

## FEMINISM

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### Contents

1. Introduction
  2. Liberal Feminism
  3. Socialist (Marxist) Feminism
  4. Radical Feminism
  5. Psychoanalytic Feminism
  6. Postmodernist Feminism
  7. The Future of Feminism
- Acknowledgements  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### Summary

In the history of Western political thought, feminism is diverse. This article identifies five main groups: a) liberal feminism; b) socialist (Marxist) feminism; c) radical feminism; d) psychoanalytic feminism; and e) postmodernist feminism. On the basis of this distinction, it appears that the fundamental disagreement among feminists lies in whether one sees the feminist objective of redressing the imbalance of power between men and women is compatible with other established political ideologies and movements. The survey also points to an important characteristic of feminism that transcends ideological divide, namely, that feminism is a force of democratization that aims at the empowerment of women. The author argues that the future of feminism as a global movement lies in building on this strength.

### 1. Introduction

Feminism is a contested term. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin “femina,” which means woman. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines feminism as having “the qualities of females.” In a book review published on April 27, 1895 in *The Athenaeum*, the word was first used in connection with the struggle for women’s rights. In this sense feminism is synonymous with the women’s movement of the West and is based fundamentally on liberalism by advocating the equality of the sexes. As such the movement was shaped importantly by two historical events. The first was the suffrage movement that straddled the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and the second was the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s, or what has been referred to as the “second wave.”

While this account identifies the birth of feminism as an organized modern political movement, many consider such an account problematic precisely because it renders feminism as being intrinsically linked with the evolution of liberal democracy of the West. A more inclusive (and radical) feminism starts with the recognition that men as a group are more powerful than women, and that this imbalance of power can be redressed only by political means. All non-feminist political ideas and ideologies are therefore flawed because they fail to take women into account. The key issue for feminism lies in whether one believes that feminism is about filling this void or that feminism has a distinctive goal separate from all other political movements. This article provides a survey of the different theoretical positions taken in response to the issue.

## 2. Liberal Feminism

Among the earliest political writings that can be identified as liberal feminist is *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797). During Wollstonecraft's times, not only were women's rights a non-issue, but women were basically non-persons as a result of matrimonial laws. Yet even more pernicious than these institutional constraints were the philosophical principles that condemned women to irrationality. Leading Enlightenment thinkers were generally of the view that women were by their very nature incapable of reasoning and thus the principle of rational individualism was not applicable to women.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), for example, believed that women, in contrast to men, were essentially creatures of emotion and passion. Using this fundamental distinction as his premise, Rousseau argued in his well-known work, *Emile* (1762) that the education of boys and girls should accordingly be different (1979, p. 363). Boys were to be educated so that they could take on the role of the citizen in which the capacity to master abstract arguments and general principles was essential. Girls, on the other hand, were inherently incapable of such mental tasks (1979, pp. 386-387). Hence, it was only natural for girls to become wives and mothers rather than citizens when they grew up. The education of girls was to ensure that the sexes complemented each other when they lived together as husband and wife (1979, p. 358). The wife was to be no more than a pleasing partner and a nurturing mother (1979, p. 365).

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* was a rebuttal of Rousseau's position (1992, pp. 175-194). Wollstonecraft maintained that women were as rational as men and that both men and women required proper education in order to utilize this rational capacity (1992, p. 125 and p. 300). Indeed, if women in Wollstonecraft's times appeared to be feeble and frivolous, it was precisely due to the lack of such education. In other words, the alleged irrationality of women was the result of cultivation rather than nature. With proper education, women would be as worthy as men and thus women ought to be entitled to the same rights that men had (1992, p. 303). While Wollstonecraft advocated women's rights, she by no means argued that women ought to abandon their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Instead, Wollstonecraft contended that education enhanced women's capacity to perform their domestic responsibilities. By properly performing their domestic duties, women could contribute to the overall "progress of knowledge and virtue" (1992, pp. 86-87).

Contemporary feminists are undoubtedly more critical of women's traditional roles. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's core argument, namely, that the equality of the sexes is based on the rationality that both sexes share, remains central among liberal feminists. Feminists who agree with Wollstonecraft are therefore typically concerned with making good the promise of universality within the framework of liberalism. In other words, liberal feminists, as feminists, are critical of the fact that the canonical liberal thinkers failed to take women into account (with perhaps the exception of the English utilitarian thinker John Stuart Mill [1806–1873], who published the essay “The Subjection of Women” in 1869.) But liberal feminists also believe that liberalism does not by any means exclude women categorically. Hence, the main concern among these feminists is to prove that men and women share the same characteristics.

There is no doubt that liberal feminism has been enormously influential in shaping the politics of feminism in the Western world. It was the ideology that supported the suffrage movement from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. When the American feminist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, marking the beginning of the “second wave,” her image of a fulfilled woman was very much defined by the liberal notions of autonomy and freedom. Friedan believed that American women were denied the opportunities to pursue these values as they were socialized into believing that their only and ultimate fulfillment was in the family (1997, pp. 15-16). By founding the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, Friedan helped solidify contemporary American feminism as one of securing civil rights for women.

Despite the indisputable achievement of liberal feminism in the United States and elsewhere in the contemporary Western world, liberal feminism is not without its critics. Among the earlier critics was Jean Bethke Elshtain; a contemporary American political theorist who maintains that liberal feminism fails to resolve the hierarchical duality of liberalism, namely, the public versus the private. To appreciate this line of criticism, one needs to place liberalism in the context of its history.

