

A · RE-EXAMINATION

BY

Nancy Cott Linda Gordon Judith Stacey Juliet Mitchell Ann Oakley And Six Other Major Feminist Thinkers

what is feminism?

Edited by
Juliet Mitchell &
Ann Oakley

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1 Introduction

Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley

In The Second Sex Simone de Beauvoir argues that the division of sexes is an irreducible, contingent fact of biology. Woman is a biological, not an historical, category, and she thus suffers from a singular oppression which knows of no historical period that precedes it. Without a different past, how can one have a concept of a different future?

In 1976, we edited a collection of essays, The Rights and Wrongs of Women. This volume, What is Feminism?, was conceived as its sequel. The contributors to both books are mostly activists, even initiators, of the women's liberation movement that started in the mid-sixties. At the outset, The Second Sex was the only major work of reference for most of us. Faced with de Beauvoir's analysis of women's lack of history, for some, it became a prime task to discover and create a history both for women and for their intellectual and practical struggle. The Rights and Wrongs of Women was a contribution to the first dimension of the task – does the concept of women or do women themselves have a history? What is Feminism? was conceived as a contribution to the second. E. H. Carr's What is History? could stand as a reference title – the source of an investigation into something that we assume we know.

At the beginning of this phase of feminism, in the sixties, there were radical feminists and women's liberationists.

Radical feminism in its beginnings was best exemplified for the public in Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972). The base-line of de Beauvoir's thesis of an irreducible biological category was asserted to the full – there was no history, only a biological condition outside time which nothing but a technology without circumscription by historical conditions could destroy. Thus women had a natural unity in their biology, and feminism could ally itself safely and, by definition, with all shapes and forms of validation of,

and protest by, women. It was self-referring - by women for women.

Although the distinction, even for those early days, should not be maintained too rigidly between forms of feminism, most of the contributors both to this and to the earlier collection come from the liberationist tradition. Emanating in diverse ways from some type of socialist or marxist background, women's liberationists were unable to assume a common identity for women along a biological dividing line – we needed a social definition and therefore a history.

In our earlier *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* most of the essays created a concept and understanding of women through an analysis of the category within history – be it in a history of ideas or of material conditions. 'Women' became a coherent entity through their rediscovery in the interstices of literature, film, history. . . .

As women were sought and found, the nomenclature of the movement changed. The urgency of our search for a past, so that we could cohere as a unity and thus struggle for a future, is reflected in this shifting terminology of the movement. The 'women's liberation movement' became the 'women's movement', thus shedding our immediate political peers of black liberation, children's liberation and, to an extent, gay liberation, and allying ourselves firmly within our specific heritage of feminist struggle in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women's liberationists took a sideways step closer to radical feminists and became 'feminists' despite the fact that at the outset many of us shared de Beauvoir's earlier resistance to the term.

The search for this history has proved as problematic as de Beauvoir's comment warned us it would be. On the one hand, an article such as Sally Alexander's contribution in *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, by re-examining the changing structure of manufacturing industry in London in the 1840s through the lives of women, permanently altered the social history and geography of the period. It also disturbingly unsettled all preceding notions of women's role at the time. With women there, the picture shifts; it becomes altogether denser. At the same time, the new picture changes our understanding of women.

On the other hand, as Rosalind Delmar discusses in her contribution to this volume, the search for women in history has called into question the very stability of the concept 'woman'. Feminism in the sixties and seventies has above all been distinguished from any of its earlier expressions by the deconstruction of any fixed meaning to the notion of 'woman'. If woman cannot be fixed as an identity beyond the biological female, neither can feminism have a

unified definition. In The Rights and Wrongs of Women we were looking for women; in What is Feminism?, for feminism. In both cases the ground changed to quicksand beneath our feet.

The final selection of articles for this volume reflects the enormous difficulty of the question. Many more people from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds were invited to participate and accepted but got into difficulties. We feel that the essays that were finally produced are a tribute to, not an evasion of, the difficulty. They take different approaches to the task of examining the quicksand that lies beneath simplistic attempts to say what feminism is – and is not (for many of us have found it easier to define feminism in its absence rather than its presence).

