Rosemarie Tong

FEMINIST THOUGHT

A COMPREHENSIVE INTRODUCTION

Westview Press

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Rosemarie Tong
Williams College

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In memory of my husband,
Paul ki-king Tong

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Rosemarie Tong

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Introduction: The Varieties of Feminist Thinking

ABOUT EIGHT YEARS AGO, WHEN I DECIDED to develop at Williams College a course entitled "Introduction to Feminist Theory," several of my colleagues had two predominant and for the most part inconsistent reactions. One colleague branded the course "a political polemic." It turned out that he saw feminist theory as a monolithic ideology into which unsuspecting students would be indoctrinated. Another colleague criticized the course for almost opposite reasons: He saw nothing theoretical about feminist theory at all. Echoing many early critics of feminist thought, he described it as a random mixture of complaints pointing out, but scarcely analyzing, the subjugation of women.[1] After much discussion, and with the help of the Williams Women's Studies Committee, I finally persuaded my skeptical colleagues that feminist theory is not one, but many, theories or perspectives and that each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation. The more skillfully a feminist theory can combine description, explanation, and prescription, the better that theory is.

Feminism, like most broad-based philosophical perspectives, accommodates several species under its genus. No short list could be exhaustive, but many, although by no means all, feminist theorists are able to identify their approach as essentially liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, or postmodern. I understand each of these to be a partial and provisional answer to the "woman question(s)," providing a unique perspective with its own methodological strengths and weaknesses. What continues to fascinate me, however, is the way in which these partial and provisional answers intersect, joining together both to lament the ways in which women have been oppressed, repressed, and suppressed and to celebrate the ways in which so many women have

"beaten the system," taken charge of their own destinies, and encouraged each other to live, love, laugh, and be happy *as women.*

Because so much of contemporary feminist theory defines itself in reaction against traditional liberal feminism, liberalism is the obvious place to begin a survey of feminist thought. This perspective received its classic formulation in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*[2] and in John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women."[3] Its main thrust, an emphasis still felt in contemporary groups such as the National Organization for Women, is that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance and/or success in the so-called public world. Because society has the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and/or physically capable than men, it excludes women from the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. As a result of this policy of exclusion, the true potential of many women goes unfulfilled. If it should happen that when women and men are given the same educational opportunities and civil rights, few women achieve eminence in the sciences, arts, and professions, then so be it. Gender justice, insist liberal feminists, requires us, first, to make the rules of the game fair and, second, to make certain that none of the runners in the race for society's goods and services is systematically disadvantaged; gender justice does not also require us to give the losers as well as the winners a prize.

But is this feasible? Marxist feminists think it impossible for anyone, especially women, to obtain genuine equal opportunity in a class society where the wealth produced by the powerless many ends up in the hands of the powerful few. With Friedrich Engels,[4] they claim that women's oppression originated in the introduction of private property, an institution that obliterated whatever equality the human community had previously enjoyed. Private ownership of the means of production by relatively few persons, originally all male, inaugurated a class system whose contemporary manifestations are corporate capitalism and imperialism. Reflection on this state of affairs suggests that capitalism itself, not just the larger social rules under which men are privileged over women, is the cause of women's oppression. If all women—not just the relatively privileged or exceptional ones—are ever to be liberated, the capitalist system must be replaced by a socialist system in which the means of production belong to one and all. Because, under socialism, no one would be economically dependent on anyone else, women would be economically freed from men and therefore equal to them.

Radical feminists, however, believe that neither their liberal nor their Marxist sisters have gone far enough. They argue that it is the patriarchal system that oppresses women, a system characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition, a system that cannot be reformed but only

ripped out root and branch. It is not just patriarchy's legal and political structures that must be overturned; its social and cultural institutions (especially the family, the church, and the academy) must also go.

