

[How Universities Radicalized Young Women and Launched the Sex Wars](#)

From the horses' mouths

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Communist propaganda, arguments for lesbianism, accusations of white supremacy, and conspiracy theories about rape culture: perhaps not what the average 19-year-old (or tax-paying parent thereof) was expecting when she registered for [Philosophy of Sexual Politics](#) at Paterson State University in Wayne, New Jersey c. 1974. But that's what she got.

The class was taught by [Professor Paula Rothenberg](#), a prominent feminist leader who called for the “[radical transformation of all our institutions](#).” With Alison Jaggar, Rothenberg would go on to co-author one of the first women's studies textbooks ([Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men](#) [1978]). Later, she published [White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism](#) (2002).

Her New Jersey classroom became the laboratory in which young women were encouraged “[to rethink every aspect of our lives](#).”

This was anti-male consciousness-raising masquerading as a legitimate college elective. Any female student who entered Rothenberg's classroom *not* seeing herself as a victim would be trained to see her life differently. She would be told as a founding fact of the course that she was part of an oppressed class.

She would read Betty Friedan's landmark [The Feminine Mystique](#) (1963), which claimed that a married woman's home in the American suburbs was "in reality a comfortable concentration camp" where she was "suffering a slow death of mind and spirit" (p. 369).

She would read impassioned selections from the anthology [Sisterhood is Powerful](#) (1970), edited by Robin Morgan. Morgan encouraged women to hate men, having declared "man-hating" "an honorable and viable political act" because "the oppressed have a right to class-hatred against the class that is oppressing them" (*Going Too Far*, 1977, p. 178).

In reading Shulamith Firestone's [The Dialectic of Sex](#) (1970), another assigned text, Rothenberg's student would be presented with a horrifying picture of the deformed lives of early American feminists, who, according to Firestone, were "not taught *even to read*, let alone admitted to college" (p. 17, emphasis mine). (As I've shown in my video [series about nineteenth-century American and British feminists](#), this is ludicrously untrue.)

The student of feminist philosophy would read about the omnipresence of rape in American society. In Susan Lydon's "[The Politics of Orgasm](#)" (1970) she would learn that men view sex "as conquest and ego-enhancement" (p. 205). In Susan Griffin's "[Rape: The All-American Crime](#)" (1971), she would learn that mainstream American culture actually approved of rape (p. 33).



Imagine being taught *as scholarly fact* that men were committed to "[making \[women\] sexually as well as economically, socially, and politically subservient](#)" ("The Politics of Orgasm," p. 201).

Imagine sitting in a classroom filled with other young women who amplified the paranoid message, speaking at length of their rapes and their abortions, the sexual double standards and abuse they suffered, their fear and rage—all the while one's professor, a PhD in Philosophy, affirmed women's second-class status as fact, never offering an alternative view, never cautioning about the need to weigh evidence or avoid emotion-laden conclusions.

Emotion-laden conclusions were the point.

One cannot fully understand the sexual revolution—and the generations of pathologically furious women it spawned—without examining the extraordinary feminist takeover of North American universities.