The writers of the essays inhabit different academic and intellectual settings and do not all have the same theoretical allegiances. Despite, or even because of, these differences, we feel the final collection of essays is able both to describe the methodology of the search for feminism and to chart the growth thus uncovered in new, interesting and original ways.

As Rosalind Delmar observes, the naming of the parts of modern feminism - radical feminism, socialist feminism, marxist feminism, lesbian separatism and so on - signals a sclerosis of the movement. The question suggested by this is whether it makes sense to assume any necessary unity within feminism. At the start of organized feminism, women believed they shared the same situation; yet, as they learnt to speak about it, they fast discovered their differences from one another. If feminists are not a collectivity, then the question the other way round is whether collective action by women - as in the Greenham Common peace movement - can be considered feminist at all. Can feminism be defined simply by virtue of its object of concern - women? Is it not feminist to profess an interest in human welfare more generally? - and if this is the case, are men to be allowed to dress up any variety of their concern for women in the clothes of feminism?

In her essay, Nancy Cott explores how feminist thinking about women's similarity to and difference from men has been implicated in the stated goals and activities of the women's movement in its different historical periods. All the varieties of feminism contain at their heart a paradox - requiring gender consciousness for their basis, their political rallying cry is the elimination of gender roles. Cott's conclusion is that mass movements of, and on behalf of, women are only able to emerge out of the diversity of philosophies and practice when women have particular 'instrumental' reasons for advancing gender interests - securing the suffrage, for instance.

Effective practical feminism is thus a strategic coalition which makes it possible to transcend theoretical difference.

Taking off from this point, Deborah Rhode's essay explores the tensions between feminist theory and the liberal legalist traditions that have shaped its development. What Rhode calls individual rights-oriented strategies have successfully overcome much sexbased discrimination, yet, by appealing to the law in its social control function, feminism defeats its own agenda by fighting for equality within a social system that cannot offer it.

The radicalization of working women pushes this fight to its limits. According to Heather Maroney, in her essay 'Feminism at Work', the rise of working-class feminism presents the women's movement with an important moment of decision: can a fusion be created between sex-based and class-based forms of opposition to the status quo?

Economically, one important and recent social change has been that in a deepening recession, when unemployment rates have taken on an epidemic character, the only people with better employment prospects are women. This redistribution of economic opportunities between the sexes isn't unique – it's happened before. In her contribution to the book Juliet Mitchell suggests that looking back, and seeing where we are now, enables us to comprehend a particular role for women in terms of acute and chronic social change – they move into the future first. Thus the relationship between social change on the one hand, and feminism on the other, is complex. Feminism may itself succeed in bringing about social change; but it finds itself being used in the process of change to construct a confrontation out of which a particular future is made that feminism did not want.

Feminism takes its meanings from the moment. Like all political movements, it is capable of generating and containing its own backlash; hence the 'pro-family' feminism of the 1980s, in which writers such as Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, enormously influential in the late sixties and early seventies, appear to change their minds and tell us we got it all wrong. In so retreating from sexual politics, as Judith Stacey argues in her 'Are Feminists Afraid to Leave Home?', they inform us that the politics of revolution are the politics of rage, and of an insensible disregard for our own ahistorical vulnerability. To oppose the family, and deny men their connection with women, is to deny our own need for connectedness — which is dangerously close to the uncaring male response to the spectre of the aggrieved feminist in his midst. However, more interesting than the backlash are the reasons for it, and here the rise

of conservative pro-family feminism, as Stacey shows, is closely tied to the fate of the family, an unsatisfactory but alluring institution.

Stacey also links the new conservative feminism with the personal fates of feminists who have propounded it, bemoaning in their late thirties and forties the non-achievement of a status they earlier attacked. If the first wave of this women's movement was concerned with redressing the wrongs of women, then its second wave has alighted on more positive emblems of womanhood, such as childbearing and childrearing and well-worn capacities for emotional intimacy that once felt like oppression. The essays by Jane Lewis, Shervl Ruzek, Hilary Rose and Ann Oakley all examine the meaning of feminism within the context of women's traditional domestic labour, and point to ways in which a detailed 'inside' knowledge of this labour changes the dominant paradigm of knowledge about the condition of being human. In other words, to understand women is simply to have a different way of seeing the world.

