

THIRD EDITION

# FEMINIST THOUGHT

A MORE COMPREHENSIVE  
INTRODUCTION

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## Introduction: The Diversity of Feminist Thinking

Since writing my first introduction to feminist thought nearly two decades ago, I have become increasingly convinced that feminist thought resists categorization into tidy schools of thought. Interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interlocking are the kind of adjectives that best describe the way we feminists think. There is a certain breathlessness in the way we move from one topic to the next, revising our thoughts in midstream. Yet despite the very real problems that come with trying to categorize the thought of an incredibly diverse and large array of feminist thinkers as “x” or “y” or “z,” feminist thought is old enough to have a history complete with a set of labels: liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist, psychoanalytic, care-focused, multicultural/global/colonial, ecofeminist, and postmodern/third wave. To be sure, this list of labels is incomplete and highly contestable. Indeed, it may ultimately prove to be entirely unreflective of feminism’s intellectual and political commitments to women. For now, however, feminist thought’s old labels still remain serviceable. They signal to the public that feminism is not a monolithic ideology and that all feminists do not think alike. The labels also help mark the range of different approaches, perspectives, and frameworks a variety of feminists have used to shape both their explanations for women’s oppression and their proposed solutions for its elimination.

Because so much of contemporary feminist theory defines itself in reaction against traditional liberal feminism, liberalism is as good a place as any to begin a survey of feminist thought. This perspective received its classic formulation in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*,<sup>1</sup> in John Stuart Mill’s “The Subjection of Women,”<sup>2</sup> and in the nineteenth-century women’s suffrage movement. Its main thrust, an emphasis still felt in contemporary

## 2 Introduction

groups such as the National Organization of Women (NOW), is that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world. To the extent that society holds the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men, it tends to discriminate against women in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. As liberal feminists see it, this discrimination against women is unfair. Women should have as much chance to succeed in the public realm as men do. 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.

But is the liberal feminist program drastic and dramatic enough to completely undo women's oppression? Radical feminists think not. They claim the patriarchal system is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition. It cannot be reformed but only ripped out root and branch. It is not just patriarchy's legal and political structures that must be overturned on the way to women's liberation. Its social and cultural institutions (especially the family and organized religion) must also be uprooted.

As in the past, I remain impressed by the diverse modalities of thinking that count as "radical feminist thought." Although all radical feminists focus on sex, gender, and reproduction as the locus for the development of feminist thought,<sup>3</sup> some of them favor so-called androgyny, stress the pleasures of sex (be it heterosexual, lesbian, or autoerotic), and view as unalloyed blessings for women not only the old reproduction-controlling technologies but also the new reproduction-assisting technologies. In contrast, other radical feminists reject androgyny; emphasize the dangers of sex, especially heterosexual sex; and regard as harmful to women the new reproduction-assisting technologies and, for the most part, the old reproduction-controlling technologies. As in the second edition of my book, I sort this varied array of radical feminist thinkers into two groups: "radical-libertarian feminists" and "radical-cultural feminists."<sup>4</sup>

With respect to gender-related issues, radical-libertarian feminists usually reason 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 harmful state of affairs is to *permit* all human beings to be androgynous—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 combining his or her masculine and feminine sides.

Disagreeing with radical-libertarian feminists that a turn to androgyny is a liberation strategy for women, radical-cultural feminists argue against this move in one of three ways. Some anti-androgynists maintain the problem is not femininity in and of itself, but rather the low value that patriarchy assigns to feminine qualities such as “gentleness, modesty, humility, supportiveness, empathy, compassionateness, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, unselfishness,” and the high value it assigns to masculine qualities such as “assertiveness, aggressiveness, hardness, rationality or the ability to think logically, abstractly and analytically, ability to control emotion.”<sup>5</sup> They claim that if society can learn to value “feminine” traits as much as “masculine” traits, women’s oppression will be a bad memory. Other anti-androgynists object, insisting femininity *is* the problem because it has been constructed by men for patriarchal purposes. In order to be liberated, women must reject femininity as it has been constructed for them and give it an entirely new meaning. 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 reference point external to it. Still other anti-androgynists, reverting to a “nature theory,” argue that despite patriarchy’s imposition of a false, or inauthentic, *feminine* nature upon women, many women have nonetheless rebelled against it, unearthing their true, or authentic, *female* nature instead. Full personal freedom for a woman consists, then, in her ability to renounce her false feminine self in favor of her true female self.

