

# What is Feminism?



an introduction to feminist theory

Chris Beasley

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**What is feminism?**

*To my good friend Christine Putland, who suggested the overall form of this volume and offered several valuable suggestions; to Peter Hall, for extraordinary generosity and patience in difficult times, not to mention a number of design contributions; and to our daughter, Perry Grace, for her utter disinterest in my completion of anything unrelated to her small, lively self.*

## *Introduction*

Feminism is a troublesome term. It may conjure up images of lively discussions, gesticulating hands and perhaps the occasional thumping of fists on tables; certainly, hot milk and bedsocks do not spring to mind. And yet, while the term appears to encourage a great many people to express opinions, it is by no means clear what is being talked about.

Such lack of clarity is not a straightforward result of either limited knowledge or prejudiced misrepresentation. Feminism is one of those terms that inconveniently defy simple explanation. Moreover, feminism's complexity and diversity provide obstacles to those wishing to gain a satisfactory grasp of its meanings. This interesting and powerful combination initially suggested to me the need for a short, comprehensive and intellectually rigorous book, a book which could deal with the question of what characterises contemporary Western feminism. I chose the somewhat impatient query, 'What is feminism anyway?', as the appropriate title for this book in order to signal my growing perception that although the term 'feminism' is commonly used it is, at the same time, both confusing and difficult.<sup>1</sup>

This book is intended to be used as a helpful, condensed but thorough reference by those of you who are new to the field as well as those who are already well informed. It offers both analysis and a survey—an accessible, short-cut through the swathe of writing dealing with feminism. After reading the book you should be able to launch into a discussion on the subject of feminism with some degree of confidence.

## THE PROBLEM

Feminism is becoming an increasingly accepted part of ordinary social and political discourse, even if it is not viewed in the same light by everyone. However, feminism now, as in the past, entails a variety of widely differing approaches. And yet, in spite of this diversity, feminism is often represented in everyday discussions, as well as in lecture rooms, as a single entity and somehow concerned with 'equality'. This limited portrayal is rarely challenged, partly because many forms of current feminist analysis require considerable previous knowledge and are sometimes only available in forms of academic language so difficult that they make Einstein's theory of relativity look like a piece of cake. Contemporary feminist thought has sometimes, in this context, been accused of retreating from broadly understandable language into an incomprehensible jargon typically associated with 'ivory tower' academics.<sup>2</sup>

Whether this accusation is fair or not, the problem remains that despite a growing awareness of and potential audience for feminist ideas, feminist thought is little understood—even among academics. I have been lecturing in the field of feminist thought for well over a decade and have recently been struck by the ever increasing number of students and staff from other courses and disciplines asking me for assistance. It is both a pleasing and dispiriting development. On the one hand, academic teachers wish to include some reference to feminist approaches in their subjects and, relatedly, students are now often required or wish to write on topics involving women, 'gender' issues, bodies, sexuality, et cetera. On the other hand, teachers within universities and in other settings find that it is no simple matter to gather together the resources necessary for even the most basic inclusion of contemporary feminist frameworks in their subjects. And students ask for assistance because, while there may be some discussion of feminism in the courses they undertake, the material provided typically either assumes feminism is equivalent to (North American) liberal feminism or hints gloomily at the hardships involved in coming to grips with contemporary feminist thought without much further clarification. The problems associated with gain-

ing some understanding of the term 'feminism' are usually even greater for those outside educational institutions. In this context, teachers, students and other interested individuals obviously require some reasonably quick, painless and relatively straightforward guide through the complexity of the field.

A close look at the range of materials commonly employed by teachers attending to feminism goes some way to explaining why it is actually quite difficult to gain a satisfactory grasp of the field. Although feminist thought has been considered by many authors, existing writers rarely attend to the issue of what it is they are discussing. The meaning of the term 'feminism' is almost invariably assumed and/or evaded. Furthermore, most texts dealing with contemporary Western feminism tend to deal only with some aspects of feminism—such as focusing on more established ('modernist') approaches, or only summarising various 'types' of thought named feminist (which does not explain why they are so named). The result is that those who hope to become better informed about feminism have little choice but to struggle through several texts and try to develop some perspective of their own.