The 'denaturalizing' of women's work in the home has enabled its dissection into both labour and love. In Hilary Rose's essay the experiential politics of time and caring oppose the language of aggression and domination which masculinist science has used to describe its relationship with nature, which must be subjugated, as women are, before real work can proceed. The question for feminists is, under what conditions is caring extracted from them? It's certainly the case, as Jane Lewis goes on to demonstrate, that the 'caring assumption' has been built into philosophies of welfare, so that women find it difficult legitimately to move beyond their roles as wives and mothers. At the personal level this is frequently reflected in uncertainty about the status of what one is doing; to care for children, to look after homes and be concerned with the welfare of men - is this labour done for oneself or is it alienated, not only because one is divorced (sometimes literally) from its product, but because one never chose to do it in the first place?

Women's choices require women to be viewed and treated as autonomous by those who make policy. This simple insight of feminism is perhaps possible because in the welfare field the equality argument seems to stand up better than in others - though being constantly limited, as we have already said, to a relatively unchanging social vision.

Shervl Ruzek's essay on feminism and health care is somewhat different from the others in that it sets out to describe some of the ways in which the women's movement has challenged and reshaped formal health care and has led to new forms of care. It thus provides an answer to the question as to what difference feminism has made,

without detailing the difference feminism is. The impact of feminism on medical practice has been uneven, and its intentions have naturally met with extreme opposition from many quarters of organized medicine. Two aspects of this are particularly interesting from the point of view of both the history of medicine and the history of women. The first is that history contains no parallel example of a clash between the interests of feminism and the interests of a profession. This suggests that feminism has something to say in general about how and why expert knowledge is constructed. As Ruzek says, feminism's dispute with medicine is not only about enabling women to take charge of their own health and health care; it is also about the status of medicine's claims to scientific status. Along with other groups interested in restoring health care to the community, feminist criticism has laid bare the uncomfortable fact that most obstetric practice is based on nothing sounder than what the obstetrician wants.

About motherhood in general, feminists have professed many different opinions and, from demanding its medicalization (in the early years of this century), they have now shifted to decrying it though on this point their voices are by no means unanimous. Ann Oakley explores in her essay some of the symptoms of, and reasons for, the state's and the medical profession's interest in motherhood. Rather than simply reiterating the point that motherhood is a source of power for women, she proposes that the particular love of mother and child carries such revolutionary potential that, in a world where women are at least free to be citizens, this power must be controlled and turned in on itself before it has the chance to fuel a social movement.

The thesis of love possesses as its antithesis the hatred and violence generated by too much intimacy. In the case of male violence against women, the task of feminism is apparent and relatively straightforward, if difficult to accomplish. Yet where violence towards children is concerned - the theme of Linda Gordon's essay - feminism may not like what it sees. As mothers, women are both victims and victimizers; they are both dependent and depended on. To acknowledge their aggressions towards their children (which may be shown in neglect rather than direct physical violence) is problematic, since to defend women against violence requires a statement of political innocence and the more this becomes impossible, the more the abuse of power loses its gendered character.

Most of the essays in this collection end with questions. The complexity of feminism (or feminisms, as Rosalind Delmar rightly rephrases it) has drawn us into reflecting on our past and present where once we more gaily planned our future. As editors, we have had to watch the book develop into something other than what we first intended. We do not want to lose sight of the celebration behind the worries. So it is not Dutch courage if we conclude by saying that it is only through a creative use of anxiety that we can start to look forward again.

Rosalind Delmar

There are many, feminist and non-feminist alike, for whom the question 'what is feminism?' has little meaning. The content of terms like 'feminism' and 'feminist' seems self-evident, something that can be taken for granted. By now, it seems to me, the assumption that the meaning of feminism is 'obvious' needs to be challenged. It has become an obstacle to understanding feminism, in its diversity and in its differences, and in its specificity as well.¹

It is certainly possible to construct a base-line definition of feminism and the feminist which can be shared by feminists and non-feminists. Many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order. But beyond that, things immediately become more complicated.

