

LYNNE SEGAL

*Why Feminism?*

# WHY FEMINISM?

Gender, Psychology, Politics

LYNNE SEGAL

Polity Press

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Reprinted 2002, 2005

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN 0-7456-2346-8  
ISBN 0-7456-2347-6 (pbk)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Berling  
by Ace Filmsetting Ltd, Frome, Somerset  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Marston Book Services Limited, Oxford

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: [www.polity.co.uk](http://www.polity.co.uk)

# Why Feminism?

**For Peter**

# Acknowledgements

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Fewer people than usual helped me with this book, which says something about these times. As pressures to publish from within the administration of academic space encounter the shrinking possibilities for cross-over writing with mainstream publishers, and the fractiousness between feminists is matched by the decline in collective political engagements, I wasn't confident I could manage to write at all any more: no longer sure of whom I would be writing for, or why. But I am still lucky enough to find myself within networks in which feminism, and often even socialism, are lifetime commitments, which continue to inspire me. I would like to thank John Fletcher, Catherine Hall, Katherine Johnson, Cora Kaplan, Loretta Loach, Mandy Merck, David Newson, Sheila Rowbotham, Alan Sinfield, Barbara Taylor, Ruth Thackeray and Leonore Tiefer for advice, assistance or encouragement. I am very grateful for the support of my editor David Held. Above all, I value the love, generosity and rigorous red pen of Peter Osborne, without whom . . .

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# Introduction: Why Feminism?

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Why is feminism still so contentious? Feminism grew too big for its marching boots in the closing years of the 1970s; since then, many of its exponents have taken a more reflexive turn. But the anxiety it generates has far from dissipated. Indeed, feminists even frighten each other. Today, maverick voices emerge on all sides, rebuking a politics they claim to espouse. 'Many a monster can march about flying the banner of "freedom" or "feminism"', philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain alleges from the USA – condemning women who do not subordinate their own rights to the welfare of their children.<sup>1</sup> In these pages, I try to make sense of the *mélange* of contemporary feminism. I wonder whether we can still look to it for a confrontational and broadly transformative politics and culture, or whether it has become little more than a blip in the march of economic neo-liberalism.

It is hard to avoid either idealizing or trashing one's past, feeding the unruly envy between and within political generations. It is harder still, and obviously foolhardy, to engage in any form of futurology. In all social movements, once the excitement of finding a new collective identity begins to ebb, everyday politics becomes a more discouraging, even tedious affair; a matter of competing interests and conflicting alliances. It never remains the revelation which first inspired new levels of self-confidence and hope, as it was when women's liberation erupted into the lives of many women at the close of the 1960s. Yesterday's visionaries are today's scapegoats, when not newly tamed and domesticated.

The declining passion for politics evident in many veteran feminists, accompanying the frank rejection of feminism by many young women, is part of a wider 'exhaustion of utopian energies' since the 1980s, a time often described as 'post-socialist', if not 'post-political'.<sup>2</sup> There is a firm consensus at the close of the twentieth century that little, if anything, remains of a socialist left capable of winning popular support for its vision of a more egalitarian future. The verdict on feminism, and its now diverse aspirations, is more ambivalent. Its promotion of women's interests is usually endorsed in mainstream politics, while still anxiously traduced on every side. But the inequalities and divisions between women themselves have dramatically deepened, while many of the problems which energized feminists into collective action in the 1970s everywhere persist. This is both despite, and because of, the many gains achieved by women throughout the century. Some were consciously fought for; others were the more ambiguous, unintended consequences of changes in capitalism – pushing women into the future first, as exemplary low-paid, flexible workers.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, current debates are obsessed with gender contrasts and conflicts, often packaged as slanging matches between feminists themselves: 'movement' feminists, like British old-timer Bea Campbell, are pitted against American 'celebrity' feminists/anti-feminists, like Camille Paglia. Here women's political differences can be made to service antithetical desires: serious interest in gender issues *and* the satisfaction of misogynist expectation. However dubious its delivery, though, there is no doubting the continuing social centrality of gender anxieties – whether triggered by family breakdown, new 'laddism', teenage pregnancy or some other form of sexual or social panic. This means that as a feminist it is hard to remain detached from the political arena, whether or not one feels able to preserve or refashion one's political visions or, harder still, one's collective engagements.

Yet, we must persist, why *feminism*? Is the time for the renewal of feminism not long past, given the remarkable shifts in gender relations? Gender disruptions are indeed ubiquitous, as I illustrate throughout this book, but surely men are

now often its victims, whether in the classroom, the workplace or the divorce courts. Moreover, publishers (especially feminist ones) have been suggesting that 'there is no market any more for specifically feminist books'.<sup>4</sup> But that is only part of the story. Books about women? That is quite another matter. They are in huge demand.<sup>5</sup> Never has more been written about the concerns of women. Nor has so much anxiety been manifest on the threat they pose to the serenity of men. At a time when gender distinctions have been disrupted and denaturalized everywhere, through the combined forces of economic, political and quite literal biomedical interventions, the question of women's difference and distinctive dispositions remains paramount. The dismantling of gender archetypes provokes their perpetual rearticulation, as I show in chapter 2. With feminism posed against women, and gender posed against politics, what in the world do we make of 'feminism' today?

