

Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory

By Judith Grant

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[The following are excerpts from this book, which we find interesting:]

There is a sense in which a particular orthodoxy about feminist theory has been created by the ways in which we have studied it. The orthodoxy goes like this: There is not one feminist theory. Rather, feminist theory is multicentered and undefinable. It is divided according to its attachment to one or another of several male theories whose terms it has attempted to appropriate and whose male-biased assumptions it has tended to mitigate. While this hyphenation model has led to many interesting discussions of "liberal feminism", "Marxist feminism", "psychoanalytic feminism", "existentialist feminism", and so on, it has left us with a feminist theory that understands itself to be a kind of bandage on the basically misogynist canon of Western political and social philosophy. This way of analyzing feminism is reflected in most of the major, general treatments of feminist theory.

Jean Bethke Elshstain, for example, has divided feminist theory into four categories: radical, liberal, Marxist, and psychoanalytic. Elshstain, in accepting the formulation of feminism as divided, has gone on to comment that all feminist theories are political theories in search of politics, the public, and citizenship.

Likewise, Alison Jaggar has divided feminist theory according to the categories radical, liberal, Marxist and socialist. The problems with understanding feminism as hyphenated and underscored in Jaggar's account, which attempts to fit all theory into a preassigned grid. For example, Jaggar's discussion of liberal feminist theory concentrates, without comment, almost solely on the first wave. This conspicuous lack of second-wave liberal theorists leads on to the intuitively unlikely conclusion that second wave liberals look exactly like their first wave predecessors. So too, Jaggar seems at times unconcerned about the problems of fitting feminists from varied theoretical traditions into the model she presents. For example, Jaggar places the French feminist Monique Wittig in the same category as American radical feminists, thus obscuring important questions about the influence of existentialism and postmodernism in French theory as opposed to the relative lack thereof in American thought.

In contrast, Josephine Donovan has been careful to explicitly acknowledge differences between the first and second waves, and between American feminists and their European counterparts. She has linked contemporary liberal feminism to the first wave, arguing that both are the intellectual products of Enlightenment thinking. She concludes by arguing in favor of a feminist moral vision based on the idea of female difference. Donovan too follows a

hyphenation model and continues to emphasize differences in feminism over similarities. She divides feminist theory according to cultural, Freudian, existentialist, Marxist, and radical feminisms. Interestingly, her category "cultural feminism" links contemporary radical feminists who speak of female exceptionalism (as she herself does) to a similar first wave tradition including Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Margaret Fuller. Donovan also makes mention of radical feminism's now familiar historical roots in the New Left. Donovan argues: "Much of radical feminist theory was, therefore, forged in reaction against theories, organizational structures and personal styles of the male New Left. . . In terms of theory, radical feminists became determined to establish that their own personal 'subjective' issues had an importance and legitimacy equal to those great issues being dealt with by the New Left."

Another popular book, one by Rosemary Tong entitled *Feminist Thought: A comprehensive Introduction*, divides feminist theory even more than the others. Her formulation includes liberal, Marxist radical mothering, radical sexuality, psychoanalytic, socialist, essentialist, and postmodern. Interestingly, despite its claim to be comprehensive, there is almost no discussion of texts by women of color. Indeed, this omission exists in all of the texts mentioned above, though an understanding of the roots of feminist theory by women of color is essential to a full understanding of feminist theory.

ALTERNATIVES TO A HYPHENATED FEMINISM

I think it is politically significant that we have not looked at feminist theory as it has developed out of feminism itself, but instead have looked at it in terms of the history of Western thought. It is as though we believed that we had no way of understanding theory except terms of the canon. Perhaps even more critical is the fact that the hyphenation approach allows us to miss certain crucial and fundamental points about feminist theory and its history. In reading certain women's studies texts, we might think that (e.g.) liberal feminists thought of liberal feminism after having read Locke. Being extremely dissatisfied with his approach, they decided to come up with a feminist version and call it liberal feminism. Surely, this is not how feminist theory was born.

