

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

The Spectator Online

Newspapers

1-26-2022

The Feminist Library: An Interview with Author Jenny Brown

Kali Herbst Minino
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online>

Recommended Citation

Minino, Kali Herbst, "The Feminist Library: An Interview with Author Jenny Brown" (2022). *The Spectator Online*. 506.

<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/506>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Newspapers at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Spectator Online by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.



The Feminist Library: An Interview with Author Jenny Brown

Kali Herbst Minino, News Editor

Covering the history of abortion and the stigma behind it, “Without Apology” advocates for a direct demand for abortion rights. Jenny Brown, the author of the book and a member of National Women’s Liberation, has written for the magazine Labor Notes, and was a leader in efforts to get the morning after pill available over the counter. Besides “Without Apology,” she has also written “Birth Strike: The Hidden Fight over Women’s Work.”

Herbst Minino: You talk in your book about how abortion has been misconstrued as a cultural issue instead of an economic one. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

Brown: When we were first trying to figure out why there were attacks on abortion starting in the early 2000s, we looked at history. There were attacks not just on abortion, but also birth control. When we tried to get the morning after pill over the counter, we discovered that the attacks had similarities throughout history. When the country was founded, abortion was basically legal. They didn’t even really regard it as abortion, they just regarded it as “your period was blocked, you could take these herbs or do this surgery and that would unblock it.” It also depended on the report of the person who’s pregnant, so in effect, abortion was legal.

That was true up through the 1860s, and then there started to be a few state laws against it. In the 1870s, the Comstock Act was passed, which basically made all abortion, birth control and any kind of information about reproduction illegal. Then there was 100 years of illegal abortion in the United States. In the 1860s and ’70s, there was a population motivation.

Essentially, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ruling class was concerned that immigrants, particularly Catholics, were coming in, and they [the ruling class] were worried that they would be outnumbered.

During that period, it was mostly married women who were using abortion to limit their family size. Family sizes had gone down from an average of eight kids per woman in 1800 to four kids per woman in 1900, so it was really noticeable in the lifetimes of people that families were getting smaller.



There was a big push by the medical establishment to make abortion illegal; they had various arguments about it and wrote books directed at women trying to get them to stop having abortions.

Fast forward to the early 2000s, the U.S. has had a declining birth rate since the 1970s. The high was the baby boom, and it had basically been declining since then. You start to hear politicians complaining that women of the country need to start having more babies.

In Europe, when they saw this, they did a lot of things to make it easier to have kids. When you contrast it to the U.S. response, we haven't had a lot of support for child-bearing. If anything, it's getting more difficult because our wages have been so stagnant.

It takes two people to support a family. We went from a period in the '60s where if you had a good union job, you could probably survive with one salary per family or part-time salaries. Now, that's just absolutely impossible. Employers are getting an extra 40, 60 hours a week of work out of each two-parent family, and the time left for child-rearing is the spare time on the phone from work. That has resulted in people making decisions to not have as many kids.

A lot of people in my group, National Women's Liberation, were testifying that while they had one kid, they didn't think they could do a second one because it was just too difficult. Although they wanted more kids, the situation, the lack of government support, meant that they decided not to. That was a microcosm of what was happening nationally, the birth rate was going down. The response of the U.S. government has been to make it more difficult to get birth control and abortion rather than giving us the support we need to raise kids.

Herbst Minino: You mentioned in your book that there was a time where there was a fear of Roe v. Wade getting overturned, and I think we're seeing that again in recent events. In your opinion, why does that keep happening?

Brown: When the women's liberation movement was very strong, starting in 1967, '68, they were using consciousness raising, which meant comparing their experiences among themselves, initially not publicly. A lot of them realized, "oh we've had a lot of illegal abortions and haven't told anybody about it."

When they went public, they were speaking out about their illegal abortions very forcefully, and because they had analyzed it in the context of women's oppression, they were demanding everything [including] free abortion. The demands were really popular, and in New York—the first state to really provide abortion on demand—you didn't have to [visit] three psychiatrists and have to prove that you were worthy. The law was passed in 1970, so it was a precursor to Roe.

