

Meredith Tax, feminist author, dies at 80

Her 1970 pamphlet “Woman and Her Mind” was a founding text of second-wave feminism

By Hillel Italie for the Washington Post
September 29, 2022

Meredith Tax, a prominent activist and writer of second-wave feminism who challenged herself, her peers and the world at large to rethink long-held ideas about gender, race and class, died Sept. 25 at 80.

Her friend Frances Kissling confirmed the death but provided no further details. The life of Ms. Tax, born into an upwardly mobile Jewish family in Wisconsin, was often a story of self-discovery. She was a graduate of Brandeis University and a fellowship student in London who had dreams of a gilded career in the arts before the 1960s politicized her, then radicalized her into “studying the world instead of literature.” Contentious even within communities of activists, she confronted Planned Parenthood and other [abortion](#) rights supporters over the issue of sterilization abuse and was thrown out of the Leninist October League after criticizing its treatment of women. She faced her own reckoning in the 1970s when she worked in a Zenith TV factory in Chicago and was the only White person on the assembly line.

“The first thing I had to learn how to do was hard physical labor; the second was to shut up,” she wrote in a mini-autobiography on her blog. “I had always been such a bright girl, in love with my own ideas. Now I had to learn how to listen very deeply, listen the way people do when they are in the minority, taking in not only what people said but what they didn’t say, the changes in their voices, their body language.”

Earlier in 2022, Ms. Tax lamented what she regarded as the lack of a feminist equivalent to Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street. Writing in the Nation, she alleged that “young feminists concentrate on social media, blogs, and campaigns — an emphasis that entails paying a lot of attention to personalities, branding, and celebrity.”

“While #MeToo is unquestionably a powerful movement against job-related sexual harassment and assault, it is not a membership organization, so there is no way for people who support it to ensure its consistency or change its public face,” she wrote.

Rachel Carmona, executive director of Women’s March, disputed Ms. Tax’s perspective. In a letter to the Nation, she cited the massive 2017 gatherings held soon after President Donald Trump’s inauguration as “an example of online activism transforming itself into activism in the streets, on the ground, where and when it was needed most.”

Ms. Tax’s books included the nonfiction “The Rising of the Women” (1980) and the novels “Rivington Street” (1982) and its sequel, “Union Square” (1988), which New York Times

book critic Eden Ross Lipson described as “a kind of ‘politically correct’ but popular fiction. It is accessible and entertaining, and combines romance, family life, fashion and politics without condescension.”

Ms. Tax wrote for the Nation, the Guardian and the Village Voice among other publications, and has been praised for her 1970 pamphlet “Woman and Her Mind,” a founding text of second-wave feminism, in which she explored how society conditioned the behavior of men and women.

“Men are taught to be active,” she wrote, “to go and seek what they need; not to look pretty and wait for it to come into their vicinity. Men don’t observe each passing cloud over human relations as if their whole future depended on it. There’s a reason for that. It doesn’t. Women are hyper-aware of their surroundings. They have to be. Walk down a street without being tuned in and you’re in real danger; our society is one in which men rape, mug and murder women whom they don’t know every day.”

Meredith Jane Tax was born in Milwaukee on Sept. 18, 1942. Her father was a physician, and her mother was a homemaker “of the Betty Friedan generation, angry and bitter about her deprived childhood and her own crazy family, but too fearful to try to expand her horizons,” she [wrote](#). “Today she would be diagnosed as having an anxiety disorder; she was afraid of everything and couldn’t stand having anybody around whom she couldn’t completely control.”

Ms. Tax graduated from Brandeis in 1964, then spent four years at the University of London before returning to the United States to join the antiwar and the feminist movements.

She helped found the PEN American Center Women’s Committee, the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse, and the Women’s World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development (Women’s WORLD). More recently, she chaired the board of the Center for Secular Space, founded in 2011 “to strengthen secular voices, oppose fundamentalism, and promote universality in human rights.”

Ms. Tax’s first marriage, to Jonathan Schwartz, ended in divorce, and she later married author and philosopher Marshall Berman. She had a child with each husband. Information about survivors was not immediately available.