A mere generation ago, it caused little surprise when the American poet Adrienne Rich declared feminism a renaissance 'far more extraordinary and influential' in shifting perspectives than the effects of the move from theology to humanism in the European Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> Partisan, for sure. But the decades of resurgent feminism did fundamentally transform our perceptions of both present and past. They threw up some revolutionary conceptions of the future in the process. Today, that word – the new 'f-word' – is in free fall, often arousing little more than a yawn. 'Feminism is boring', the British journalist Polly Toynbee moans, summing up the abiding apprehensions of her peers, women influential in the mainstream media.<sup>7</sup> Boring, perhaps, but still capable of stirring up enormous animosity, and never left to rest in peace.

Suitably distanced from feminism's supposedly dour defenders, Toynbee herself proceeds to produce a thoughtful summary of why women need feminism: continuing inequalities in their earnings, the difficulties of being torn between careers and children, their greater vulnerability to domestic violence and rape, especially when most financially dependent on a man – as the mothers of young children. *Passé*, predictable, prosaic; yet the common sense of our age. Who wants yesterday's slogans? Who wants yesterday's woman? In

fact, it is not just feminism, but participation in the public terrain of politics itself which is now commonly dismissed as 'boring', or assumed to be motivated by an exclusive self-interest, in a world where individualism has intensified with an awesome vengeance, demolishing most of its erstwhile critics; or at least, those whose politics cannot be reduced to the vivid provocation of rebellious lifestyles. The irony is that current forms of feminism display an extraordinary endurance and diversity; so varied, indeed, that common ground can be hard to find.

What is feminism? Who is a feminist? Contention rather than accord is what we must explore in answering such questions today. This is a perplexing situation for those who identified with a movement which, during its activist peak, preferred to operate through consensus. Moving on from the burning questions, bonfires and street parades, the change in the self-conception of the women's movement was the beginning of an always ambivalent slide into the cultural mainstream: goodbye to 'Women's Liberation', with its clenched fist, its militant slogans and joyful songs ('The Women's Army is Marching'); hello to 'feminism', with its diffuse theoretical underpinnings and performative uncertainties ('doing feminism', 'doing gender'). 'Could you please say a few sentences without using the word "struggle"?' interviewers of feminists in the mid-1970s used to ask, when we held forth on our goals and aspirations, believing that we could work to better the lives of women everywhere. 'Could you please tell me what your struggle for health, housing, clean water, union recognition [or some other bread-and-butter issue], has to do with feminism?', one might easily hear today.

The difference is context. As I explore in my opening chapter, the women's liberation movement emerged at the close of the 1960s in critical dialogue with a broader left movement fighting for a more egalitarian world. Even in the USA, where more conventionally liberal movements, like the National Organization of Women, were always stronger than in Britain, one prominent wing of the movement was militantly leftist and radical. In the three decades of second-wave feminism, as I trace out in subsequent chapters, one can discern

the successive dominance of three distinct styles and viewpoints, although earlier outlooks continue – often angrily – to contest more modish replacements. During the foundation and spread of the women's movement in the 1970s, there was an emphasis on women's shared needs, and struggles to end gender inequalities and cultural subordination. This turned into a dual and contradictory prioritizing of women's distinct 'difference' alongside recognition of multiple differences between women in the 1980s, accompanying the entrenchment of divisions within feminism itself. Subsequently, there has been a shift towards discursive analyses of the instability of *all* identities and differences, as feminist theory found a home in the post-structuralist academy of the 1990s.

One explanation of the shift in feminist consciousness and priorities suggests that the early women's liberationist search for social transformation came up against women's own subjective resistance to change.<sup>8</sup> Women's internalized submissiveness or nurturing sensitivities may, or may not, prove genuine enough. But the turn inward, often to psychoanalysis, was part of something wider. It was never going to be easy to persuade individual men to change, but it was going to be far harder to undermine the interconnecting worlds of home, jobs and cultural and public life which overwhelmingly reflect the principle of male authority. Nevertheless, in my view, feminism's distinct legacy still lies in its potential, however complex and difficult, to connect personal and cultural issues to economic and political affairs. This is why in this book I move back and forth between explorations of gender dynamics at the social and political level and attempts to theorize differences, identities and subjectivities in the psychological and symbolic domains. Throughout, I am seeking ways of negotiating the increasingly bitter tension between feminist activisms and academic feminisms – often misleadingly reduced to clashes between the economic versus the cultural; maldistribution versus misrecognition.

