk about, is frequently a resistance against 2nd Wave feminism, rather than against the patriarchal status quo. It is also debatable just how ironic such acts can be, to a generation who have grown up with these (mis)representations of femininity as a backdrop and who were not born early enough to have glimpsed a more egalitarian, collective and less gendered society.

Budgeon does engage with critiques of 3rd Wave feminism, and makes several pertinent and challenging critiques of her own; the bulk of which appear in the later chapters. She rightly interrogates the notion of ‘choice’ within predefined options, the reifying of choice for its own sake – regardless of the content or consequences of those ‘choices’, and the meaning of feminism when it is stretched to the point of meaninglessness.

When reading this book I was frequently frustrated at how much time and energy 3rd Wave feminism seems to spend misrepresenting the 2nd Wave. This new version of feminism appears to have no agenda of its own, no concern for its own legacy, no analysis of structural power relations (which still exist) and therefore leaves the status quo thoroughly intact; if not reinforced. Budgeon is more positive than I; and clearly she sees a potential in this new breed of so-called feminism. Readers will make up their own minds, but either way, this is a concise, thorough and useful book for anyone who has ever wondered just what the 3rd Wave actually is, and what it could mean.

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