

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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PART 3 GENDER

3.2 Perspectives

3.2.1 Introduction

There are different feminist views about the nature of and mechanisms for the oppression of women. A lot of prefixes have been added in various combinations to feminism: socialist, Marxist, bourgeois, radical, materialist, positivist, idealist. Unfortunately, these labels have not always been used to mean the same thing, nor are they mutually exclusive. More profoundly, the theoretical positions embodied in different perspectives are not entirely distinct. In practice, too, feminists with very different epistemological perspectives collaborate in combating gender oppression and there is a tendency for research endeavours to adopt a plurality of perspectives in exploring a substantive area of enquiry. Thus no set of definitions will be entirely satisfactory. The following outline of different perspectives is, however, intended to help the potential critical social researcher grasp the key points of debate within feminism.

'Traditional' feminism around 1970 directly reflected the women's movement of the 1960s. It emphasised 'sisterhood' in redefining women's relations to one another and the 'personal' realms in drawing attention to women's position. Feminism, really for the first time, began to directly engage oppression of women rather than their social disadvantage (Oakley, 1974a). Women's movements and feminist thought earlier in the century had tended towards the advocacy of the equality of opportunity for women in a man's world. These, so-called, liberal or bourgeois feminists¹ NOTE wanted equality for women within the existing social system (Mary Wollstonecraft; Elizabeth Cady Stanton; Harriet Taylor Mill).

The feminist positions that were emerging in the early 1970s were opposed to reformism arguing that the position of women cannot be changed within prevailing social structures because it is capitalism and/or patriarchy that ensures the oppression of women. Only a fundamental change in social relations will provide women with equality.

A fierce debate about the nature of women's oppression, the means of analysis and the direction of feminist politics erupted in the mid-1970s and lasted for around ten years to the mid 1980s (Vogel, 1984). The debate has been characterised in several ways; most often it is seen as embodying a split between socialist and radical feminists. The former are presented as seeing capitalism as the basis of oppression while the latter see patriarchy as the fundamental oppressive mechanism. While class and gender constitute the major axis of this debate, in reality the distinction is much more blurred and the debate far more subtle. Although it is not the intention of this book to rehearse theoretical debates, which have in any case been well documented elsewhere, a brief characterisation

of the different positions does provide a context for the examination of different methodologies.

3.2.2 Socialist feminism

Socialist feminism is a general term for those feminists who see capitalist relations of production as important to an analysis of the oppression of women. In essence, socialist feminism argues that the position of women cannot be divorced from a Marxist analysis of capitalism. Generally speaking, there are two basic versions of this approach.

First, a view that suggests that productive relations within capitalism underpin the oppression of women. This might better be referred to as 'a socialist class analysis of the oppression of women'. The approach is based on Engels (1884) analysis of gender oppression in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Engels offers a materialistic explanation that shows the relationship between the ownership of private property and the ideological subordination of women. His analysis is important to socialist women as it is virtually the only account within 19th century Marxism of relations between the sexes and of the possibility of social advance united with sexual emancipation. Engels argued that emancipation of women depends on their full integration into social production. Human reproduction is identified along with production as constituting the material basis of society. Engels argued that the origin of the monogamous family, and its attendant domination of women by men, results from the emergence of private property. Private property is at the root of class differences and the oppression of women is thus linked to the emergence of socio-economic classes and resolvable only through class conflict.

Although this approach has been recently reworked and developed (Sayers *et al.*, 1987) it has had a mixed reception even in socialist circles. Kautsky regarded it with suspicion and in the USSR until recently, Engels' concentration on sex/love was seen as individualistic, and outside the province of the state (Millett, 1969; Rowbotham, 1970; Porter, 1980). Lenin (1919, p. 3), however, endorsed *The Origins*, as did Eleanor Marx and Rosa Luxemburg among other prominent female Marxists (Thonnessen, 1973; Draper & Lipow, 1976; Porter, 1980). Simone de Beauvoir (1952), on the other hand, saw Engels as an economic determinist, (le Doeuff, 1980) while more recently, Millet (1969), Eisenstein (1979b) and Vogel (1984) have pointed to contradictions in his analysis. More recent proponents of the approach that sees gender divisions as a by-product of class processes (Secombe, 1974; Zaretsky, 1976) have been attacked for ignoring the benefits to men of patriarchal oppression (Cockburn, 1983).

