

The Diversity of Feminist Thought

It would be a mistake to expect a brief and clear definition in a sentence or two of feminism or feminist thought. Feminism, after all, has a long history, going back at least to the 18th century and the work of early liberal feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. Feminism is also a response to women's lives and experiences and the varieties of feminisms reflects the changing and varied nature of women's experience. Despite these difficulties, all varieties of feminism agree that women have been oppressed and unjustly treated (Grimshaw). But as Jean Grimshaw notes, how feminists conceptualize that oppression, its causes, and the responses to it, varies. The editors of the anthology *Feminist Frameworks* use the metaphor of lenses to understand the variety and diversity of feminist theory. Feminists, they suggest, use a variety of categories to organize and understand women's social reality and women's lives and subordination can be understood adequately only in terms of several categories. Drawing on the work of several feminist philosophers (Tong's noteworthy *Feminist Thought*, Jaggar, Grimshaw; none of this should be construed as original intellectual work), this outline of several distinct feminist theories is impartial and brief and programmatic but should provide a little introductory background into the varieties of second-wave feminist thought.

Liberal Feminism

- Lens of gender and gender equality
- Emphasis on traditional understanding of human nature and personhood: rationality, individual autonomy, self-fulfillment (characteristics possessed by all).
- Sex and gender neutral; all human beings possess a common nature.
- A just society is a society that allows individuals to exercise their freedom and fulfill themselves.
- Emphasis on equality of opportunity: all persons deserve an equal chance to develop their rational and moral capacities so that they can achieve personhood.
- Because society has the false belief that women are by nature less intellectually and physically capable than men it excludes women from many opportunities and the true potential of women goes unfulfilled.
- Liberal feminists argue that women share the same rational human nature men do and so should be given the same educational opportunities and civil rights as men are given.
- The goal of women's liberation is freeing women from oppressive gender roles: sexual and gender equality.
- Liberal feminism led to advances in the economic sphere, in equality of opportunity and in civil rights.
- The main problem of liberal feminism is its tendency to accept male values as universal values. All women should want to become like men, to aspire to masculine values. Liberal feminism often did not include an analysis of class or sexuality (the sex/gender system).

Marxist Feminism

- Lens of class.
- influence: the philosophies of Marx and Engels
- key concepts: class, wealth, capitalism
- explanation: women's oppression originated in the introduction of private property. Capitalism is the cause of women's oppression.
- prescription: The capitalist system must be replaced by a socialist system in which the means of production belong to one and all.
- Rejection of the abstract individualism of liberal feminism.
- Emphasis on our social nature, as it is our social existence (class, the kind of work we do) that determines our consciousness.
- A woman's conception of herself is a product of her social existence which is largely defined by the kind of work she does—relegated largely to domestic work in the private sphere and the reproduction of the species (rather than production).
- With its emphasis on economic factors, Marxist Feminists see women as a distinct economic class, rather than as individuals, analyzing the connections between women's work status and their self-image.
- Capitalism perpetuates the subordination of women by enforcing their economic dependence on men.
- Impact on comparable worth debate, wages for housework, women's double-day.
- The weaknesses of Marxist Feminism include its obscuring differences between distinct economic classes of men and women and its failure to make room for issues unrelated to the nature and function of work (the sex-gender system).

Radical Feminism

- Lens of sex/gender and sexuality.
- Influence: to some extent the black power movement, other social and progressive movements of the 1960s.
- key concepts: biology, sex/gender system, patriarchy, power, dominance, hierarchy.
- explanation: women's biology is closely related to their oppression, as well as all the manifestations of sexual violence.
- prescription: generally revolves around their conception of female biology, perhaps androgyny (radical-liberation feminists), separatism (radical-lesbian feminists), recovery of an authentic female nature (radical-cultural feminists).
- Main insight: distinctions of gender, based on sex, structure virtually every aspect of our lives and are so all-pervasive that ordinarily they go unrecognized.
- Gender is the unquestioned framework in terms of which we perceive and interpret the world. Radical feminists appeal to women not as an economic class but as a class defined by the sex/gender system.
- Sexuality is the root cause of oppression—women are oppressed because they are women.
- Radical feminists, through their analysis of the gender system, first disclosed the elaborate system of male domination known as patriarchy.