In the history of political thought, liberalism represented a revolt against patriarchalism (see chapter *Liberalism*). The first treatise of John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1698), for example, was a critique of the doctrine of patriarchalism as advocated by the English political thinker Robert Filmer (1588–1653). According to Filmer, political authority was a consequence or derivative of the governance of the household, which was the exclusive prerogative of the father/husband (1997, pp. 15-16). Consequently, advocates of patriarchalism saw the duality of public and private, nature and convention, family and politics, as part of a continuum regulated by the same rationale. In contrast, Locke (1632–1704) introduced a clear disjuncture between the family and politics by maintaining that politics was a matter of convention and that political association was legitimate only through a social contract agreed upon by consenting rational individuals who were equals.

Accordingly, liberals typically regard politics as belonging to the public realm, which is the world of universality and of reason. The family, on the other hand, falls within the private realm, which is the world of particularity and of desire. This dichotomy between the public and the private realms is problematic from a feminist perspective. First, there is an explicit hierarchy set up between the two where the world of reason (associated

with men) is valued over the world of desire (associated with women). Second, while there is equality between individuals in the public realm, the structure of inequality remains intact in the private realm. Like Filmer, Locke maintained in the *Second Treatise* that the authority of husband over wife, parents over children, was natural (1988, p. 304 and p. 321).

Against this background, feminists like Elshtain note that the adoption of the language of rights for feminist cause is fundamentally flawed. The language of rights is the only one recognized by the public realm and as such, liberal feminists simply side step the more political issue of making the private realm on par with the public one. In Elshtain's view, this is unsatisfactory because women are in the end denied a public voice that recognizes them as women (1981, p.127).

A second and related criticism of liberal feminism is that the social contract is a form of political association in which women are categorically excluded. In an important essay, entitled "The Fraternal Contract", the feminist theorist Carol Pateman offers a disturbingly powerful feminist analysis of the origin of liberalism by focusing on the concept of fraternity. Pateman rightly notes that of the three fundamental concepts that define the ideals of citizenship in the modern liberal state, fraternity, as opposed to liberty and equality, is rarely discussed (1989, pp. 34-35). This lack of discussion is not accidental and a feminist interpretation of contractarianism can account for this gap.

According to Pateman, there are two dimensions to patriarchalism: 1) the paternal (father/son): 2) the masculine (husband/wife) (1989, p.37). Pateman argues that the transition from the traditional to the modern world, as captured in the doctrine of contractarianism, was by no means a total displacement of patriarchalism. Instead, what contractarianism challenged were the paternal but not the masculine aspect of patriarchalism. In other words, contractarianism represented a shift from paternal to fraternal form of patriarchy. The similarity between patriarchalism and contractarianism is the assumption that the right of men over women is not political, but natural (1989, pp. 39-43). That the social contract is literally a "fraternal pact" is illustrated by the fact that citizenship passed through the female line remains an issue.

Like Elshtain, Pateman believes that liberal feminism is problematic in that it does not question the patriarchal assumptions of liberalism. In this reading, liberal feminists appear to have wrongly concerned themselves with the task of proving that women can be like men. This approach fails to address the reverse, namely, what women can do uniquely as women, such as giving birth (1989, p.44). Moreover, an awareness of the fraternal origin of social contract helps to account for some of the classical problems of liberalism, such as the tension between the citizen (who is to be informed by collective interests) on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie (who is to be entirely motivated by self-interests) on the other (1989, p. 47). Pateman points out that this is a tension only if we believe that fraternity is indeed an ideal of liberalism. But such a belief is simply misguided because the concept of fraternity was originally defined in terms of men's right to women. Fraternity as such has nothing to do with the bonding between men (and women) as fellow human beings.

The issues raised by Elshtain and Pateman are undoubtedly central to the viability of liberalism for feminist cause. As women in the Western world began to make their mark in the public world in the 1960s, it became clear that women's issues defied a clear boundary between the public and the private realms. Thus liberal feminists were and still are confounded by a conundrum—how to remain liberal on the one hand, and feminist on the other, when modern liberalism hinges on the distinction between the public (political) and the private (non-political).

In response liberal feminists such as Susan Moller Okin points out that the public/private distinction is ideological and that the problem can be addressed without compromising liberalism. Indeed, Okin argues that any comprehensive theory of justice must consider family as its starting point precisely because the family is the first place where a person can learn about justice and other ethical norms needed to sustain a just society (1989, pp. 17-18). By making the family the cornerstone of a liberal polity, Okin acknowledges the inevitable politicization of the so-called private realm. In Okin's view, taking such a step does not necessarily violate such fundamental rights as privacy and personal freedom (1998, pp. 133-137). Yet problems ranging from childcare to domestic violence, including rape and sexual assaults, continue to challenge a feminist agenda that is associated with a system of political principles committed to minimizing the role of government in the everyday life of individuals.

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**Dr Theresa Lee** is an associate professor in political theory in the Department of Political Science at the University of Guelph in Canada. Having completed an undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Toronto, Lee started graduate studies at Princeton University and received her Ph.D. in 1992. Her main interest is twentieth-century and contemporary political thought. She has published in the areas of postmodernism, feminism, multiculturalism, human rights, and Chinese political thought. She is the author of *Politics and Truth: Political Theory and the Postmodernist Challenge* (1997), published by the State University of New York Press.

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