Curiously, feminist theorists have almost reveled in this fragmentary self-perception. Why? I think it is because there is something about "feminism itself" that portends the development of hyphenated feminisms. Indeed, the hyphenation model shows how furiously we have sought to maintain the idea that feminism is a disparate body of thought. This desire is itself an ideological manifestation of something that is precisely a similarity among feminisms -- namely, the almost fanatical devotion to the ideas of personal experience and difference. Somehow, we have decided that differences among women are and must be reflected in differences among theories, and that if we did not have many different theories we would be somehow authoritarian.

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One reason why radical feminists became the primary builders of feminist theory is simply that the academic roots and intellectual nature of the New Left meant that the women who came out of that tradition were predisposed to consider theory as essential to politics. It was in this sense quite logical that radical feminists struggled hardest at developing theories that could guide them in their sustained effort to change the situation of women.

In addition to the importance of theory per se, the particular direction of radical feminist theory of personal politics was foreshadowed by the cultural radicalism of the 60s, which placed a lot of stock in issues of lifestyle, clothing, language, and so on. Indeed, even the most hard-core left-wing groups of the period (e.g., Maoists, Black Panthers, Weather underground) made a great deal of the congruence between personal life and political commitment.

Finally, the disparity between second wave liberals and radicals on the question of theory building can be explained by the fact that liberals already had a theory. Liberal theory per se could explain the kinds of activism that were centered around government and legal change. The trick for liberal feminists seemed to be simply to get the powerful structures in society to treat women as though they were rational and, therefore, according to the classical liberal definition, human beings. Radicals, on the other hand, were politicized within the context of social movements attuned to the limits of liberalism and committed to a critique of economic and cultural imperialism. Absent the connection to liberal statism, radical feminists were free to make a much broader criticism of the private/public distinction.

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The creators of feminist theory, many of whom were neither black nor working-class, at first could discern no argument that might enable them to create a compelling testament to their own structural oppression. Firestone thus complained that sex-class was “invisible”. Others went on to boldly assert that middle- and upper-class were not only oppressed, but a type of vanguard: “A few of us have emerged from the masses of women in this country . . . to identify the problem and the enemy . . . many [of us] are well educated and professional. Some are from the ruling class.”

For feminist women, the objectivist elements in Marxism were dangerous since they prevented the male Left from acknowledging female oppression especially when it existed among ruling class women: “. . . after all women were leaving the Left in increasing numbers – and the men began to play guilt games. 'So what makes you think you're oppressed, you white middle-class chick?' . . . That tactic made some women even madder but it began to cut deep into many women.” Yet it was a logical and political necessity that feminism come up with some way to define all women as oppressed if the claims regarding women as an oppressed class were to be

sustained.

The problem was that women were present in every *oppressed and oppressing* group. Indeed, many women, such as those who were white and middle-class, would not have been considered oppressed by any existing measure save the newly emerging feminist one. To the contrary, by most gauges many women seemed more free than many men; ruling-class women were more free than working-class men, and even black women seemed to be more accepted in white society than black men.

Yet, it seemed to early radical feminists that the category Woman had to include all women or risk dissolution. . . .

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To argue persuasively that oppression was common to all women, feminists had to define oppression differently. And this new definition had to accommodate middle- and upper-class women. However, early feminists could point to no theory that proved that women as women were in an *objectively* oppressed situation. For that matter, there was virtually no political theory that referred to women at all except in derogatory terms. Although radical feminists perceived a need to design a concept that might provide some irrefutable grounding for the idea that women per se were oppressed, the task at hand presented an extreme difficulty.

The solution that prevailed was to define “oppression” subjectively. Oppression included anything that women *experienced* as oppressive. It is important to note that as with the concept Woman, the subjectivism of nascent feminist theory was developed as an exact inversion, and opposition to, the the allegedly objective view of oppression. . . . Once again, the prevailing patriarchal categories were not altered, but merely reversed. The radical feminists' solution worked against what they perceived as objective theories of oppression by asserting the validity of a subjective one. This counter-formulation also warded off those who claimed that sexual problems were invalid because subjective and personal. “Experience” became the byword of the new feminism.