

My Comments on *Radical Feminism Today*

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That title

I want to start by talking about the title of the book. I didn't choose it, the publisher did. The book is a re-write of my PhD thesis (minus 36,000 words), and the title of the thesis was *Against the Dismantling of Feminism: A Study in the Politics of Meaning*, which I preferred. I suggested to the publisher that, if they really had to have 'radical feminism' in the title, it could be *Retrieving Radical Feminism*. To no avail. The title *Radical Feminism Today* was written into the contract and that was what it was going to be.

You might gather from this that I don't like the title, and you'd be right. I don't, and there are two main reasons for that. (There is another, minor, reason, and that is that it has dated very quickly. When I told someone the book was published in 2001 she said: 'That's not today, is it?').

The first reason I don't like the title is that it's too bland. It gives no hint of the battles, of the concerted campaigns against radical feminism, nor of its struggles to survive against the grain. Neither does it give any hint of the nasty, untrue things said about it and about radical feminists by the academic mainstream. Just think, for example, of the number of times you've come across remarks to the effect that Andrea Dworkin or Catharine McKinnon are in bed with the right-wing, just because they dared to criticise one of male supremacy's sacred cows, pornography. How often have you come across accusations that radical feminism is 'essentialist' or 'racist', accusations made as tangential remarks and throwaway lines, so taken for granted that argument and evidence are regarded as irrelevant? 'Radical Feminism Today' is too nice, it denies the insults. It denies, too, the fact that radical feminism has been almost completely excluded from the academic canon and replaced with 'Gender Studies' or 'Queer Studies', both of which monopolise the terrain that feminism made its own-sex and the relations between the sexes.

The second reason why I don't like the title is that it implies that there are other forms of feminism than radical feminism, and that radical feminism is just one form of feminism among many. But (as I argue in the book) that is not the case. There's only feminism; and what's usually called 'radical feminism' (that is, what's usually called 'radical feminism' by those who agree with it, not what is usually called 'radical feminism' by its enemies who distort and trivialise it) comes closest to being only feminism unmixed with anything else. Catharine McKinnon called this 'feminism unmodified'. By modifying feminism, I mean calling it 'radical feminism', 'socialist feminism', 'liberal feminism', 'Marxist feminism', 'postmodernist feminism', or (what is more usual these days) simply referring to 'feminisms' in the plural and leaving the way open for any kind of modifier at all. This typology, this setting up of many different forms of modified feminism with

the genuine form of feminism just one among many, has allowed anti-feminist positions to get smuggled into feminism because they call themselves ‘feminism’. By ‘anti-feminist positions’, I mean those campaigns, supposedly waged against radical feminism, but in fact waged against feminism itself, and in its very name. In that sense, there has been a concerted attempt to dismantle feminism from within, and that was what the title of my thesis, *Against the Dismantling of Feminism*, was intended to convey.

There are many examples of these struggles waged against feminism in the book (and later I’ll come to what I see as the outright victor in these struggles, the widespread use of the word ‘gender’). Here I want to give just two examples. (Both are implied in the book, although not actually spelled out as such). First, there’s the way in which socialist feminism used to berate radical feminism. From what socialist feminism saw as its own grounding in historical materialism, it accused radical feminism of being ‘ahistorical’ with its use of the word ‘patriarchy’, of ignoring class and the women ‘out there in the western suburbs’ (in the case of Sydney), of being middle-class, of being ‘cultural’ (as opposed to materialist), of excluding men, etc.

If we’d taken any notice of these criticisms, feminism would have shrivelled and died under the weight of so much clever argument. (I refer to this cleverness in the book, in the section called ‘Meaning and understanding’, where I discuss the objections feminists have raised to the incomprehensibility of academic feminism). Fortunately, many of those who identified as socialist feminists in fact simply espoused feminism much of the time for most purposes, despite their criticisms; and there were those of us who continued to adhere to feminism as we knew it and refused to be seduced away by arcane disputes in the fields of higher learning. So the academic point-scoring didn’t manage to destroy feminism utterly. The point remains, though, that many of those oh-so-sophisticated arguments were not advancing the cause of feminism, but actually undermining it.

Postmodernist feminism (to come to my second example) used accusations of ‘essentialism’ to heap such scorn on the very notion of ‘women’, that any actions on behalf of women were threatened with political paralysis (or they would have been if one took any notice of postmodernist arguments). Once again, this is not a feminist position. It actively undermines feminism, and in that sense it’s anti-feminist. How is it possible to engage in feminist politics if you’re forbidden to talk about women?

