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Radical Feminism: History, Politics, Action*

Introduction

Because of its very nature, radical feminism has concentrated on creating its theory in the writing of women's lives and the political analysis of women's oppression. Little time has been devoted to defining and redefining our "theory" for theory's sake. Where socialist, liberal, and more recently post-modernist feminisms have convenient existing theoretical structures to manipulate and re-manipulate, stretching them like a skin across the drum of women's experiences, radical feminism creates an original political and social theory of women's oppression, and strategies for ending that oppression which come from women's lived experiences.

So Janice Raymond writes her theory of women's friendships, their passion and the obstacles involved in befriending women. In doing so she critiques hetero-reality: the value system of women as being "for" men, upon which patriarchy rests. Kathleen Barry, Catharine MacKinnon, Susan Griffin, and Andrea Dworkin document the international trafficking in women and children, pornography and rape, creating a power analysis of violence against women and the abuse of women's bodies as international currency. Radical feminists frequently combine creative writing and theory, such as in the poetry and prose of Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Robin Morgan, Susan Griffin, and Judy Grahn. Here the passion of radical feminism can be fully expressed, because it is a theory of the emotional as well as the rational intellect.

Theory and practice are interdependently intertwined. Anne Koedt, Judith Levine, and Anita Rapone touched on this in their introduction to *Radical Feminism* in 1973 when they wrote: "... the purpose in selecting and organising this anthology was to present primary source material not so much *about* as *from* the Radical Feminist Movement" (our italics, p. viii). Radical means "pertaining to the root"; Radical Feminism looks at the roots of women's oppression. As Robin Morgan says:

* This is an expanded version of "Radical Feminism: Critique and Construct" (Gunew, Ed., 1990a).

We would like to acknowledge Christine Zmroczek's invaluable contribution in unearthing early radical feminist writings.



I call myself a Radical Feminist, and that means specific things to me. The etymology of the word 'radical' refers to 'one who goes to the root'. I believe that sexism is the root oppression, the one which, until and unless we uproot it will continue to put forth the branches of racism, class hatred, ageism, competition, ecological disaster, and economic exploitation. This means, to me, that the so-called revolutions to date have been *coups-d'état* between men, in a halfhearted attempt to prune the branches but leave the root embedded for the sake of preserving their own male privileges (1978, p. 9).

Radical feminism's revolutionary intent is expressed first and foremost in its woman-centredness: women's experiences and interests are at the centre of our theory and practice. It is the only theory *by* and *for* women. Radical feminism names *all* women as part of an oppressed group, stressing that no woman can walk down the street or even live in her home safely without fear of violation by men. But French feminist Christine Delphy points out that like all oppressed people, many women do not like to accept that they are part of an oppressed group, misunderstanding a power analysis for "conspiracy theory" and mistakenly feeling a threat to their sense of agency.

Feminism itself has often marginalised radical feminism, moving into a comfortable and easy libertarianism, stressing individualism rather than collective responsibility; or into socialism with its ready made structures to attack, withdrawing the heat from the main actors of patriarchy: men themselves.

More than sixteen years after the publication of *Feminist Practice: Notes From the Tenth Year* (1979) – a self-published pamphlet by a group of English radical feminists – many of the comments about the place of radical feminism still ring true.

We are all agreed that we would call ourselves Radical Feminists and that we want to do something about the fact that we feel our politics have been lost, have become invisible, in the present state of the WLM [Women's Liberation Movement]. We feel that this was partly Radical Feminism's own fault, for in England we have not written much for ourselves – concentrating on action – and so being defined (maligned?) by others by default.

We feel that Radical Feminism has been a, if not *the*, major force in the WLM since the start, but as factions started to emerge it has rarely been women who called themselves radical feminists who have defined radical feminism. For a long time it was used as a term of abuse to corral those aspects of WL which frightened those concerned with male acceptability, those aspects which most threatened their image of respectability. Radical Feminists became a corporate object of derision which these women and men could then dissociate themselves from (p. 1).