While I do not for one moment suggest that wide reading or the process of attempting to figure out the characteristics of a field of knowledge are undesirable, there is no doubt that most of us face restrictions on the time and energy necessary to devote to these forms of intellectual preparation. Moreover, I see no reason why finding out about feminist thought has to be such a chore. On these grounds there seemed to me a definite place for a book which provides a reasonably accessible analytical guide in one site. This book is not supposed to replace wider reading but it is intended to make that reading more efficient and less agonising.

The book clarifies the question of what contemporary Western feminism involves and thus offers a 'definition' of the term. The notion of 'defining' feminism is controversial.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the problems associated with a complex, shifting and sometimes inaccessible field, defining feminism also involves considering whether it is in any sense distinguishable from 'other' forms of thought. As will be noted shortly, the issue of feminism's 'borders' is a matter of debate. Finally,



feminists themselves often indicate considerable reluctance to engage in the task of definition. In the main, feminists are inclined—frequently deliberately—not to define what they mean by feminism, sensing dangers such as internal policing of both the field and of feminists by those who might like to determine what is to be included (or not), as well as the potential danger of constricting the unstable vitality of its meanings.

Although the problems associated with defining feminism are inclined to make one pause, I believe that discussion about the meanings of the term is not to be dismissed because it is an arduous undertaking. It can also be argued that refusing to engage in definition does not mean that the question of definition is avoided, rather it leaves implicit definitions in place. These problems in my view indicate that greater attention needs to be paid to *how* the task of definition might be approached. Nevertheless, any brief, neat account of feminism is likely to be disputed. The 'definition' provided in the book is inevitably rather more of an exposition or 'map'. In common with Braidotti,<sup>4</sup> I consider that feminism's manifold qualities suggest a cautious, open-ended and wide-ranging approach to exploring its characteristics rather than an attempt to find some concise central core. Shortly I will explain how I understand the task of 'defining' in more depth but, for the moment, what is relevant here is that such a map or guide is inevitably far more fluid and extensive than any fixed definition that you might find in a dictionary or encyclopedia.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike dictionary definitions, this 'mapping' methodology encourages tendencies to write at great length and in painstaking detail. I was determined to resist such tendencies. I wanted to write more of a pocket-book analytical guide rather than a full-blown overview text in order to assist those who require a quickly absorbed but comprehensive reference, and for this to be of use to a wide variety of readers.

My reason for writing such a book is that an answer to the question of what makes a particular group of writers **feminist** theorists—rather than some other sort—is not as obvious as you might imagine. Although I think there is reason to be wary of strict definition in the traditional dictionary sense, feminism

## INTRODUCTION

is not a term that is entirely up for grabs. As Rothfield notes, feminism is scarcely a static label, but '[t]his is not to suggest that feminism has no boundaries'.<sup>6</sup> The use of words or labels (no matter how broadly and conditionally understood) does involve the inclusion of something(s) and the exclusion of others, even if the boundaries change over time and are permeable or fluid rather than concrete. Hence, it becomes important for those who wish to understand a term to explore *how* the term may be 'defined'. Because a term like feminism means something(s) and not others at any given moment in time, in a cultural climate where the term is in common usage, the problem of defining or characterising feminism takes on a measure of urgency.

As I have already suggested, there are a number of problems associated with the task of discerning the characteristics of feminism one of which is its variable usage. According to Offen, the term 'feminism' barely existed before the twentieth century. Originating in France, it only began to be employed in the 1890s.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is a relatively 'new' term within the long history of Western social and political theory and in this sense suggests a new framework or new frameworks. Moreover, its meaning has varied over time and its present multiple meanings are rather different from those in use in the 1890s.<sup>8</sup> **Delmar** suggests in this context that there is no set 'ideal' or vision in feminism. She also distinguishes between the practical politics of the women's movement and a history of ideas.<sup>9</sup> Delmar considers that feminism may exist only in the form of an intellectual tendency with or without the benefit of a social movement. However, many feminist writers do not accept a conception of feminism as simply a set of ideas existing in the absence of a movement. In other words, there are both broad and narrow definitions of feminism which affect how you see feminist thought and what it might be said to offer.