Now, as those of you who have read the book will know, I do think there are problems with seeing ‘women’ as the subject matter of feminism. If feminism is seen only in terms of women, the real social problem, male supremacy, tends to drop out of the picture. But that’s not the postmodernist point. Just what is the postmodernist point I’m not sure. (It’s a bit too clever for me). But the upshot is either to ban any references to ‘women’ which expose the ways in which male supremacist relations of power damage women and subordinate them to men, or to make you feel theoretically naive, old-fashioned, out of the academic

mainstream, and just plain silly, if you persist in doing so. The point I'm making is that not everything called 'feminist' is feminist, and the way you tell whether it is or not is to ask whether or not it makes sense in terms of what feminism means. Banning talk about women doesn't make sense in feminist terms.

So these are the two reasons why I don't like the title—it's blandness gives no hint of the struggles that went on; and it implies that radical feminism is one feminism among many, whereas it isn't. Now, I'm not recommending the complete abolition of the term 'radical feminism' in favour of just 'feminism', obviously not, since I've been using it a fair bit myself. I'm simply trying to suggest that things are not quite as they seem, and there's still a lot of work to do to clarify the meaning of feminism.

Defining feminism

So what does feminism mean in my view? Well, that's what the book's about. I start by explicitly defining feminism. Since that takes close to 6,000 words, it's obviously not a definition in the ordinary sense, but an extended debate about a certain meaning and the reasons for it. Here, though, I'll condense it into a few paragraphs.

Feminism (I argue) is the political movement which struggles against male supremacy (or male domination—I don't make any distinction between the two). By 'male supremacy', I mean a kind of social order, a system of meanings and values based on the principle that only men count as 'human' and that women can gain access to a 'human' status, although a subsidiary and diminished one, only through their relationships with men. As a central part of its struggle, feminism focuses on women because women are the chief victims of a system designed to give preference to men over women.

Three things need to be said about this. (Well, probably more than three things, but I'm going to stick to three here). The first is that, as a social system of meanings and values, male domination affects us all, women and men. Its reason for existence is to benefit men at women's expense, but women can embrace that ethic too (and men can refuse it). As a social system, male domination is not only where we live, it also lives in us. It permeates our selves, even to the deepest reaches of our being (the unconscious) and manifests as our own feelings and desires, even what seem to be the most private and secret of them. None of us is immune, no one has escaped its influence, we're all creatures of the social environment. There are no self-engendered individuals unencumbered with social relations, and neither are there special bits of us which have somehow evaded the meanings and values of the world we live in. When those meanings and values serve to justify and maintain oppression, exploitation, dehumanisation and degradation, we've got real problems because those things aren't just imposed on us from outside, they're deeply embedded in us. They are us. Each of us, then, has the political responsibility to find out how those meanings and values have affected us, and we'll all be different in the ways we've taken them in (or they've taken us in, more likely).

But (and this is the second thing which needs to be said) the social arrangements of male supremacy are not the only social arrangements there are, even under present conditions. Male supremacy is not the whole of social life. If it had been, the human race would have ceased to exist long ago because the core values of male supremacy-hierarchical power over others, violence, competition, callous disregard for human welfare, greed for wealth, etc.-are not life-enhancing. No society could last very long with never-ending violence and competition for resources unleavened by co-operativeness and care and concern for others, not least because no infant would ever survive to adulthood. So even though male supremacy is powerful and dominant, even though it is too often the default option which switches in if we're not vigilant, it's not all there is. There are also forms of interaction which enable us to treat each other with respect, and they can be appealed to as a counterweight to the meanings and values of male supremacy.

And the third thing I want to say is that there's a tremendous contradiction at the heart of male supremacist relations of power, and that is that its denial of a human status to women means that men can't be genuinely human either. So in that sense, male domination doesn't benefit men at all. It's bad for men too from a genuinely human standpoint.

And what's that, you may ask? It's a bit startling to hear someone making blithe references to the 'human' in these days where anti-humanism (or in some quarters, 'post-humanism') is the peak of theoretical sophistication. However, I do believe there's a vital need for a concept of the human. I don't mean this in the positive sense of supplying a list of characteristics which count as human. I'm not going to tell you that such and such is the way to be human because I don't know. Indeed, I can't know because ways of being human are ways people live their lives. Each of us has to decide that for ourselves and there are probably as many different ways of being human as there are people in the world, although there are also commonalities too. But I'm not even going to talk about the commonalities because what I'm chiefly concerned with in this question of the human are its violations.