Post sixties radical feminism also had its history in women's activism in the past. For example, Hedwig Dohm in Germany, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage,



and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the US, Christabel Pankhurst (before her socialism) and Virginia Woolf in England, and Vida Goldstein in Australia are but a few of our predecessors.¹ In November 1911, in England, a radical feminist review, *The Free Woman*, began publishing weekly as a forum for revolutionary ideas about women, marriage, politics, prostitution, sexual relations, and issues concerning women's oppression and strategies for ending it. It was banned by booksellers, and many suffragists objected to it because of its critical position on the fight for the vote as the single issue which would ensure women's equality. "Feminism is the whole issue, political enfranchisement a branch issue," they wrote (in Tuttle: 1986, p. 117).

Definitional Statements From Radical Feminism

As space is limited, we concentrate on the general principles shared by the various streams within radical feminism rather than on the differences between them. The first and fundamental theme is that women as a social group are oppressed by men as a social group and that this oppression is the *primary* oppression for women. Patriarchy is the oppressing *structure* of male domination. Radical feminism makes visible male control as it is exercised in every sphere of women's lives, both public and private. So reproduction, marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and motherhood are primary sites of attack and envisaged positive change.

Robin Morgan catches the excitement of radical feminism in her definition in *Going Too Far*.

... it wasn't ... a wing or arm or toe of the Left - or Right - or any other male-defined, male-controlled group. It was something quite Else, something in itself, a whole new politics, an entirely different and astoundingly radical way of perceiving society, sentient matter, life itself, the universe. It was a philosophy. It was immense. It was also most decidedly a real, autonomous Movement, this feminism, with all the strengths that implied. And with all the evils too - the familiar internecine squabbles (1978, p. 13).

A second central element characteristic of radical feminism is that it is created by women for women. Christine Delphy points out that people from the Left for example, are fighting on behalf of someone else, but that

... the contradictions which result from this situation are foreign to feminism. We are not fighting for others, but for ourselves. We and no other people are the victims of the oppression which we denounce and fight against. And when we speak, it is not in the name or in the place of others, but in our own name and in our own place (1984, p. 146).

1. See Dale Spender (1983), for a collection of historical writings on feminist theorists.



Radical feminism stresses that “emancipation” or “equality” on male terms is not enough. A total revolution of the social structures and the elimination of the processes of patriarchy are essential. In her paper published originally in 1979 titled “I Call Myself a Radical Feminist” British writer Gail Chester outlined her position, clearly defining herself as “active in and believing in the need for, a strong, autonomous, revolutionary movement for the liberation of women” (p. 12). To her radical feminism is both socialist in its intent and revolutionary.

Mary Daly defines radical feminism in terms of the selfhood of women. Reclaiming and remaking language she exhorts women to take their true Selves back, and become self-acting, self-respecting. In *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), she calls radical feminism a “journey of women becoming” (p. 1). Mary Daly has a unique style in which she reworks language for radical feminist purposes. Her work is impassioned, poetic and deals with the spiritual dimension. She sees the radical feminist task as changing consciousness, rediscovering the past and creating the future through women’s radical “otherness”. In her own words (p. 39): “Radical Feminism is not reconciliation with the father. Rather it is affirming our original birth, our original source, movement, surge of living. This finding of our original integrity is remembering our Selves.”

In the introduction to the first issue of the French feminist journal *Questions Feministes* (1977) – a journal of radical feminist theory – the editors identify their political perspective as radical feminist, recognising that the political struggle they are involved in is that against “the oppression of women by the patriarchal social system” (p. 5). They outline some of the underlying principles of radical feminism: the notion that the social existence of men and women was created rather than being part of their “nature”; the right of women not to be “different” but to be “autonomous”; and a materialist approach to analysing women’s oppression based on a premise that women form a social class based in sex. As Kate Millett (1971) wrote: “sex is a status category with political implications.”