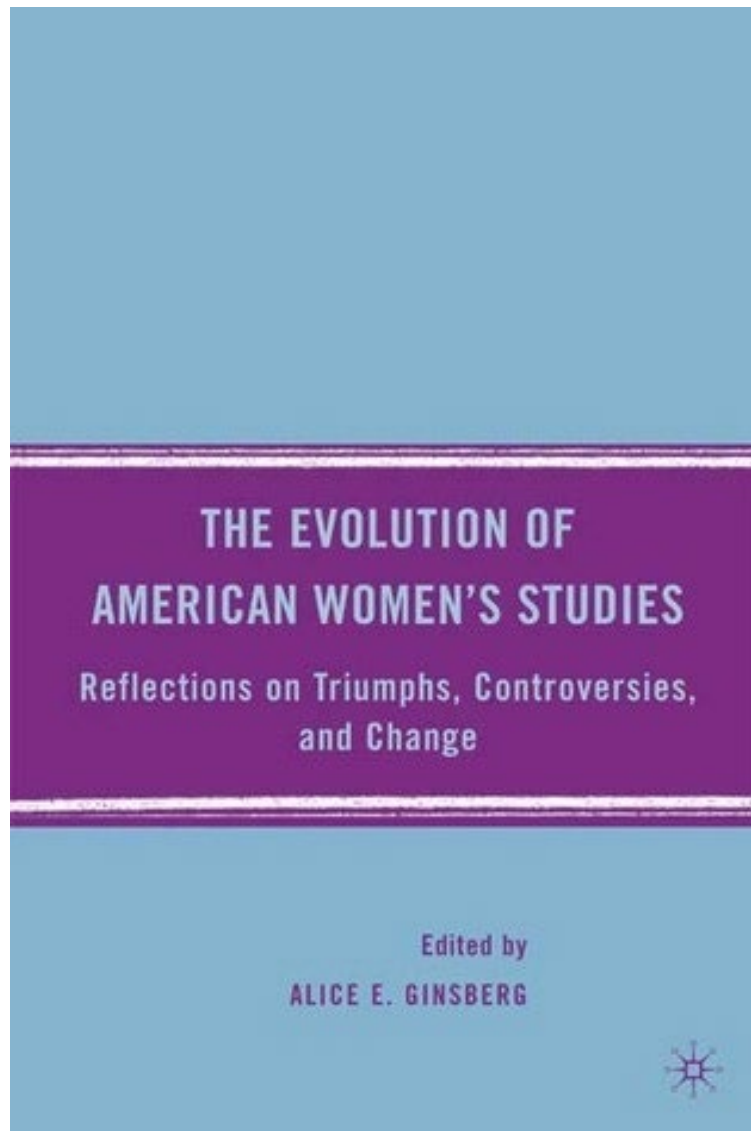
In Feminist Academics' Own Words



Were all women's studies courses exactly like the one taught by Paula Rothenberg (about which more later)? Probably not, but most were.

In 2008, Palgrave Macmillan, a prestigious publisher, brought out [*The Evolution of American Women's Studies: Reflections on Triumphs, Controversies, and Change*](#).

The book contains chapters by a dozen feminist academics, including Rothenberg. These were the leaders in the movement, the pioneers who taught the first courses and established the feminist journals that now largely control what passes for knowledge about women.



They make clear that women's studies always had a radical agenda, percolating its grievance-based theories throughout the halls of the ivory tower, and not content to let them stay there.

"From the beginning, the goal of women's studies was not merely to study women's position in the world but to change it" (*The Evolution*, p. 10). So wrote the volume editor, [Alice Ginsberg](#), a specialist in feminist education. Ginsberg did not hide the fact that women's studies was never committed to the dispassionate pursuit of knowledge that would have made it a genuine academic field. Her words are echoed throughout the volume.

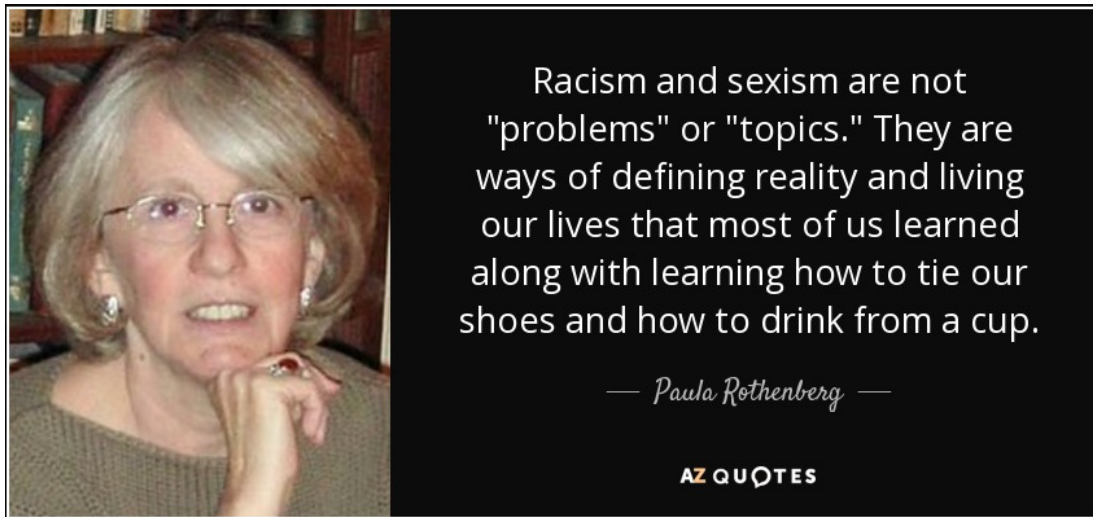
"I remain convinced," wrote black feminist academic [Beverly Guy-Sheftall](#), "that teaching antiracist, antihomophobic, anti-capitalist, cross-cultural, transnational women's studies courses [...] is still the most important and pleasurable work that I do" (*The Evolution*, p. 111).

[Ann Russo](#), a women's studies program director, stressed the incendiary mishmash of unproven premises at the heart of her teaching: "I struggle in my classes to cultivate a sustained and simultaneous focus on the forces that shape how privilege, access, and power shape identities and

experiences of oppression and resistance, as well as complicity in others' oppression" (*The Evolution*, p. 135).

This was typical academic mumbo-jumbo, but it's meaning is clear enough. The primary subject of women's studies was the oppression of women by men as well as some (white) women's complicity in the oppression of other women. Women's studies demanded that its students accept and adhere to an extremist ideological dogma.

Marxism, the Social Construction of Gender, and Lesbian Superiority



In one of the book's chapters, titled "[Women Studies: The Early Years](#)," the afore-mentioned Professor Rothenberg presented an outline of her early-1970s feminist philosophy course that highlights the revolutionary rage at the heart of the so-called discipline.

Anyone who still thinks that women's studies started out with the moderate aim of introducing women's history and perspectives into a primarily male educational environment will be quickly disabused of that notion by glancing at the intemperate, reductionist, anti-scientific, hate-filled agit-prop theories that made up the entirety of the curriculum.