But how can we know what counts as a violation if we don't first know what it is that's being violated? My answer is that it's through the violations that we get to recognise what being human means. Or rather, it's because our humanity is violated that we feel compelled to say what it is. An illustration might make this clearer. Take rape as an example. There's no doubt that rape is a violation. But of what? Of the woman herself, of course, but what aspect? How do we name whatever it is that's violated by rape? Certainly, we can say it's a woman's bodily integrity that's been violated, and that would be right. But this notion of 'bodily integrity' would never have arisen were it not for the rape in the first place. We don't normally engage in conversations about our bodily integrity, discussing whether it has this characteristic or that, this peculiarity or that, whether it takes this from or another one, whether it's giving us trouble or working well, etc. The term 'bodily integrity' doesn't slide trippingly off the tongue. It's awkward, not a

common usage. I would suggest that's because there is no need for such a term in normal everyday social intercourse. Bodily integrity, whatever it is that's violated by rape, is something that's taken-for-granted and respected as a matter of course when the social arrangements of male supremacy are not operating. My point is that something every human being is entitled to simply by existing is only identified when it's violated, and even then, it's not named easily and comfortably.

So I'm not going to tell you what it is to be human in any positive sense. My point about the human is simply that it is constantly violated under conditions of male domination. The system creates a profoundly dehumanised world. It dehumanises women because it denies women a fully human status in our own right; and it dehumanises men because men can't be fully human if women aren't. That's the political reality feminism is struggling with.

Gender

To call this political reality 'gender' is to trivialise it out of existence. I have three objections to the term 'gender' as a designation of the subject matter of feminism, one logical, one semantic and one political (although all three are linked because confusion serves the political purpose of obscuring where the real power lies).

My logical objection is that 'gender' falls right into the very trap it was supposedly designed to avoid. You might remember that it was originally half of the 'sex-gender' distinction, and its purpose was to emphasise the fact that sex differences were social not biological. But separating 'gender' out from 'sex' and making 'gender' refer to the social aspects of sex differences, means that 'sex' is not social. And if it's not social, it must still be biological, just as the malestream has always said it was. So on the one hand there's this new thing called 'gender' which refers to the social aspects of sex (although phrases like 'the gender of the foetus' make one wonder if the feminist message ever did get across). On the other hand, discourses about sex and biology survive in their original form, untouched by the sex-gender distinction. Interestingly, they're largely about men and involve (not entirely serious) references to testosterone as the explanation for their ungovernable sex drive. It's my impression that there's less likelihood these days of encountering explanations of women's behaviour as a result of their hormonal levels. But that's not because of the word 'gender', but because feminism has had some influence here.

So that's the logical reason for my dislike of the word 'gender'—it simply doesn't make sense. Instead of focusing attention on the social construction of sex differences, it sets up a distinction which allows those differences to continue to be explained in terms of biological impulses.

My second logical objection is that, because it really doesn't have its own meaning, it can take on any meaning at all. It usually means 'women', but it can mean 'women and men', 'sex differences', 'relationships between the sexes', 'the family', 'social relationships in general', or even male supremacy. Sometimes it

doesn't make any sense at all. I give an example in the book of the use of the phrase 'gender ideology' where it's impossible to decide what's meant—whether it refers to male supremacist ideology or to feminism.

My political objection is that it's a euphemism. It pussy-foots around and won't name the real social problem, which is male domination. In the book I advise getting rid of it altogether, but since then I've been doing some work in the social policy area, and that's an area where you just can't use terms like 'male domination' (or 'feminism', and if you say 'women' you have to say 'men' too, and 'poverty' is now called 'social exclusion', and punitive penalties for breaking petty regulations are called 'mutual obligation', and coerced labour is called 'volunteering', and the unemployed are being blamed for unemployment—I could go on, but I won't). So I'm prepared to acknowledge that there are times when euphemisms can be helpful. The important thing, though, is to know that that's what you're doing—using a euphemism while still trying to identify the real problem. And that's not easy to do with such a squishy term as 'gender'.

To sum up, then. I don't like the title of my book (and I'm not responsible for it) because it gives a misleading impression of what's actually been happening in feminism. I've defined feminism in terms of the struggle against a social system based on the principle that only men count as 'human' and for a genuinely human status for women. I've talked about how I use the word human, saying that I'm not interested in enumerating positive characteristics of what it means to be human, but rather, in those violations which we can recognise as violations even though we didn't realise there was anything there until the violation happened. And lastly, I talked about my objections to the word 'gender'—logical, in that it's self-contradictory; semantic, in that it's difficult, and sometimes impossible, to decide what it means; and political, in that it's a euphemism designed to disguise the real problem.

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