That women form a group that can be likened to a social class is an inherent part of radical feminist theory. Ti-Grace Atkinson wrote in 1974 that “the analysis begins with the feminist *raison d’être* that women are a class, that this class is political in nature, and that this political class is oppressed. From this point on, radical feminism separates from traditional feminism” (p. 41). She saw the “male/female system” as “the first and most fundamental instance of human oppression”, adding that “all other class systems are built on top of it”. She writes:

Women will not be free until all oppressed classes are free. I am not suggesting that women work to free other classes. However in the case of women oppressing other women, the exercise of class privilege by identification in effect locks the sex class into place. In identifying one’s interests with those of any power class, one thereby maintains the position of that class. As long as any class system is left standing, it stands on the backs of women (1974, p. 73).



In the Introduction to *Feminist Practice: Notes from the Tenth Year* (1979), the principles of Women's Liberation were clearly delineated. From this manifesto we can pull together some common threads: radical feminism insists that women as a social class or a social group are oppressed by men as a social group as well as individually by men who continue to benefit from that oppression and do nothing to change it; the system through which men do this has been termed patriarchy; radical feminism is women-centred and stresses both the personal as political and the need for collective action and responsibility; it is "power" rather than "difference" which determines the relationship between women and men. And finally, that "whatever we do we mean to enjoy ourselves while we do it!"

Theory and Practice

Because the theory is based in the experience of women's lives, it is part of the value system of Radical Feminism that "the personal is political". In Gail Chester's words (1979, p. 13): "Radical Feminist theory is that theory follows from practice and is impossible to develop in the absence of practice, because our theory is that practice and our practice is our theory". Misunderstandings have occurred because critics claim that radical feminism has rejected theory. But it has always maintained that we *do* need theory for understanding women's experiences, for evaluating the causes of women's oppression, and for devising strategies for action. But we *have* rejected theory which is too esoteric, too divorced from the reality of women's experiences, too inaccessible to the majority of women whom feminism is supposed to serve: theory which we have elsewhere titled "disengagement theory".²

Chester argues that radical feminist theory has not been recognised as "a theory" because it hasn't always been written down (p. 14): "If your theory is embodied in your practice, then the way you act politically has as much right to be taken as a serious statement of your theoretical position as writing it down in a book which hardly anybody will read anyhow".

Charlotte Bunch has written that theory is not "simply intellectually interesting", but that it is "crucial to the survival of feminism". It is not an academic exercise but "a process based on understanding and advancing the activist movement" (1983, p. 248). To this end, radical feminist theory is not an objective exercise, disengaged from women themselves. A theory which begins with women, places women and women's experiences at the centre, and names the oppression of women, involves an holistic view of the world, an analysis which probes every facet of existence for women. It is not, as Bunch indicates, a "laundry list of 'women's issues'", but "provides a basis for understanding every area of our lives . . . politically, culturally, economically, and spiritually" (1983, p. 250).

Bunch cautions radical feminists against becoming tired and feeling that feminist theory is too slow in bringing about change. At these times "feminists are

2. Renate Klein and Robyn Rowland, *Feminist Theory into Action: The Politics of Engagement*, Australian Women's Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Sydney, September, 1992 (unpublished).



tempted to submerge our insights into one of the century's two dominant progressive theories of reality and change: democratic liberalism or Marxist socialism" (p. 250). Bunch argues that while feminism can learn from both of these streams of theory, it must not become embedded within them or too tied to them because our view of the world is an alternative view which is autonomous and women-centred.

For her, theory "both grows out of and guides activism in a continuing, spiralling process" (p. 251). It can be divided into four interrelated parts: a description of what exists and the naming of reality; an analysis of why the reality exists and the origin of women's oppression; strategies on how to change that reality; and determining a vision for the future (pp. 251-53).

An example of the coalescence between theory and practice is the development of collective action. Through collective work radical feminists have attempted to eliminate the concept of hierarchy which places power in the hands of a few over the many. Working in a co-operative fashion towards a common goal gives value to each woman, allowing her a voice, yet making all members collectively responsible for action.