It was a moment when the Republicans were split on the question, and the Democrats were split on the question too, so it wasn't really along partisan lines. They did want us to have babies, but they were worried that there were too many and it was straining public services and so on. That split meant that they were able to sneak abortion on demand through the New York state legislature. Similarly, that also meant that it was possible to get the Roe decision.

By '73, the birth rate still appeared to be high. By '75, '76, the birth rate dropped considerably, and you start to see a backlash not just from the Catholic Church, which had always been the big opponent, but Republicans really start to rally around trying to ban abortion again. The push was right at the right time, right at that moment when the opposition was weak and divided.

They [the opposition] reunited quite quickly after that, but we've been able to fight off attacks since then. That's why we're experiencing these constant attacks, because it's not really about punishing women for having sex, it's about these fundamental questions of our economy and who's going to pay for producing kids. They want us to pay for it out of our paychecks and it's almost impossible to do at this point.

I should say that I don't think there's a problem with lower birth rates at all, but for employers and the rich, there are several problems with lower birth rates. They're pushing big families as a solution to our retirement system, so you would be dependent on your kids. If we're not having large families, they can't do that. The military is worried about "how do we recruit when the cohort of people ages 18 to 20 is much smaller." Then there's a general worry that growth and consumption is just going to stagnate. Capitalism requires an economy to grow continuously; that's the source of its profits. I think we should adjust our economies to deal with the situation, not require that people have babies for the economy—but that's not the way our ruling class is really thinking about it.

Herbst Minino: There was a section where you talked about Neoliberalism and how it contributes to the issue. Could you talk to me a little about that?

Brown: Neoliberalism, one of the big aspects is to push the costs of reproduction back to the family and to make the government smaller and profitable. All these things that used to be provided free of charge, like the post office for example, the idea would be, you make it into a for-profit enterprise, everything sort of has to pay for itself. There's not this sense that you take money and put it into a general fund and then cover everybody for it, which is the kind of program that makes child-rearing a lot easier. Everything from school lunches to the public parks to child care—all of it's being cut and has to make a profit. If it doesn't make a profit, it's not worth it. You can't really run a society this way. We don't try to make buses and roads pay for themselves. That's the idea: to turn it all over to the private sector so that clashes with our needs as parents. I think that's sort of where the rubber hits the road on a lot of these things. National Women's Liberation picked out four big things that we thought would be big advances for women's freedom, which were national health care, paid childcare so you don't have to worry about the fees, paid leave that lasts at least a year and shorter work hours for everybody.

The number of hours we're working is just insane. In the '60s in a two-parent family, you'd each be working 20 hours. You wouldn't be working 40 or 60 hours each, you'd be working 20 hours each and that would be the equivalent of one 40 hour week job, which at least in unionized households used to cover the expenses for a family. That's where neoliberalism is in conflict with working class family life, and with women's freedom, the freedom of parents to have happy conditions to raise their kids.

Herbst Minino: One part that really resonated with me was when you talked about how the word "choice" has been used to refrain from saying the word "abortion." Should activists change "pro-choice" to something else, and if they should, what should that be?

Brown: Well, I use "abortion rights," and there are other terms that other people use. I think "pro-choice" was used initially to back away from "abortion" and make it a little bit softer and less alarming in the early '70s. Then it sort of hung around partly because as the movement became attenuated and the non-profit sector took over, they had to appeal to funders, and funders want things to sound nicer and aren't necessarily on board with the language that the movement was using.

We can't really defend abortion unless we can say the word, so I think we should say "abortion," and I think various groups stand around this. Shout Your Abortion has really made the point that you have to say the word and has demonstrated that you can say it. In Ireland, when they had their successful referendum a few years ago, one of the things that they were told in the run up to that was, "don't use the word abortion," but the group that really headed that up was called "The Abortion Rights Campaign." People were like, "you don't want to use the word in the name of your group." They [the campaign] said "we're gonna do it anyway" and "we're going to start talking about abortion, and we're going to say these abortions that we've had, and we're going to talk about how annoying, humiliating and oppressive it is to have to travel to other countries to get abortions. We're going to talk about it in those terms and we're not going to avoid it." It was extremely effective and they were actually able to win over the majority of the population to vote against the amendment that made abortion strictly illegal in Ireland.