Although radical feminist writings are as distinct as they are myriad, one of their frequent themes is the effect of female biology on woman's self-perception, status, and function in the private and public domains. In order to avoid confusion, it is important to distinguish this feminist inquiry from the antifeminist dictum that biology is women's unfortunate and unchanging destiny. When conservatives say that biology is destiny,[5] they mean that (1) people are born with the hormones, anatomy, and chromosomes of either a male or a female; (2) females are destined to have a much more burdensome reproductive role than are males; (3) males will, other things being equal, exhibit "masculine" psychological traits (for example, "assertiveness, aggressiveness, hardiness, rationality or the ability to think logically, abstractly and analytically, ability to control emotion"), whereas females will, other things being equal, exhibit "feminine" psychological traits (for example, "gentleness, modesty, humility, supportiveness, empathy, compassionateness, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, unselfishness");[6] and (4) society should preserve this natural order, making sure that its men remain "manly" and its women "womanly." In contrast to conservatives, radical feminists have no interest in preserving the kind of "natural order," or biological status quo, that subordinates women to men. Rather, their aim is to question the concept of a "natural order" and to overcome whatever negative effects biology has had on women and perhaps also on men.[7]

Initially preoccupied with the enslaving aspects of women's biology and psychology,[8] most radical feminists came to view women's biology (especially their reproductive capacities) and the nurturant psychology that flows from it as potential sources of liberating power for women.[9] What is oppressive is not female biology per se, but rather that men have controlled women as childbearers and childrearers. Thus, if women are to be liberated, each woman must determine for herself when to use or not to use reproduction-controlling technologies (for example, contraception, sterilization, abortion) and reproduction-aiding technologies (for example, artificial insemination by donor, in vitro fertilization, contracted motherhood);[10] and each woman must also determine for herself how and how not to rear the children she bears.[11]

Not all radical feminists focus on the biological origins of women's oppression, however. Indeed, most focus instead on the ways in which gender (masculinity and femininity) and sexuality (heterosexuality versus lesbianism) have been used to subordinate women to men. Although radical feminists seldom separate their discussions of gender and sexuality, preferring instead to discuss the sex/gender system in toto,[12] moments

of emphasis do punctuate their writings. As we shall see, many radical feminists, like many liberal feminists, have at some time or other espoused a nurture theory of gender differences according to which masculine and feminine traits are almost exclusively the product of socialization or the environment[13] (think here of Margaret Mead, who after studying three primitive societies—the Arapesh, the Mundugumor, and the Tschambuli—found both Arapesh sexes "feminine," both Mundugumor sexes "masculine," the female Tschambuli "masculine," and the male Tschambuli "feminine"[14]). Unlike liberal feminists, however, who tend to deemphasize men's power over women and who quite often suggest "that men are simply fellow victims of sex-role conditioning,"[15] radical feminists insist that male power, in societies such as ours, is at the root of the social construction of gender.

At first, some radical feminists reasoned that if, to their own detriment, men are required to exhibit masculine characteristics only and if, to their own detriment, women are required to exhibit feminine characteristics only, then the solution to this problem is to permit each and every person to be androgynous—that is, to exhibit a full range of masculine *and* feminine qualities. Men should be permitted to explore their "feminine" dimensions and women their "masculine" ones. No human being should be forbidden the sense of wholeness that comes from being both male and female. But after more reflection on the concept of androgyny, many radical feminists concluded that androgyny is not really a liberation strategy—at least not for women.[16] Some antiandrogynists argued that the problem is not femininity in and of itself, but rather the low value that patriarchy assigns to female qualities such as nurturance, emotion, gentleness, and the like. They maintained that if we can just value the "feminine" as much as the "masculine," women's oppression will be a bad memory. Other antiandrogynists disagreed, insisting that femininity has to be the problem because it has been constructed by men for patriarchal purposes. In order to be liberated, women must give new gynocentric meanings to femininity. Femininity should no longer be understood as those traits that deviate from masculinity. On the contrary, femininity should be understood as a way of being that needs no external reference point. Still other antiandrogynists, reverting back to a "nature theory," argued that despite patriarchy's imposition upon all women of what amounts to a false, or inauthentic, *feminine* nature, many women have nonetheless unearthed a true, or authentic, *female* nature. Full personal freedom for a woman consists, then, in her ability to renounce her false feminine self in favor of her true female self.

It is difficult to fully appreciate all the nuances of radical feminist thought on gender. But it is even more difficult to adequately represent all that radical feminists have had to say about sexual oppression—about

male sexual domination and female sexual submission. Through pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, and woman battering,[17] through foot binding, suttee, purdah, clitoridectomy, witch-burning, and gynecology, men have controlled women's sexuality for male pleasure.[18]

At first, many radical feminists believed that in order to be liberated, women must escape the confines of heterosexuality and create an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, autoeroticism, or lesbianism.[19] Alone, or with other women, a woman can discover the true pleasures of sex. More recently, some radical feminists have argued that no specific kind of sexual experience should be prescribed as *the* best kind for a liberated woman.[20] Each and every woman should be encouraged to experiment sexually with herself, with other women, and even with men. As dangerous as heterosexuality is for a woman within a patriarchal society—as difficult as it can be for a woman to know when she truly wants to say "yes" to a man's sexual advances—she must feel free to follow the lead of her own desires.