On balance, socialist feminists prefer a view which gives as much weight to feminist as socialist concerns (Hartmann, 1979b) and the tendency in the 1980s is a view that argues that women are oppressed by both productive and reproductive relations within capitalism. This approach has a number of variants. First, is the view that women are oppressed by class relations (as are men) but that within classes they are oppressed by gender relations that cannot be reduced to class. Second, women are oppressed by both capitalism and by patriarchy. This second form, which might be regarded as the dominant approach of socialist feminism, has developed two ways of combining a Marxist class analysis with a feminist gender analysis of society.

One approach posits a fusion of the two oppressive mechanisms and argues for capitalist patriarchy, which emphasises 'the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship

between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring' (Eisenstein, 1979b, p. 5). The capitalist patriarchy view argues that women are exploited as labourers within the class structure but are also oppressed by patriarchy. This oppression reflects the hierarchical relations of the sexual (and racial) division of labour and society, which defines people's activity, desires, and so on according to their biological sex. This sexual division separates men and women into their respective hierarchical sex roles and structures their related duties in the family domain and within the economy. The sexual division has evolved from ideological and political interpretations of biological difference that men have chosen to interpret and make political use of.

The view argues that capitalism 'needs' patriarchy in the sense that patriarchy provides the necessary order and control. Male supremacy involves a system of cultural, social, economic and political control. The capitalist concern with profit and patriarchal concern with sexual hierarchy are inextricably connected (but cannot be reduced to each other), patriarchy and capitalism become an *integral process*: specific elements of each system are necessitated by the other (Eisenstein, 1979b, p. 28).

Patriarchy provides the sexual hierarchical ordering of society, but, as a political system, cannot be reduced to its economic structure. Capitalism, as an economic class system, driven by the pursuit of profit, feeds off the (prior) patriarchal ordering. Together they form the political economy of the society, not merely one or another, but a particular blend of the two. The view suggests that a reformulation of the idea of class is required that takes into account the complex reality of women's lives in capitalist patriarchy.

The other approach to combining a Marxist class analysis with a feminist gender analysis of society is to adopt a *dualist* thesis that sees capitalism and patriarchy as separate but interrelated oppressive structures. The dual approach requires that social structures and practices are examined for both gender and class oppression (Hartmann, 1979a; Cockburn, 1983). This reverses the intention of socialist feminism to dissolve the distinction between the radical feminist gender-oriented perspective and the socialist or Marxist class-oriented perspective. Dualist approaches have been criticised for proposing a mysterious coexistence of unrelated explanations of social development. Each of the dual realms remain relatively autonomous and the unsatisfactory analysis of patriarchy that derives from radical feminism and the gender blind analysis of class that derives from Marxism remain more or less in tact (Young, 1981; Vogel, 1984).

Although the view that women are oppressed by patriarchy and capitalism, either through some kind of fusion of the two mechanisms or through the workings of two relatively autonomous realms, has been the dominant approach of socialist feminism it is regarded as unsatisfactory in developing a 'unified materialist perspective on women's liberation' (Vogel, 1984, p. 28) not least because it pays only lip service to racial oppression.

3.2.3 Radical feminism

Radical feminism, a multi-faceted perspective, argues that, at root, women are oppressed by men. Radical feminists see it as a mistake to subsume the oppression of women under class oppression. There are, arguably, two basic forms of radical feminism, the idealist and the materialist approaches.