Delmar notes that in contrast to this lack of uniformity in response to the question of 'what is feminism?', there has often been a considerable degree of consistency in the images said to represent feminism and feminists.<sup>10</sup> When you consider that images may refer to styles of dress, haircuts, ways of behaving, attitudes and so on, you can probably conjure up a number of

graphic pictures yourself. It is interesting that these easily evoked images are more often associated with pejorative views of feminism. However, the images also suggest an impulse to tie feminism down to something and to ignore considerable differences over the characteristics of feminism.

## APPROACH AND ORGANISATION

Perhaps one way of dealing with the difficult task of establishing 'what is feminism?' is simply to avoid trying to arrive at a clear-cut definition, to cast off a notion of burrowing ever-inwards towards a definitive core. After all, there is no reason why characterising or defining a term is necessarily to be equated with discovering its supposed eternal essence. Instead, given the purpose of this book and its focus on feminist theory, definition becomes a more modest task, 'a clarifying device'.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, I have adopted a method which involves looking at the task of 'definition' from various perspectives and am more concerned to provide the sense of a field alive with possibilities than with locating a tidy answer.

In Part I (chapters 1 and 2) I look at the relationship between Western feminist thought and 'traditional' Western social and political thought. This section, entitled 'Departing from traditional fare', provides the first taste of how feminism may be regarded as diverging from the 'diet' of mainstream thinking. In other words, I start the process of 'defining' feminism from considering that which various feminists describe as providing a point of 'departure'. Feminists indicate what they mean by the term as they point out what distinguishes it from 'other' (non-feminist) bodies of thought. However, it must be noted at this juncture that aspects of those bodies of thought supposedly 'outside' feminism are nonetheless incorporated into feminism.<sup>12</sup> This raises certain issues. If even some feminists include 'within' feminism aspects of that which they have demarcated as non-feminist, how then is feminism in any sense distinguishable from these other forms of thought?

It appears that feminism has boundaries (feminism does

involve some distinguishable meanings) but, at the same time, the interchanges between feminist thought and 'other' forms of thinking which feminists criticise indicate that there is unlikely to be a strict, clear-cut dividing line between them. Perhaps the image of the Berlin Wall is helpful in illustrating this seeming inconsistency. The Wall no longer provides a physical barrier—it is continuously breached—and yet this does not mean that East and West Germany are indistinguishable. Similarly, feminism has boundaries which may be permeable, but this scarcely implies that feminism is no different from any other form of thinking. Rather, the issue becomes not simply where feminism's boundaries might be, but how they might be understood. As a result, clarifying boundaries (how feminism departs from 'other' bodies of thought) and their potential permeability (the ambiguities of that departure), are both part of the first steps in 'defining' feminism.

Part II, 'Active ingredients', allows the reader to digest feminism's volatile dimensions, to absorb the character of its 'cuisine'. Thus, by contrast with the first section, part II begins to depict the parameters of feminism from a standpoint designated by feminists as 'within' feminism. This leads, in chapters 3 and 4, to overviews of the field. (The discussion outlined here is subject to the same concerns regarding boundaries as those noted earlier.) Finally, chapters 5 to 8 offer brief descriptions of most of the generally agreed 'dishes' available on the menu of Western feminism, providing an opportunity to partake of its several varieties.

The intention of the book's organisation is first to outline how feminism is distinguished from 'other' forms of thought—that is, the implications of negative demarcation (Part I)—and, second, to delineate the field in a number of ways, that is, marking out both the dimensions and content of a positive terrain (Parts II and III). This yields a workable, if rather pragmatic, analytical guide to the problem of 'defining' feminism. A pragmatic guide allows for diversity and change as well as indicating potential difficulties attached to overly rigid or clear-cut definitions which attempt to lay down the law regarding what is and what is not 'feminist' thought.

