

Reflection

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I remember the first time I read *Against Our Will*. I was in college, nurturing a budding feminism, but still uncertain what it meant to be a “feminist.” Reading *Against Our Will* was a consciousness-raising experience that, at the end, provided me one of those glorious “aha!” moments: So *this* is what feminism is.

Against Our Will provided me and, no doubt, countless other women with an analytical framework for understanding gender oppression. In her meticulously documented history of rape, Susan Brownmiller described, as no one before her had, how the penis could be used as a weapon and, even more significant, how rape epitomized the nature of gender relations. Rape and the threat of rape, Brownmiller told us, are effective ways for men to intimidate and control women. It is women’s, not men’s, behavior that is changed by the threat or the act of rape. But men can also use rape as a way to punish other men: to emasculate them by “using” them “like a woman,” to establish dominance by “taking” *their* women (i.e., their sexual property). In fact, it was Brownmiller’s analysis of rape as a weapon of war that most moved me when I read it in 1975, and I continue to marvel at its relevance today.

Of course, any groundbreaking book will become the focal point of intense debate, and *Against Our Will* was hardly an exception in this respect. The book elicited hyperbolic praise and criticism when it was first published and long afterward. Even ardent supporters of Brownmiller’s analysis, however, often tried to tone it down a bit by conceding that not *all* men are potential rapists. But whether you agreed or disagreed, in whole or in part, with Brownmiller’s argument, once *Against Our Will* was published, no one could write or talk about rape without reference to this book. Indeed, perhaps the greatest contribution Brownmiller made with *Against Our Will* was putting rape in the public spotlight, making it a topic people could no longer ignore, try to hide, or speak about in only hushed tones.

When I read *Against Our Will* the first time, it made me at once sad and furious. The numerous stories of mass and individual rapes of women and girls in so many different cultures at so many different points in time often made me cry, but the repetitious details were never numbing. *Against Our Will* was—and remains—a feminist call to action. Seeing the “facts” about rape in print was empowering. It helped thousands of women overcome the intimidation that the threat of rape imposed and inspired them to act collectively to bring about social change. After reading *Against Our Will*, I didn’t sit paralyzed with fear; I became a feminist activist. And isn’t that one of the true measures of a classic: that it motivates us not to just *talk* about a problem, but to *act* in response to the problem? Although today we may question to what extent our activism has been successful in bringing about positive changes in society’s responses to rape victims, there is no denying that the anti-rape movement has brought about significant change. And *Against Our Will* was, in essence, the manifesto of the anti-rape movement. We are indebted to Susan Brownmiller for her courage to speak out when many of us could not or didn’t know the words that would make a difference.