Sexuality also plays a crucial role in psychoanalytic feminist theory, but in a markedly different way. Whereas for radical feminists, the centrality of sexuality emerges "from feminist practice on diverse issues, including abortion, birth control, sterilization abuse, domestic battery, rape, incest, lesbianism, sexual harassment, prostitution, female sexual slavery, and pornography,"[21] for psychoanalytic feminists, the centrality of sexuality arises out of Freudian theory and such theoretical concepts as the pre-Oedipal stage and the Oedipus complex.

Psychoanalytic feminists find the root of women's oppression embedded deep in her psyche. Originally, in the pre-Oedipal stage, all infants are symbiotically attached to their mothers, whom they perceive as omnipotent. The mother-infant relationship is an ambivalent one, however, because mother at times gives too much—her presence overwhelms—and at other times gives too little—her absence disappoints. The pre-Oedipal stage ends with the Oedipus complex, the process by which the boy gives up his first love object, mother, in order to escape castration at the hands of father. As a result of submitting his id (or desires) to the superego (collective social conscience), the boy is fully integrated into culture. Together with his father he will rule over nature and woman, both of whom contain a similarly irrational power. In contrast to the boy, the girl, who has no penis to lose, separates slowly from her first love object, mother. As a result, the girl's integration into culture is incomplete. She exists at the periphery or margin of culture as the one who does not rule but is ruled, largely because, as Dorothy Dinnerstein suggested, she fears her own power.[22]

Because the Oedipus complex is the root of male rule, or patriarchy, some psychoanalytic feminists suggest that it is an invention of men's

imagination—a psychic contraption that everyone, especially women, should escape.[23] Others object that unless we are prepared to pull the string that unravels society, we must accept some version of the Oedipus complex as the experience that integrates the individual into society. In accepting *some* version of the complex, wrote Sherry Ortner, we need not also accept the Freudian version, according to which authority, autonomy, and universalism are labeled "male" and love, dependence, and particularism are labeled "female."[24] These labels, which attach more value to being male than to being female, are not essential to the Oedipus complex. Rather, they are simply the consequences of a child's actual experience with men and women. As Ortner saw it, dual parenting—as recommended also by Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow[25]—and dual participation in the work force would change the gender valences of the Oedipus complex. Authority, autonomy, and universalism would no longer be the exclusive property of men; and love, dependence, and particularism would no longer be the exclusive property of woman.

But we are far from exhausting the riches of the feminist tradition. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* probably the key theoretical text of twentieth-century feminism, offered an existentialist explanation of woman's situation.[26] De Beauvoir argued that woman is oppressed by virtue of "otherness." Woman is the Other because she is *not*-man. Man is the self, the free, determining being who defines the meaning of his existence, and woman is the Other, the object whose meaning is determined for her. If woman is to become a self, a subject, she must, like man, transcend the definitions, labels, and essences limiting her existence. She must make herself be whatever she wants to be.

The task of weaving these several strands of feminist theory together seems to have been taken up most effectively by socialist feminists. In *Woman's Estate,* for example, Juliet Mitchell argued that women's condition is *overdetermined* by the structures of production (from Marxist feminists), reproduction and sexuality (from radical feminists), and the socialization of children (from liberal feminists).[27] Woman's status and function in all of these structures must change if she is to achieve anything approximating full liberation. Furthermore, as Mitchell made clear in her later book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism,*[28] woman's interior world (her psyche) must also be transformed (as emphasized by psychoanalytic feminists), for without such a change, improvements in her exterior world will not liberate her from the kind of patriarchal thoughts that undermine her confidence (as emphasized by existentialist feminists).

Another powerful attempt to achieve a synthesis within feminist thought has been made by Alison Jaggar. Although conceding that each and every feminist perspective acknowledges the conflicting demands made on women as wives, mothers, daughters, lovers, and workers,[29] Jaggar insisted