Idealist radical feminists make up the bulk of what is usually referred to as radical feminism. In the early 1970s they were often referred to simply as feminists and have

more recently been called (rather inappropriately) *cultural feminists*. They adopt a view that the biological differences between men and women constitute an impassable barrier for cognition (for this reason idealist radical feminists are sometimes referred to as biological feminists). In effect, idealist radical feminists adopt an ascriptive and separatist approach (Rich, 1977; Morgan, 1978, 1982; Daly, 1979, 1984; Spender, 1980, 1982, 1984; Orbach, 1981; Arcana, 1983; Griffin, 1984a, 1984b). They posit a view that suggests that women are biologically different and as a consequence are psychologically different and thereby have a view of the world that is ungraspable to men. It is this innate difference (which usually projects men in negative ways emphasising aggressiveness, insensitivity and egocentrism, and women in positive ways) that excludes men from female perspectives and which has led men, in the past, to dominate and oppress women.²

Another form of idealist radical feminism occurs in what has been labelled psychoanalytic feminism. The approach, which was particularly strong in France³ in the 1970s and subsequently in Italy and the United States, derives from the work of the French post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. He argued that ‘woman’ or ‘femininity’ are radical symbols contradicting the patriarchal ‘symbolic order’— signs, codes and rituals expressed linguistically that make up the way in which we operate in society. Women from childhood are not allowed to develop, indeed, it is argued that women have never existed because they have had to use male points of reference. Psychoanalytic feminism is thus concerned with the masculinity in women’s heads that results from them being in a patriarchal society. It is not initially concerned with the material conditions of women’s lives, nor with discrimination that can be changed by legislation. Psychoanalytic feminism argues that women must re-evaluate their own worth, celebrate their own bodies and generally learn to appreciate and nurture their womanness. Strategies to do this include: psychoanalysis; women-only spaces; redefinition of sexuality; breaking with dependence on men; and developing new concepts and language.

Materialist radical feminism also sees the oppression of women as primarily an oppression by men. However, it is opposed to idealist radical feminism because it argues that such oppression is rooted in social relations and not biology. Materialist radical feminism therefore does not advocate ‘cultural separatism’. Materialist radical feminism proposes that radical changes in social relationships between men and women, and thus of radical changes in society, are the only long-term solution to the oppression of women.

In the main, materialist radical feminism takes a critical (and often Marxist) framework and gives precedence to gender over class oppression. There is often a dualism in this approach that sees gender as related to but somehow prior to, and distinct from, class oppression. Radical materialist feminists sometimes refer to themselves as *Marxist* feminists as opposed to *socialist* feminists because they prefer to take on board Marx’s analytic framework and dialectical methodology rather than his socialist or class theory (Delphy, 1985).

Materialist radical feminism is similar, in its materialist orientation and dialectical analysis, to a ‘capitalist patriarchy’ approach to socialist feminism. However, contrary to socialist feminism, materialist radical feminists (such as Christine Delphy) argue that feminism and Marxism will not be integrated by adding patriarchy to capitalism. Nor is it possible to see how class and gender oppression interrelate until women’s oppression is understood. Further, feminism cannot simply use the concepts developed for the analysis

of class oppression in its analysis of patriarchy because such concepts actually obscure gender oppression,

Socialist feminism then differs from idealist radical feminism because it adopts a materialist dialectical analysis and does not accept that gender is the sole or primary determinant of women's oppression. Socialist feminism differs from materialist radical feminism in more subtle ways but, primarily, socialist feminism argues that sexual oppression within classes is (at least in part) a structural effect of capitalist relations. (Patriarchy, then, is interrelated with capitalism). Materialist radical feminism, argues that patriarchy and capitalism are separate forms of oppression (and that, chronologically, patriarchy precedes capitalism).

3.2.4 Conclusion

While Marxist analysis tends to assume the oppressive nature of class, feminists have expended considerable effort arguing that gender is an oppressive mechanism. Even in the 1990s there was still considerable resistance to the idea from both women and men. Feminists still had to constantly reassert the sexist nature of society and will have to continue to do so in the face of post-feminism.