An example of the grounding of activism in theory emerges in the analysis of the painful and unsanitised issues centering in the many violences against women: battering, rape, incest, reproductive violence and femicide. Grassroots organising at the level of women's daily existence and survival, for example within the Rape Crisis Centre Movement and the Domestic Violence Movement, stresses the ongoing struggle against patriarchal abuse. It also stresses the belief that in every day of our lives women can contribute to the erosion of the negative self-image and sense of powerlessness which male-dominated society hands to us. So the revolution takes place every day, not in an imagined future. In Gail Chester's words:

Because Radical Feminists do not recognise a split between our theory and practice, we are able to say that the revolution can begin now, by us taking positive actions to change our lives . . . it is a much more optimistic and humane vision of change than the male-defined notion of the building towards a revolution at some point in the distant future, once all the preparations have been made (1979, pp. 14-15).

Patriarchy

Radical feminists see patriarchy as a universal value system, though it exhibits itself in different forms culturally and historically.³ Ruth Bleier defines it thus:

By patriarchy I mean the historic system of male dominance, a system committed to the maintenance and reinforcement of male hegemony in all aspects of life – personal and private privilege and power as well as public privilege and power. Its

3. For examples of its universality see Morgan (1984) and Seager and Olson (1986).



institutions direct and protect the distribution of power and privilege to those who are male, apportioned, however, according to social and economic class and race. Patriarchy takes different forms and develops specific supporting institutions and ideologies during different historical periods and political economies (1984, p. 162).

Patriarchy is a system of structures and institutions created by men in order to sustain and recreate male power and female subordination. Such structures include: institutions such as the law, religion, and the family; ideologies which perpetuate the “naturally” inferior position of women; socialisation processes to ensure that women and men develop behaviour and belief systems appropriate to the powerful or less powerful group to which they belong.

The *structures* of patriarchy which have been established in order to maintain male power have been clearly analysed by radical feminists. *Economic* structures have been dealt with by, for example, Lisa Leghorn and Katherine Parker (1981); Marilyn Waring, (1988); Prue Hyman, (1994). Hilda Scott (1984) clearly demonstrates the increasing feminisation of poverty. *Political, legal, and religious* structures are dominated by men who ensure that they maintain those positions. Women's right to vote is only a recent event historically. Within the legal profession, few women sit on the higher benches in the court system. Within the private domain of *the family*, marriage, and reproduction, men have structured a system whereby woman's reproductive capacity leaves her vulnerable, domestically exploited, and often entrapped in economic dependence.

Patriarchal *ideology* maintains these structures. The family is maintained through the concept of romantic love between men and women, when in fact marriage contracts have traditionally had an economic base. Women's labour within the family, which has been unpaid and unacknowledged, and which includes the emotional servicing of members of the family as well as their physical servicing, continues to be defined as a “labour of love”. Men have managed to create an ideology which defines men as the “natural” owners of intellect, rationality, and the power to rule. Women “by nature” are submissive, passive, and willing to be led. Processes such as the socialisation of children encourage this situation to continue. So, for example, in playground games, boys soon learn that they are to act and girls to create an “audience” for male performance.

The construction of the *family* and of the economic dependence of women on men also interrelates with the ideology of hetero-reality and the structures of heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich (1980) has analysed the compulsory nature of heterosexuality and its function as a political institution. She argues that men fear that women could be indifferent to them and that “men could be allowed emotional – therefore economic – access to women *only* on women's terms” (p. 643). The compulsory nature of heterosexuality defines men's access to women as natural and their right.

In a broader analysis Janice Raymond (1986) has created the term hetero-reality, that is the belief that in our world woman's purpose is to be “for



men". Hetero-reality determines that the single woman is defined as "loose" in the promiscuous sense. So the state of being free and unattached with respect to men is translated into the negative state of being available to any man.

The patriarchal system is located within a language and knowledge system which constructs masculinity and femininity in support of the established power imbalance. Dale Spender has addressed these issues through her analysis of language, showing how men have constructed and controlled language in order to reinforce women's subordinate position (Spender: 1980). She also reclaims "women of ideas" historically and the knowledge that they have created. In *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* she writes:

I have come to accept that a patriarchal society depends in large measure on the experience and values of males being perceived as the *only* valid frame of reference for society, and that it is therefore in patriarchal interests to prevent women from sharing, establishing and asserting their equally real, valid and *different frame* of reference, which is the outcome of different experience (1982, p. 5).