As difficult as it is to fully reflect the range of radical feminist thought on gender, it is even more difficult to do so with respect to sexuality. Radical-libertarian feminists argue that no specific kind of sexual experience should be prescribed as *the* best kind for women.<sup>6</sup> Every woman should be encouraged to experiment sexually with herself, with other women, and with men. Although heterosexuality can be dangerous for women within a patriarchal society, women must nonetheless feel free to follow the lead of their own desires, embracing men if that is their choice.

Radical-cultural feminists disagree. They stress that through pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, and woman battering,<sup>7</sup> through foot binding, suttee, purdah, clitoridectomy, witch burning, and gynecology,<sup>8</sup> men have controlled women’s sexuality for male pleasure. Thus, in order to be liberated, women must escape the confines of heterosexuality and create an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, autoeroticism, or lesbianism.<sup>9</sup> Only alone, or with other women, can women discover the true pleasure of sex.

Radical feminist thought is as diverse on issues related to reproduction as it is on matters related to sexuality. Radical-libertarian feminists claim biological motherhood drains women physically and psychologically.<sup>10</sup> Women

should be free, they say, to use the old reproduction-controlling technologies and the new reproduction-assisting technologies on their own terms—to prevent or terminate unwanted pregnancies or, alternatively, so that women can have children when they want them (premenopausally or postmenopausally), how they want them (in their own womb or that of another woman), and with whom they want them (a man, a woman, or alone). Some radical-libertarian feminists go farther than this, however. They look forward to the day when ectogenesis (extracorporeal gestation in an artificial placenta) entirely replaces the natural process of pregnancy. In contrast to radical-libertarian feminists, radical-cultural feminists claim biological motherhood is the ultimate source of woman's power.<sup>11</sup> It is women who determine whether the human species continues—whether there is life or no life. Women must guard and celebrate this life-giving power, for without it, men will have even less respect and use for women than they have now.<sup>12</sup>

Somewhat unconvinced by the liberal and radical feminist agendas for women's liberation, Marxist and socialist feminists claim it is impossible for anyone, especially women, to achieve true freedom in a class-based society, where the wealth produced by the powerless many ends up in the hands of the powerful few. With Friedrich Engels,<sup>13</sup> Marxist and socialist feminists insist women's oppression originated in the introduction of private property, an institution that obliterated whatever equality of community humans 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 that privilege men over women, is the cause of women's oppression. If all women—rather than just the “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 everyone. No longer economically dependent on men, women will be just as free as men.

Socialist feminists agree with Marxist feminists that *capitalism* is the source of women's oppression, and with radical feminists that *patriarchy* is the source of women's oppression. Therefore, the way to end women's oppression, in socialist feminists' estimation, is to kill the two-headed beast of capitalist patriarchy or patriarchal capitalism (take your pick). Motivated by this goal, socialist feminists seek to develop theories that explain the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy.

During the first stage of theory development, socialist feminists offered several “two-system” explanations of women's oppression. Among these two-system theories were those forwarded by Juliet Mitchell and Alison Jaggar. In

*Women's Estate*, Mitchell claimed that women's condition is determined not only by the structures of production (as Marxist feminists think), but also by the structures of reproduction and sexuality (as radical feminists believe), and the socialization of children (as liberal feminists argue).<sup>14</sup> She stressed that women's status and function in all of these structures must change if women are to achieve full liberation. Still, in the final analysis, Mitchell gave the edge to capitalism over patriarchy as women's worst enemy.

Like Mitchell, Alison Jaggar attempted to achieve a synthesis between Marxist and radical feminist thought. Acknowledging that all feminist perspectives recognize the conflicting demands made on women as wives, mothers, daughters, lovers, and workers,<sup>15</sup> Jaggar insisted that socialist feminism is unique because of its concerted effort to interrelate the myriad forms of women's oppression. She used the unifying concept of alienation to explain how, under capitalism, everything (work, sex, play) and everyone (family members and friends) that could be a source of women's integration as persons becomes instead a cause of their disintegration. Together with Mitchell, Jaggar insisted there are only complex explanations for women's subordination. Yet, in contrast to Mitchell, she named patriarchy rather than capitalism as the worst evil visited on women.

After Mitchell and Jaggar, another group of socialist feminists aimed to develop new explanations of women's oppression that did not in any way pinpoint capitalism or patriarchy as the *primary* source of women's limited well-being and freedom. Iris Marion Young, Heidi Hartmann, and Sylvia Walby constructed explanations for women's oppression that viewed capitalism and patriarchy as interactive to the point of full symbiosis. To a greater or lesser extent, these thinkers addressed the question of whether capitalism could survive the death of patriarchy, or vice versa. Although the nuances of their theories were difficult to grasp, Young, Hartmann, and Walby—like their predecessors Mitchell and Jaggar—pushed feminists to address issues related to women's unpaid, underpaid, or disvalued work.

