

H-France Review Vol. 22 (June 2022), No. 105

Trine Rogg Korsvik, *Politicizing Rape and Pornography. 1970s Feminist Movements in France and Norway*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. xii + 297 pp. Figures, references, and index. £79.99 (hb). ISBN 978-3-030-55638-9.

Review by Jane Freeland, German Historical Institute London.

Upon receiving this book, I must admit that I felt some trepidation. Pornography has been a subject of intense debate among feminists since the 1980s. For some, it is an extreme form of the patriarchal objectification, commodification, and sexualization of women's bodies, if not a form of violence against women itself. As American feminist Robin Morgan famously coined, "pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice." [1] Others see pornography differently. Not as a form of violence or discrimination against women, but as something liberating for women's sexuality. That women can consume and even participate in pornography for their own gratification is not to succumb to the patriarchy, but rather to resist its control of women's sexuality. Given these tensions, the title, *Politicizing Rape and Pornography*, gave me a moment's pause. Was the author drawing an equivalence between the two? Between an act of criminal violence against women, and something much more nebulous and whose meaning for gender justice is highly contested?

But I should not have been worried. Author Trine Rogg Korsvik centers these tensions on the very first page of the preface. As Korsvik explains, *Politicizing Rape and Pornography* historicizes the interface of sex, violence, and women's rights. Specifically, the book examines how sex and violence came to be politicized by women activists, how they made them into issues of women's equality and rights, and, in turn, how sex and violence became subject to legal regulation. It does this by examining the action of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) against rape in France and the Norwegian women's movement's activism against pornography. According to Korsvik, while rape was the touchstone for French women's activism at the nexus of sex and violence, pornography was much more important for the Norwegian movement. Using these two case studies, Korsvik explores how feminists in France and Norway drew upon a Western transnational women's movement to begin a discussion on the "boundaries between sexual liberty and abuse" (p. 2) that resulted in legal change in the two countries, but that also extends beyond it. In doing so, the book queries the meaning and impact of feminist social change.

Following a detailed introduction, the first chapter addresses how rape and pornography became political issues. More specifically, it shows how feminists took rape and pornography from issues of sexual morality and reframed them as issues of discrimination against women and inequality. The 1970s were an important era for this transformation. Despite very different discourses of

rape and pornography in France and Norway respectively, at the start of the 1970s both countries had archaic and inconsistent legal approaches to the subjects. In the 1970s in France, rape law dated back to 1832, and despite severe stated punishments for committing rape (10-20 years imprisonment), in practice very few women reported rape and of those cases that were reported, few ended in conviction. Consequently, up until the 1970s there was very little public discussion of rape in France. In Norway, where laws regarding obscene content dated from 1902, there was heated debate throughout the 1950s and 1960s on pornography, thanks in part to highly publicized legal trials against authors of erotic novels.

It was in this context that women began to speak out about their experiences of rape and sexual exploitation. Korsvik highlights two key publications in leftist magazines as the triggers for the feminist politicization of rape and pornography. For the French case, Korsvik focuses particularly on Annie Cohen's article "Au nom de la révolution" published in the left-wing newspaper *Libération* in 1972. In this piece, Cohen discussed the rape of a woman activist, Maï, and what happened after Maï disclosed her attack to the anti-racist committee she was a part of and named a fellow activist as the perpetrator. Rather than support Maï, who was herself a woman of color, the committee told her that her claims would only undermine their work to stop racism. Cohen's article, which provoked responses not only from notables like Jean-Paul Sartre, but also Maï herself, is a fascinating case for complicating the history of feminisms in Europe as the authors grappled with the intersections of race, sexuality, and the legacies of imperialism. In Norway, it was the liberal newspaper *Dagbladet* that provoked debate after publishing the article "Sexual Liberalism and Women's Oppression in Male Society" in 1974. Written by three members of the New Feminists, the article discussed the women's visit to a striptease show in Oslo. As Korsvik shows, the piece -- drawing on feminist and leftist politics -- situated striptease and pornography at the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and Christianity. Much like the French case, this article attracted public debate on men's sexuality and women's rights, and the role of capitalism and religion in norms of gender and sexuality.