For example, popular approaches to feminism often contain references to a style of dress, to looks, to ways of behaving to men and women, to what used to be called 'manners'. It is, in practice, impossible to discuss feminism without discussing the image of feminism and the feminists. Feminists play and have played with a range of choices in the process of self-presentation, registering a relation both to the body and to the social meaning of womanhood. Various, sometimes competing, images of the feminist are thus produced, and these acquire their own social meanings. This is important to stress now because in contemporary feminism the construction of new images is a conscious process. There is a strand whose central concern is to investigate culture (in its widest sense) and to experiment with the means of representation. But feminism's wish that women behave differently is also an historic element: Mary

Wollstonecraft at the end of the eighteenth century called for 'a revolution in female manners'.

The diversity of representations of the feminist has undoubtedly grown since then. How difficult it would be to choose between them. to find the 'true' feminist image, the 'proper way' to be a feminist. And yet many books on feminism are written, and feminism is often spoken about, as if there were a 'true' and authentic feminism, unified and consistent over time and in any one place, even if fragmented in its origins and at specific historical moments.

Most people have heard a sentence which begins: 'As a feminist I think. . . . 'It is a sentence which speaks of a wish that an agreed way of being a feminist should exist, but is not the product of any genuine agreement among feminists about what they think or how they should live their lives. In the women's movement, there is a strong desire to pin feminism down (whether as support for a series of agreed demands or as preoccupation with central concerns like sexual division or male domination) but this impulse has invariably encountered obstacles. General agreement about the situation in which women find themselves has not been accompanied by any shared understanding of why this state of affairs should exist or what could be done about it. Indeed, the history of the women's movement in the 1970s, a time of apparent unity, was marked by bitter, at times virulent, internal disputes over what it was possible or permissible for a feminist to do, say, think or feel.

The fragmentation of contemporary feminism bears ample witness to the impossibility of constructing modern feminism as a simple unity in the present or of arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism. Such differing explanations, such a variety of emphases in practical campaigns, such widely varying interpretations of their results have emerged, that it now makes more sense to speak of a plurality of feminisms than of one.

Recently the different meanings of feminism for different feminists have manifested themselves as a sort of sclerosis of the movement, segments of which have become separated from and hardened against each other. Instead of internal dialogue there is a naming of the parts: there are radical feminists, socialist feminists, marxist feminists, lesbian separatists, women of colour, and so on, each group with its own carefully preserved sense of identity. Each for itself is the only worthwhile feminism; others are ignored except to be criticized.

How much does this matter? Is it not the case that even extreme differences in politics can often mask underlying agreement? Could it not still be that what unites feminists is greater than what divides? Might not current fragmentation be merely an episode in an overriding history of unity?

At times it is rather attractive to think so and to let the matter rest at that. All cats look grey in the dark, and the exclusivism of feminist groups can be reminiscent of what Freud called 'the narcissism of minor differences'. Even so, at a theoretical level, agreements are uncovered only by the exploration of differences – they cannot be assumed. And there is no overwhelming reason to assume an underlying feminist unity. Indeed, one unlooked-for effect of an assumed coherence of feminism can be its marginalization, as discourse or as practice. In many ways it makes more sense to invert the question 'Why is there so much division between feminists?' and ask instead 'Does feminism have any necessary unity, politically, socially, or culturally?'

What is the background to current fragmentation? At the start of the contemporary women's movement in Britain it was often assumed that there was a potentially unificatory point of view on women's issues which would be able to accommodate divergencies and not be submerged by them. From the start the modern women's movement pitched its appeal at a very high level of generality, to all women, and thought of its aims and objectives in very general terms.

The unity of the movement was assumed to derive from a potential identity between women. This concept of identity rested on the idea that women share the same experiences: an external situation in which they find themselves — economic oppression, commercial exploitation, legal discrimination are examples; and an internal response — the feeling of inadequacy, a sense of narrow horizons. A shared response to shared experience was put forward as the basis for a communality of feeling between women, a shared psychology even. Women's politics and women's organizing were then seen as an expression of this community of feeling and experience.⁴

So unproblematically was potential identity between women assumed that the plural form 'we' was adopted, and it is still much used: 'we', women, can speak on behalf of all of us 'women'. (In some of the first women's groups of the late sixties and early seventies every effort was made to encourage women to use this form and speak in terms of 'we' instead of what was heard as the more divisive grammar of 'you' and 'I'. It should be noted, though, that this plural form lends itself to a differently divisive grammar, that of 'us' and 'them'.)

In fact, common ground within women's politics was based on an agreed description rather than an analysis, and the absence of