In my lifetime, feminists have always been interested in the autobiographies of women, hunting down the words of their foremothers and constructing their own tales of personal struggle and survival, whether in the quest for self-enlightenment

or for solidarity with other women. In the most recent flowering of the genre, women academics have taken to writing their memoirs. And if their narratives display somewhat less disadvantage and hardship than many that preceded them, their proliferation carries its own story of the contradictions of feminism at the close of the twentieth century. These are times in which a woman – even, or perhaps especially, a fem-inist – can be accused of abusing her institutionalized power: an authority which she wields, not so much in the familiar female sphere of the family, as in the once seamlessly male world of the academy, or some other public position. The autobiographical writing of that most ostentatiously undutiful daughter of feminism, Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (1997), springs immediately to mind. But she is joined by a host of other women memoirists of the 1990s, whose world is the university: today's most prestigious stronghold of feminist practice.<sup>9</sup> What the feminist academic memoir brings to that world is a focus on the personal. Ironically, the more some women seem to be winning old gender battles, power-dressing for their jobs in the professional world, and narrowing the gender differences affecting their daily lives, the stronger the affirmation of women's unique affiliation to personal life. As Calista Flockhart – pocketing her millions from portraying the winsome, emotionally wobbly, lawyer, Ally McBeal – assures us, women can't 'have it all': 'I don't think there's an answer here, just anxiety and conflict'.<sup>10</sup>

Women can't have it all, no doubt; and the political never did reduce to such dreams of personal transcendence. But in exploring the paradoxes of gender in this book I seek to promote a combination of theoretical questioning and political engagements which might enable more women to share in the self-questioning, the pleasures and, above all, the solidarities and egalitarian settlements that feminism, at its most generous, regards as the birthright of women everywhere.

Using conflicts over 'gender' as my key symbolic site, I see the cultural fluidities of sexual and gender identity celebrated in recent post-structuralist and queer feminist readings mocked by the return of a Darwinian fundamentalism and the rise of genetic determinism in popular culture and much of the so-



cial sciences. Fierce controversies over memory and trauma return us to the promise and the perils of relying upon the light that Freud seemed to shine on the strange working of the mind: rarely matched, however, by attention to the power relations and normative frames in which the language of desire is acquired, suppressed and distorted. In the 1970s feminists demanded public recognition of the extent of child sexual abuse; today, saturated with sensationalized tales of victimhood and abuse, some now deplore the curiously depoliticized fate of their protests when exploited by the media, or used to consolidate the need for expert advice and healing.

Mainstream culture has found many ways of accommodating feminism, ranging from the endorsement of women as sexually vulnerable and abused, through the managerial appropriation of equal opportunities to hypocritical applause for women's supposed caring virtues and values. What we have yet to see is movement towards fairer and more caring societies, whatever the rhetoric of New Labour in Britain or the machinations of Clinton in Washington. Approaching the millennium, media outlets select their favourite figures to assess the impact of three decades of feminism, hoping for simple messages which can be repackaged as new and contentious. They are easy to find. From one side, Germaine Greer wades in to announce that women today are regularly, even increasingly, demeaned and damaged, especially in sex with men: 'For all our liberation talk, rich, modern, western woman is continually, repeatedly mutilated'.<sup>11</sup> She echoes the enthusiastically embraced gloom of another populist, white, Western feminist, drowning us in her rhetoric of the destruction of women's achievements in the twenty-first century: 'Feminists will be visible only in pornographic scenarios as stereotypically cartoonish uppity women, made happy and normal through rape'.<sup>12</sup> From the opposite side, Rosalind Coward contends that it is time for Western feminists to stop viewing women as oppressed, because she sees instead 'situations where men are really becoming vulnerable and women potent'.<sup>13</sup> In fact, feminism could still offer us something far richer than such simplistic gender-polarizing polemic.

As funding for welfare shrinks, the working day lengthens,



inequality deepens and political protest is everywhere muted, it is women and children in particular who remain at the cutting edge of the contradictions between work and welfare markets and morality. Certain groups of men are known to be 'failing' today, both at school and in the job market, with destructive consequences. These consequences are all the more destructive because of the effects of gender: the assumption that men should always be the dominant sex. When wider questions of social inequality and gender justice are posed alongside problems of identities and belonging, the domain of feminism immediately expands. It is such a feminism which I believe we still need: we need the continuing provocation which its inquiries can still arouse; we need its collective efforts to find solutions when the dreams and realities of specific groups of women and men are most awry; we need its potential, at its most thoughtful, to embrace complexity and conflict in the experiences of individual women and men, as the resilience of images of masculinity as power are shaken by the actualities of shifting gender dynamics and the fragilities of gendered and sexual identities. Drawing primarily on the Anglo-American experience, *Why Feminism?* attempts to lay out the potentialities and pitfalls of feminist consciousness for the century ahead.