Aside from presenting the reader with such captivating material, Korsvik's discussion of these public debates also underscores the close relationship between the emerging women's liberation movements and other leftist political actors. This is a factor frequently overlooked in histories of feminism in Europe and is one of the most important contributions of the book. Perhaps because so many women's movements in Europe formed in response to the misogyny of 1968 and the exclusion of women from the student movement, the history of feminism in Europe in the 1970s is often more focused on discussions among feminists than in the interactions between women's movements and other activists and thinkers. But, as Korsvik shows, the relationship between women's liberation movements and the Left is fundamental to understanding activism against rape and pornography.

Indeed, throughout the book Korsvik presents a complex picture of the women's movements in France and Norway that attends to the ideological differences between activists and the intersections of women's rights, with inequalities of class and race. Across chapters three and four, Korsvik reflects on how these divisions shaped the campaigns against rape and pornography and how their legal success was interpreted by activists. In the French case, for example, following the public outcry and politicization of the gang rape of two Belgian women in Aix-en-Provence in 1975, the MLF began supporting the use of the judicial system in rape cases as a way of bringing attention to the issue. This did not sit comfortably with all feminists, as Korsvik says "on the one hand, they encouraged women to report rape to the police; on the other, they

strongly opposed the ‘bourgeois’ judicial system” (p. 105). This was why, following the enactment of legal reform in 1980, the MLF reacted ambivalently. Although successful in creating change for women, did stricter laws against rape represent the change women activists wanted? Or had they simply reinforced institutions of oppression aimed at punishing workers and immigrants?

Similarly, in the Norwegian case, the group New Feminists, who had initially advocated the most outwardly feminist critique of pornography, pulled out from a cross-party Women’s Joint Action Against Pornography. This action, initiated by the women’s section of the Center Party in 1977, brought together various representatives of women’s interests in the fight against pornography, including Christian Democrats. This was too much for the New Feminists who were wary of the impact of Christian “puritanism” on the discussion of pornography. It was not until the early 1980s, following the decline of Marxist-Leninism and Christian political influence alike in Norway that the New Feminists rejoined the campaign against pornography. Unfortunately, when legal change came in 1983, many Norwegian activists felt the same ambivalence as their French sisters. Despite putatively stricter laws, the courts’ stringent interpretation meant that very little changed in practice. In this way, whether it was by drawing attention to “oppression mechanisms other than purely economic ones” (p. 157) or by questioning who to cooperate with, or how to create change, campaigning against rape and pornography was a pivotal learning process for women activists that would shape the movements in the future.

The book’s main shortcoming lies in the power of the comparison. It is unclear why these two countries have been selected, or what their specific comparison can bring to the study of feminism, especially since the two movements had little contact with one another. Some of the explanations offered in chapter five as to why rape was the core issue in France, while pornography was the focus of attention in Norway, are also unconvincing. However, it might be best to view *Politicizing Rape and Pornography* less as a comparative study and more as a glimpse into the way feminist ideas were translated in different national contexts. As Korsvik discusses, the 1970s were an important moment for the development of a global women’s movement against violence, broadly understood. Feminists across the world protested rape, domestic violence, pornography, and the discrimination and oppression of women at work, at home, and across society. Women in France and Norway tapped into—and participated in—this global movement, and translated this attention to sex, power, and violence into campaigns against rape and pornography that were shaped by the nature of the women’s movements, the media, and the political structures present in the two countries.

Politicizing Rape and Pornography offers readers much on the winding path of feminism in Europe. From grassroots, leftist origins, activists took issues that had not previously been considered issues of gender equality and made them into exactly that. They took part in militant actions, burning pornography and protesting in front of courthouses. They used the media to draw attention to their campaigns and to the inequalities, discrimination, and violence that women faced. In the process, they gathered support and were able to create legal change. But what did this change mean for feminism in the two countries? Although the women’s liberation movements in Norway and France might have greeted legal reform with circumspection, as Korsvik shows, women’s activism against sexual violence—broadly conceived—continues to work for change and to improve the lives of women and girls to this day.

NOTES

[1] Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Random House, 1977).

Jane Freeland
German Historical Institute London
j.freeland@ghil.ac.uk

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172