Spender stresses that men have controlled knowledge and therefore made women invisible in the world of ideas. Structures within patriarchy are established in order to maintain the view that there is no problem with the fact that men are more powerful than women. As she says (1982, p. 7): "Patriarchy requires that any conceptualisation of the world in which men and their power are a central problem should become invisible and unreal. How could patriarchy afford to accept that men were a serious problem?"

Patriarchy also has a material base in two senses. First, the economic systems are structured so that women have difficulty getting paid labour in a society which values only paid labour and in which money is the currency of power. It is extremely difficult for women without economic independence to sustain themselves without a breadwinner. It is difficult to leave a brutal husband, to withdraw sexual, emotional, and physical servicing from men, to have an equal say in decisions affecting their own lives, such as where they might live. Radical feminism has therefore stressed the necessity for women to exercise economic power in their own right.

Women's unpaid domestic service in the home is primary in supporting the patriarchal system. Christine Delphy, whose Radical Feminism stems from a Marxist base, argues that "patriarchy is the system of subordination of women to men in contemporary industrial societies, that this system has an economic base, and that this base is the domestic mode of production" (1984, p. 18). It is also a mode of consumption and circulation of goods and differs from the capitalist mode of production because "those exploited by the domestic mode of production are not *paid* but rather *maintained*. In this mode, therefore, consumption is not separate from production, and the unequal sharing of goods is not mediated by money" (1984, p. 18). Delphy argues that the analysis of women's oppression using a



traditional class analysis is not adequate because it cannot account for the particular exploitation of unwaged women. Men are the class which oppresses and exploits women and which benefits from their exploitation.

The second material base which radical feminism names as crucial to Women's Liberation is that of woman's body herself. Internationally, it is a woman's body which is the currency of patriarchy. Kathleen Barry has shown in *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979), and in *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (1995), that the international traffic in women operates extensively to socially control women. Women in marriage are seen to be "owned" by their husbands and cannot bring a civil case of rape in many countries. Women's bodies are used in advertising and pornography alike, objectified and defined as "other" and available for male use. As Delphy notes "feminism, by imprinting the word oppression on the domain of sexuality, has annexed it to materialism" (1984, p. 217). Men control the laws of reproduction, for example male-dominated parliaments and male-run pharmaceutical companies determine the forms of contraception available and the extent of their use.⁴ Male-controlled government determines women's access to safe abortion. Law developed by men determines the civil power or powerlessness of women in bringing rape or incest charges against men.

Men as a group enjoy the privileges of power. It is in the best interest of men to maintain the existing patriarchal system, and the world has been structured in order to maintain this power imbalance, for example, in their structuring of pay inequality, and the sex-segregated work world. They need to maintain the unpaid labour of women; emotional and physical servicing by women; the sense of being in control which they feel individually and collectively. Men experience both a fear and an envy of women's reproductive power (O'Brien: 1981; Rowland: 1987b). It is an area of life which is owned by the less powerful group, women. In order to wrest control back, men develop laws regulating and controlling abortion and contraception. Historically they have fought midwives for control of birth and through the new reproductive technology developments, seek to control conception itself (Rowland: 1992/1993).

Male power is maintained and defined through a variety of methods: through institutions within society, through ideology, through coercion or force, through the control of resources and rewards, through the politics of intimacy, and through personal power. The simplistic labelling of an analysis of patriarchy as "conspiracy theory" conveniently allows critics of radical feminism to dismiss this analysis of women's oppression (see also Chesler: 1994 on patriarchy from an "expert witness" perspective).

4. Radical feminists also stress the importance of applying a woman-centred analysis to the various forms of population control as they oppress women in so-called Third World countries. See for example Vimal Balasubrahmanyam (1984) and Viola Roggenkamp (1984) on India, and Farida Akhter (1987, 1992) on Bangladesh and Betsy Hartmann (1995).