For those with a strong stomach, I offer a summary here of some of the readings (for the full text list, see Rothenberg's chapter in *The Evolution of American Women's Studies*, pp. 76-78).

Like much of Second Wave feminism, Rothenberg's reading list was heavily Marxist. A required text was Friedrich Engels' [The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#) (1884) which argued that the family was the primary site of women's oppression. In his chapter on "The Family," Engels linked the position of women in marriage with the position of oppressed workers under capitalism, asserting that "The modern individual family is based on the open or disguised domestic enslavement of the woman," and specifying that "In the family, [the man] is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletariat" (p. 80).

This text inaugurated the long-standing feminist tradition of discussing family life—including sexual intimacy, mothering, caregiving, and home-making—in *economic* terms, often referring, for example, to women's "[burden of reproduction](#)," "[emotional labor](#)" "[caregiving cost](#)" and so on, thus reducing much of what makes life meaningful to an economic calculus. (Men, of course, also participate in unpaid and emotional labor, but few men can be bothered to tally it and broadcast it to the world.)

[I had the pleasure of discussing many of these loosely Marxist-derived feminist terms [here](#), with my friends Tom Golden, James Nuzzo, and Hannah Spier, including jaw-dropping clips from viral feminists expounding on them.]

For any student naïve enough to believe that biology plays a role in male and female experience, Evelyn Reed's "[Is Biology Woman's Destiny](#)" (1971), from the *International Socialist Review*, answered with a resounding negative. References to biology, Reed suggested, were little more than sexist ploys to protect an unjust *status quo*. She excoriated the "male supremacists who pose as scientists" for claiming that women's "inferiority" was decreed by nature. On the contrary, she asserted, patriarchy was only a recent historical phenomenon whose man-made inequities were cast into stark relief by Indigenous societies in which women exercised power and rape was unknown. Reed's pamphlet made up in conviction what it lacked in evidence.

Texts such as these advanced a conspiracy view of history, in which everything in western culture was deliberately aimed at limiting female life possibilities. Nowhere in Rothenberg's assigned readings can one find any defense of the free market or of the heterosexual family. Nowhere is it suggested that masculine and feminine roles developed organically over time in response to the exigencies of survival. It is certainly not stated that loving a man and raising children with him are what many women want most in their lives.



The course even had a preposterous section on female sexuality, already touched on above, to demonstrate that heterosexuality is exploitative of women and that women are better off as lesbians.

This section included the afore-mentioned Susan Lydon's essay "[The Politics of Orgasm](#)" (1970). Lydon used Sigmund Freud's theory of the vaginal orgasm, as distinct from the clitoral orgasm, as evidence that (all) men "defined feminine sexuality in a way as favorable to themselves as possible" (p. 200-201). Men were allegedly uninterested in or even put off by the clitoris because it made women's sexual pleasure "independent of the male's" (p. 201). According to Lydon's jaundiced analysis, men did not care about women's pleasure and were exclusively concerned with "coopting feminine sexuality for their own ends" (p. 203).

Grim sexual antagonism emerged even more luridly in Susan Griffin's "[Rape: The All-American Crime](#)" (1971) published in *Ramparts*, another Marxist magazine. Advancing the idea of rape culture before that was a recognized term, Griffin alleged that far from being a hated crime, rape was a socially-approved means by which men controlled women. "The fact that rape is against the law," she scoffed, "should not be considered proof that rape is not in fact encouraged as part of our culture" (p. 27). Rape was "beneficial to the ruling class of white males [...], a kind of terrorism which severely limits the freedom of women and makes women dependent on men" (p. 34). Her account of white male malevolence could hardly have been more totalizing.

Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love's "[Sappho was a Right on Woman](#)" (1973) completed the all-out attack on heterosexuality by advocating lesbianism.

As Rothenberg summarized, "[In addition to focusing on the politics of the orgasm and female sexual alienation, my students began to explore the possibilities of sex between women and many found radical feminism attractive](#)" (p. 80).

There were more titles in Rothenberg's list, but there is no need to go further. We see here all the core elements of the radical feminism that transformed our societies in the decades to follow.

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In her introduction to *The Evolution of American Women's Studies*, editor Alice Ginsberg had mocked conservative Christian political commentator Pat Robertson's description of feminism: "*The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women,*" Robertson had observed. "*It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians*" (qtd. on p. 6).

With the possible exception of the witchcraft (in fact, Robin Morgan, for one, declared herself a witch in *Going Too Far*, p. 174) every element named by Robertson is evident in Rothenberg's syllabus.

A Revolution Without a Fight

Within a few years, feminism went from a fringe social movement to a centerpiece of North American higher education, where tens of thousands of students were affected by it every year. According to Ginsberg (*The Evolution*, p. 15), in the 1970s alone, 300 women's studies programs were founded in the United States, followed by an even greater proliferation in the 1980s.

With little debate and even less resistance, academia surrendered to feminist dogmatism.