- Radical feminists focus on the subordination of women as its primary concern—revealing how male power is exercised and reinforced through such practices as sexual harassment, rape, pornography, prostitution, as well as childbearing, housework, love and marriage. Radical feminists made stride in the battle against violence against women.
- In response to the almost total domination of women by men, radical feminists have tried to celebrate womanhood in contrast to the devaluation of women that pervades the larger society, focusing on the creative power inherent in women's biology.
- Biology gives rise to those psychological characteristics linked with women: nurturance, warmth, emotional expressiveness, endurance, practical common sense.
- A possible problem: in celebrating womanhood are they celebrating what has already been defined as feminine by the patriarchy? Some radical feminist theory was also biological determinist and obscured differences among women.

Socialist Feminism

- influence: Marxism, psychoanalysis, radical feminism
- key concepts: unity and integration of capitalist system and patriarchy
- explanation: women's oppression is complexly determined by a variety of forces, including economic, social, psychological.
- Socialist feminism attempts to synthesize best insights of Marxist and Radical feminism. Capitalism, male dominance, racism, imperialism are intertwined and inseparable.
- Socialist feminism remains more historical than biological and more specific than universal: recognizes all the important differences among human beings—class, sex, but also age, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation.
- Women, like all human beings, are constituted essentially by the social relations they inhabit. A woman's life experience is shaped by all these various dimensions.
- Refuses to reduce oppression to one single type or cause.

Psychoanalytic Feminism

- the lens of psyche
- influence: Freud, the psychoanalytic movement, including object relations theory
- key concepts: sexuality, the Oedipus complex, id, ego, superego
- explanation: women's oppression is tied to the manner in which she resolves the Oedipus complex
- prescription: altering parenting habits, reconceptualizing the Oedipal stage; women must gain insight into how their psychic lives—especially their sexual lives—were structured while they were still infants.
- Weaknesses: is female sexuality parasitic upon male sexuality? How does psychoanalysis deal with issues of race and class?

Existentialist Feminism

- influence: Existentialism, Sartre, De Beauvoir
- key concepts: woman as "Other"
- explanation: women is oppressed by virtue of "otherness", the object whose meaning is determined for her.
- prescription: Woman must become a self, a subject who transcends definitions, labels, and essences. She must make herself whatever she wants to be.

Postmodern Feminism

- influences: Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, other postmodernists
- key concepts: difference and diversity (race, culture, class)
- explanation: woman as difference
- prescription: by refusing to center, congeal, and cement their separate thoughts into a unified truth too inflexible to change, feminists resist patriarchal dogma.

Multicultural and Global Feminism: the lenses of sex/gender, class, race, imperialism, colonialism

- lens of imperialism or post-colonialism
- influences: civil rights movement, the post-colonial movement, multiculturalism
- key concepts: race, difference
- Multicultural feminism examines how class, race, gender, and sexuality operate as an interacting system of subordination. These are intertwining systems, transformative—not simply additive. Melds elements from race liberation, class liberation, and women's liberation.
- Global feminists address the social forces that divide women and focus on how to value cultural diversity. They examine the connections between gender issues and national liberation, military dictatorship, democracy, and colonialism. They also examine the role of women in the global economy.

Ecofeminism

- influences: radical environmentalism, animal-rights movement
- key concepts: the nature/culture divide, the relationship between human and nonhuman nature
- explanation: woman, nonhuman animals, and the environment have all been identified together as natural forces to be dominated by Man
- prescription: overcoming the rift between nature and culture, feminism must work to eliminate all forms of the oppression of nonhuman nature
- Ecofeminists argue that we will not succeed in eliminating the hierarchical relations that plague the human social order unless we also eradicate those that regulate the relationships between the human social order and nonhuman nature. The denigration of women and men of color, of working-class women and men, and of animals has its material origins in the subjugation of women by men. The male-female relationship is the paradigm for any and all hierarchical relationships.