To the degree that liberal, radical, and Marxist-socialist feminists focus on the macrocosm (patriarchy or capitalism) in their respective explanations of women's oppression, psychoanalytic feminists are most at home in the microcosm of the individual. They claim the roots of women's oppression are embedded deep in the female psyche. Initially, psychoanalytic feminists focused on Sigmund Freud's work, looking within it for a better understanding of sexuality's role in the oppression of women. According to Freud, in the so-called 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: sometimes

mothers give too much—their presence is overwhelming—but other times mothers give too little—their absence disappoints.

The pre-Oedipal stage ends with the so-called Oedipal complex, the process by which the boy gives up his first love object, the mother, in order to escape castration at the hands of the father. As a result of submitting his id (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 supposedly 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, the 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.<sup>16</sup>

Because the Oedipus complex is the root of male rule, or patriarchy, some psychoanalytic feminists speculate that the complex is nothing more than the product of men's imagination—a psychic trap that everyone, especially women, should try to escape. Others object that unless we are prepared for reentry into a chaotic state of nature, we must accept some version of the Oedipus complex as the experience that integrates the individual into society. In accepting *some* version of the Oedipus complex, Sherry Ortner noted, we need not accept the *Freudian* version, according to which the qualities of authority, autonomy, and universalism are labeled male, whereas love, dependence, and particularism are labeled female.<sup>17</sup> These labels, meant to privilege that which is male over that which is 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) and dual participation in the workforce would change the gender valences of the Oedipus complex.<sup>18</sup> Authority, autonomy, and universalism would no longer be the exclusive property of men; love, dependence, and particularism would no longer be the exclusive property of women.

Not sure that dual parenting and dual participation in the workforce were up to changing the gender valences of the Oedipal complex, a new generation of psychoanalytic feminists turned to theorists like Jacques Lacan for more insights into the psychosexual dramas that produce “man” and “woman,” the “feminine” and the “masculine,” the “heterosexual” and the “lesbian,” and so forth. Formidable theorists like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva claimed that feminists had spent too much time focusing on the Oedipal realm and not nearly enough time on the prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal domain. This domain, often referred to as the Imaginary, is the domain infants are supposed to leave behind so they can enter the Symbolic order, the realm of language, rules, and

regimes: civilization. But, asked Irigaray and Kristeva, why should women abandon the Imaginary so they can be oppressed, suppressed, and repressed in patriarchy's Symbolic order? Why not instead stay in the Imaginary, and relish the joy of being different from men? Why not remain identified with one's first love, the mother, and develop with her new ways of speaking and writing, of constituting one's subjectivity, that do not lead to women's oppression? Why lead life on men's terms at all?

In earlier editions of this book, I had included theorists like Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings with psychoanalytic feminists because of their interest in women's psychology. But I now realize that Gilligan and Noddings are not the same kind of thinkers as those I currently classify as psychoanalytic feminists. What distinguishes Gilligan and Noddings from psychoanalytic feminists, and what links them to feminist thinkers like Sara Ruddick, Virginia Held, and Eva Feder Kittay, is their focus on the nature and practice of care. More than any other group of feminist thinkers, care-focused feminists are interested in understanding why, to a greater or lesser degree, women are usually associated with the emotions and the body, and men with reason and the mind. On a related note, care-focused feminists seek to understand why women as a group are usually linked with interdependence, community, and connection, whereas men as a group are usually linked with independence, selfhood, and autonomy. These thinkers offer a variety of explanations for *why* societies divide realities into things "feminine" and things "masculine." But whatever their explanation for men's and women's differing gender identities and behaviors, care-focused feminists regard women's hypothetically greater capacities for care as a human strength, so much so that they tend to privilege feminist approaches to an ethics of care over the reigning ethics of justice in the Western world. In addition, care-focused feminists provide excellent explanations for why women as a group disproportionately shoulder the burden of care in virtually all societies, and why men as a group do not routinely engage in caring practices. Finally, care-focused feminists provide plans and policies for reducing women's burden of care so that women have as much time and energy as men have to develop themselves as full persons.

