

MAKING SENSE OF THE “SECOND WAVE” OF

FEMINISM IN/FOR THE PRESENT

GNDR_ST 321

WINTER
2024



As we grapple with the urgencies of the present, what are the politics (and promise) of telling more complex and nuanced stories of activism and social change? In recent years, the “second wave” of feminism (1968-1980) has increasingly been conflated with “white, middle-class feminism” and critiqued as an exclusionary form of feminist politics in contrast to the more intersectional feminist politics of the “third” and “fourth” waves of feminism. Numerous historians of the period have challenged us to reconsider this claim, which elides “feminism’s deeply questioning, queer, coalitional and anti-imperialist past” and risks missing “some ways that feminist, lesbian, and queer of color and trans activists grappled hard to develop critical insights and knowledges that move us today” (Enke 2018). In this course, we will begin by exploring which projects, groups, and concerns have come to define the “second wave” (and subsequent “waves”) of feminism in the United States in our collective memory. We then turn to recent histories of the “second wave,” coupled with oral histories from movement participants, that challenge us to reconsider what counts as “feminist politics” during this period. For example, histories that focus on the formation of broad-based coalitions across and between liberation movements around issues of economic justice, reproductive rights, and the right to “self-defense” against both interpersonal and state violence during this period, challenge us to expand our conception of feminist activism. In the process, they require us to incorporate the “critical insights and knowledges” of labor and welfare rights activists, sex workers and gay liberationists, Black, Chicana, Puerto Rican and Indigenous liberation movement members as central to the feminist politics of the period. Guided student research into ongoing/current feminist projects (e.g. SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, Chicago Abortion Fund, Survived&Punished, Critical Resistance, Sylvia Rivera Law Project) aid us in identifying the legacies of this historical period in feminist activism in 2023.

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MW 11am-12:20pm
Kresge 4-410