Herbst Minino: You were a part of the fight to get the morning after pill over the counter. I'll be honest, I had a bit of a hard time coming up with questions to ask about it, but do you have any insights that you could share with me?

Brown: That was an interesting struggle. The Bush administration was completely opposed to this and we kind of expected that. Then when Obama got in, we were in the middle of the fight and in court over a few months, and the Obama administration took the same position. They were actively opposing making it over the counter. President Obama even said at one point, "I wouldn't want my young daughters to be able to access this," which is just insane if you think about it, like oh, you'd prefer them to be pregnant? It's an after-sex contraception. That was really eye-opening and it really showed how far back the Democrats had walked on really supporting contraception.

When we began, we were told that we should not demand over-the-counter for all ages, we should go for a smaller demand like making it available in hospital emergency rooms for rape victims. Some of us had been raped and we had not gone to the emergency room. Most of us, didn't use any contraception, or the guy wouldn't wear a condom, it was normal everyday sex that for one reason or another didn't end up having protection. We decided that it had to cover the most number of people rather than something that would help a handful. It had to appeal to a whole range of folks that needed the pill—that was one lesson.

Doing consciousness-raising was another [lesson]—talking about the reasons that we needed it. We even went to testify at one of the public hearings where they had a panel of experts deciding what to recommend to the FDA. Usually, “the public” means a lot of drug company representatives trying to argue for their drugs. In this case, we got up and spoke about our experiences of why we needed the morning after pill and why having to go to a doctor, get a prescription and then go get it filled was not a great thing. It made it very hard to get in time and the sooner you take it after sex the more effective it is. It’s theoretically effective up to 96 hours, but it diminishes in effectiveness each hour that passes. We testified about that from our own experience. Basically, we didn’t shy away from a lot of the things that the non-profit folks wanted us to shy away from.

We also had a legal strategy, which a couple of the lawyers who are members of our group really pushed, because at various points, the original team of lawyers wanted to say, “okay we’ve won it for 18 and over so let’s just call it a day,” and using testimony we argued, “no, when we were young teenagers, that’s when it was hardest to arrange all of this stuff like getting a doctor appointment, getting time off school, actually going and getting a prescription and the pill.

When you excluded younger teenagers, that was excluding a big portion of people who needed it, so we added people who were still under 18 to the suit. We also argued about why it was bad for anyone over 18 who needed to be carded for birth control, because you had to prove your age. That meant it would be behind the counter, the pharmacy had to be open, the pharmacist had to check your ID. We said, “no, it should be on the shelf next to the condoms.” We always made the argument for why the thing that we were fighting on affected the larger group of people, making sure that you have a way for everybody to understand how it’s going to benefit them.

Herbst Minino: You’ve also done work on labor rights, and you have a book about it. Could you talk a little bit about the intersection between labor and feminism?

Brown: I think we’re at a point which is different from where we were in the ’60s when all of these feminist advances started. Our big obstacle right now is not necessarily discriminatory laws—we’ve gotten rid of most of those, it’s not even necessarily sexist guys.

It’s the underlying economic situation that makes us powerless and unequal. We’ve run up against a wall of how much we can win without changing the basic economic setup. Our wages are constantly being undermined and our employers are demanding more and more from us. The ruling class wants to make sure we don’t have some of the things that we need.

For example, unemployment that doesn’t run out. We haven’t been able to win that because employers want to make sure we are forced to go find jobs and go back to work. We’ve heard a lot of that rhetoric around the unemployment insurance that people got during COVID-19. A lot of the things that affect women’s equality right now actually have to do with capitalism and its particular form right now, neoliberalism.

People are going in and getting sexually harassed and there’s nothing you can do about it because you don’t have the guarantees. You’d lose health care for yourself and your kids, you don’t have the guarantee of unemployment insurance if you get fired, you’re completely at the whim of your employers.

That’s how feminism and capitalism interact. The more powerless we are, the more dependent we are on our employers, the guys in our life and our parents. The dependence means that we are unfree. That’s the big stage I think we’re in. If we want to make big advances for women’s freedom, we have to start confronting the power of capital and power of employers in our society, and to do that, we have to unite with the labor movement and everybody else who needs those changes. It’s a stage where we really have to have a united front across the working class and the 99% to change those things.