Like all the feminists who preceded them and now overlap with them, multicultural, global, and postcolonial feminists focus on the causes of and explanations for women's subordination to men worldwide. However, these groups' main contribution to feminist thought is their strong commitment to highlighting the differences that exist among women and identifying ways that diverse kinds of women can work together. Unafraid of the challenges that women's differences sometimes present to women's alleged solidarity, multicultural, global, and postcolonial feminists courageously address the

ways in which race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender identity, age, religion, level of education, occupation/profession, marital status, health condition, and so on, may separate one group of women from another. They aim to reveal how contextual factors shape women's self-understanding as being oppressed or not oppressed. They also seek to help feminists reject both female essentialism (the view that all women are, down deep, exactly alike) and female chauvinism (the view that privileged women should take it upon themselves to speak on behalf of all women).

Although the terms "multicultural," "global," and "postcolonial" are often used interchangeably to describe feminists who focus on women's varying social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, I reserve the term "multicultural" to denote feminists who focus on the differences that exist among women who live within the boundaries of one nation-state or geographical area. In turn, I use the terms "global" or "postcolonial" to denote feminists who focus on the ways in which most women's lives in most developing nations are generally worse off than most women's lives in most developed nations. These feminists challenge women in developed nations to acknowledge that many of their privileges are bought at the expense of the well-being of women in developing nations. Regrettably, the harmful effects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonization campaigns are still felt in the so-called Third World.

As attentive as multicultural, global, and postcolonial feminists are to the complexities of human beings' relationships to each other, they do not focus, as ecofeminists do, on human beings' relationships to the nonhuman world—that is, to nature itself. In many ways, ecofeminists offer the broadest and also the most demanding conception of the self's relationship to the other. According to ecofeminists, we are connected not only to each other but also to the nonhuman world: animal and even vegetative. Unfortunately, we do not always acknowledge our responsibilities to each other, let alone to the nonhuman world. As a result, we deplete the world's natural resources with our machines, pollute the environment with our toxic fumes, and stockpile arms centers with tools of total destruction. In so doing, we delude ourselves that we are controlling nature and enhancing ourselves. In point of fact, said ecofeminist Ynestra King, nature is already rebelling, and each day the human self is impoverished as yet another forest is "detreed" and yet another animal species is extinguished.<sup>19</sup> The only way not to destroy ourselves, insist ecofeminists, is to strengthen our relationships not only with each other but also with the nonhuman world.

Challenging all the versions of feminism that have preceded them, postmodern and third-wave feminists push feminist thought to new limits. Although postmodern feminists' insistence that women are in no way "one" poses problems for feminist theory and action (if women do not exist as a class

or group or collectivity, it is difficult to fight against women's oppression), this insistence also adds needed fuel to the feminist fires of plurality, multiplicity, and difference. Moreover, postmodern feminists' rejection of in-the-box thinking helps feminists speak and write in ways that overcome the binary oppositions of traditional patriarchal thought. Postmodern feminists erase the lines between masculine and feminine, sex and gender, male and female. They seek to break down the conceptual grids that have prevented women from defining themselves in their own terms rather than through men's terms.

Third-wave feminists, eager to shape a new-millennium feminism, push just as hard as postmodern feminists do to rethink the category "woman/women." For third-wave feminists, difference is the way the world is. Conflict and even self-contradiction are the name of the game as women seek new identities for themselves and stir up what Judith Butler termed "gender trouble."<sup>20</sup> Yet for all their differences from first-wave and second-wave feminists, third-wave feminists have no intentions of thinking, speaking, or writing themselves and other women out of existence. Instead, they aim to answer the "woman question"—Who is she and what does she want?—in ways that it has never been answered before.

Clearly, it is a major challenge to contemporary feminism to reconcile the pressures for diversity and difference with those for integration and commonality. Fortunately, contemporary feminists do not shrink from this challenge. It seems that each year, we better understand the reasons why women worldwide are the "second sex" and how to change this state of affairs. In this third edition of my book, I have tried to discuss the weaknesses as well as the strengths of each of the feminist perspectives presented here. In so doing, I have aimed not so much at *neutrality* as I have at *respect*, since each feminist perspective has made a rich and lasting contribution to feminist thought. At the end of this book, readers looking for one winning view, a champion left standing after an intellectual free-for-all, will be disappointed. Although all feminist perspectives cannot be equally correct, there is no need here for a definitive final say. Instead there is always room for growth, improvement, reconsideration, and expansion for true feminist thinkers. And this breathing space helps keep us free from the authoritarian trap of having to know it all.

As I revised each chapter of this book and decided to delete some old chapters and add some new ones, I became increasingly convinced that I write out of a specific background of experience, as do we all. Thus, I have tried very hard to avoid either accepting or rejecting an analysis simply because it resonates or fails to resonate with my own ideas and experiences. Whether I have largely succeeded or mostly failed in this attempt is something I must leave up to you, my thoughtful readers.