Feminists are divided over the operation of gender oppression. For some, it is fundamentally down to the dominance exercised by men. For others, it is intertwined with class-based oppression, or at the very least cannot be seen in isolation from the structural organisation of society. Women have been systematically denied access to resources and thus to power. There is also considerable disagreement among feminists about suitable political tactics and the nature of the transformation that is being sought. A liberal democratic view asks no more than equal opportunity and access to resources. A more politically radical perspective declares such view bankrupt within the given socio-economic structure. Socialist feminism broadly requires an economic and gender transformation. Radical feminism argues the transformation must be directed to a new politics of gender, possibly achievable only through separatism (see Segal, 1987).

While class and gender have provided the major axis of the debate and the focus of most of the antagonisms between different feminist perspectives, the debate has also been cross-cut by issues of race and sexuality. These have grown in prominence since the mid-1980s and have provided a basis for a redirecting of feminist analyses and a shift away from approaches that emphasise a unitary perspective to those that suggest the need for a multi-faceted analysis. For example, it is increasingly clear that the absence of black women in feminist discourses cannot be resolved by simply adding to existing corpus of knowledge, but that feminism must integrate the experiences of black women and take on board an understanding of racially constructed gender roles (Joseph, 1981; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Carby, 1982; Davis, 1982; Jones, 1982; Parmar, 1982; Bourne, 1983; Dill, 1983).

The critical studies of gender oppression examined below do not include idealist radical feminism. Such approaches tend to be conservative and politically reactionary. They do not tend to address the historically specific nature of social structures nor to undertake a materialist analysis of empirical data. Instead, they are transhistorical analyses that rely heavily on idealist notions of inherent psyche. When not rooted in biological determinacy, radical feminism invokes cultural separatism. Like many multiculturalists, the radical feminist construction of cultural absolutes ironically reflects

the sexism and racism of the New Right (see section 4.2, below). In short, idealist radical feminism is incompatible with critical social research because (despite misleading titles (Firestone, 1971)), it does not undertake a dialectical analysis of historically specific social relations.

¹ The term bourgeois feminism, because of the apparent naïvety of the bourgeois feminist position, has become a derogatory term and one applied rather loosely in debates. Consequently, feminists who do not seem to be arguing the same line (such as de Beauvoir and Firestone), and indeed, feminists who would seem to be radical or socialist feminists, sometimes get labelled as bourgeois feminists. This makes the term a rather slippery one and perhaps best avoided. The situation is further complicated by two other elements. First, approaches that seem overly biologically deterministic, despite apparent ‘revolutionary’ content, are usually referred to as bourgeois, as they delimit, in effect, the possibility of social change (for example, Firestone, 1972). Second, approaches that adopt a positivistic methodology (sometimes called positivistic feminism) are also sometimes referred to as bourgeois. Positivist feminism tends to argue for gender as a generic variable to be considered in the same way that (positivist) sociologists treat socioeconomic variables. This approach, then, tends to concentrate on variable analysis within prevailing social structures hence the ‘bourgeois’ label.

² It has been argued that this version of radical feminism is a highly conservative and politically reactionary approach. The approach is, in its extreme separatist form, incompatible with critical social research as it tends not to address the historically specific nature of social structures nor to undertake a materialist analysis of empirical data, instead relying heavily on idealist notions of inherent psyche.

³ Key figures in the French movement which came to be called *Psyche et Po* (an abbreviation of ‘Psychoanalyse et Politique’) are Antoinette Fouqué and Helene Cixous. Its strong views and ‘intellectual terrorism’ waged over other feminist groups (including the ‘hijacking of the term ‘women’s liberation movement’ by registering it as a trademark and preventing other French feminists from referring to themselves as from the women’s liberation movement) led to strong feelings being expressed both for and against psychoanalytic feminism.