## INTRODUCTION

Because the task of 'definition' is pursued pragmatically, the assertion of my own views is restricted to the proposal about *how* to characterise feminism and I have tried to avoid being prescriptive when surveying the content of that field. Throughout the book I intentionally do not engage with the different strands of feminism or with different writers in the sense of offering evaluative comments, in order to leave the field as open-ended as possible. The aim of this less judgmental style is both to forgo the suggestion that I can discern the real, best or essential feminism and to allow you, the reader, to consider this for yourself. However, my concern to avoid an overly prescriptive tone also reflects a point of view in relation to the various 'types' of feminism. While I am presently pre-occupied with three of these (those described later as psychoanalytic, postmodern/poststructuralist and those attending to race/ethnicity), I am able to see uses for all the types of feminism in certain contexts and hence do not regard myself as entirely committed to any one of them.

This description of the book's organisation also reveals two coexistent elements: first, various ways of understanding the term, feminism, are indicated and some schematic considerations and parameters are arrived at which amount to a proposal regarding a 'definition' or map of the field; second, in the process an overview of the content of the field is also provided. In other words, the book contains both **argument** and **survey**.

There are two further points to make in terms of the presentation and structure of the book. Initially, readers will discover that the characterisation of feminism and feminist thought begins in a quite accessible fashion but in general becomes progressively more demanding. This is because, as the 'types' of feminist thinking are described, the material to be covered becomes for the most part less widely understood. Some descriptions refer to exacting bodies of thought outlined in very condensed form.

In addition, there are certain self-imposed limits on the task of characterising feminism undertaken in this book. Such limits include a focus on Western feminisms, and a focus on theory. With regard to the initial caveat, this book specifically provides a guide to Western feminisms as I do not believe that

## INTRODUCTION

it would be a simple task to provide a short but comprehensive account of both the diverse field of Western feminist thought and the enormous complexity of 'Third World' feminist thinking. I wish to focus on the former with some reference to possible points of interconnection.

In relation to the second self-imposed limit, the book examines the meanings attached to the term, feminism, from the point of view of a focus on feminist theory and thought and feminist theorists—that is, it deals in ideas, assumptions and frameworks. Some writers adopt the view that feminism should not be conceived in terms of ideas alone, since it also refers to political struggles. Others suggest feminism could be described even more broadly. Braidotti, for instance, talks of 'the means chosen by certain women to situate themselves in reality so as to redesign their "feminine" condition'.<sup>13</sup> While I have considerable sympathy for this expanded scope, this book was written to provide a relatively short analytical guide which concentrates on systemic, publicly asserted feminist ideas—rather than on the historical development of feminist political movements, practical struggles, feminist sub-fields or modes of inquiry such as economics or cultural studies, or individual women's negotiation of the 'feminine'. Given my earlier mention of the issue of broad or narrow definitions, it is important to note that I have undertaken an account of feminism and feminist thought which is expediently but necessarily restricted. In any case, I suspect that the apparently limited focus on ideas will give you, the reader, plenty to go on with.

## *Contents*

Introduction	ix
<b>Part I Departing from traditional fare</b>	<b>1</b>
1 Feminism's critique of traditional social and political thought	3
2 Feminism's difference from traditional social and political thought	11
<b>Part II Active ingredients</b>	<b>23</b>
3 Debates 'within' feminism about feminism	25
4 Overviews of feminist thought	36
<b>Part III What's on the menu?</b>	<b>49</b>
5 Starters on the feminist menu: liberal, radical and Marxist/socialist feminisms	51
6 'Other' possibilities: feminism and the influence of psychoanalysis	65
7 More on the menu: postmodernist/poststructuralist influences	81
8 Reassessments and potentialities: feminists concerned with race/ethnicity	101
Conclusion	117
Notes	119
Other overviews of feminist thought	151
Bibliography	152
Index	167

# **Part I   Departing from traditional fare**



