Chapter 11

Feminism

It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world.
—Mary Wollstonecraft

It is difficult for men to measure the enormous extent of social discrimination that seems insignificant from the outside and whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in woman that they appear to spring from an original nature. The man most sympathetic to women never knows her concrete situation fully. So there is no good reason to believe men when they try to defend privileges whose scope they cannot even fathom.
—Simone de Beauvoir

...we are confronting not a simple maintenance of inequality and property possession, but a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness.
—Adrienne Rich

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.
—Audre Lorde


INTRODUCTION

Feminism is an arena of such important intellectual and political ideological diversity that it is increasingly common to speak of “feminism?” rather than of a singular phenomenon. “I will sometimes refer to feminisms as singular—‘it,’” writes Zillah Eisenstein in her work on the topic, “and other times as plural—‘they,’ because it/they is/are both. Multiplicity and cohesion exist simultaneously.”5 Indeed, feminists have many shared concerns related especially to transcending male supremacy, sexism, and various practices of patriarchal political, economic, and cultural control and privilege, backed by means of coercion and force, that harm and oppress women. Yet, the oppressive contexts, experiences, and concerns of women sometimes differ so greatly that we must speak at once of multiplicity and cohesion. In this way, feminism is similar to the other ideologies we have studied. Common terms regarding its multiple political and social manifestations include first wave, second wave, third wave, fourth wave, Western, indigenous, global or transnational feminisms—all of which we shall discuss in this chapter.

That said, unlike the ideologies we have studied thus far, among these many feminisms there are feminisms characterized by other ideological emphases, such as liberal, Marxist, socialist, or conservative feminisms. And there are tremendously rich scholarly dimensions of feminism as well. Indeed, feminism is somewhat unique insofar as major scholarly and academic contributions have had immediate influence on actual feminist politics—pathbreaking studies like Kate Millet’s doctoral dissertation turned book, Sexual Politics, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s account of intersectionality, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s conceptualization of the subaltern position, and Judith Butler’s theoretical advances on the concept of gender. Such diversity within feminism naturally produces multiple feminist consciousnesses—different diagnoses of any status quo oppression, different imperatives for action, and different visions of an emancipated goal culture.

Some view feminism’s multiplicity as diluting the movement: to say that there are many feminisms weakens, not strengthens, possibilities for solidarity around shared feminist concerns. Politically, that may be the case. Liberal, Marxist, and conservative feminisms may agree on increased representation of women in structures of power, but they disagree intensely on how to achieve that and what precisely should be the end of increased representation. Moreover, once women are represented, what would their emancipation in the context of political, social, and cultural life entail? Feminists of different ideological dispositions may be aghast at the conditions of women in poverty but some might endorse enhanced state sup-

port for the impoverished, others oppose it; some might seek major transformations in relationships within the family, others not. While it may be small consolation to those who want immediate change to say that these disagreements enrich feminism, from the long term perspective it is the case that each debate within feminism raises deeply important questions of sexual and gender power, identity, and political possibility. Feminism is thus one of the most important arenas of political action and thought of our time.

Like prior chapters, this cannot be one where we comprehensively define or account for feminism—there are many longer studies to turn to for that. Rather, we’d like to see the present discussion as an attempt, first, to offer a thematic overview of the diverse concerns of current ideological feminism, and, second, to offer a glimpse at some of the philosophical roots of those concerns. Toward the first goal we will review exemplary ideological statements by leading feminist theorists, and toward the second we will discuss the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir, whose works established precedents—both directly and in controversy—for feminism today. Our discussion centers on feminism’s character as a political ideology: an action-orienting set of beliefs with a critique of the status quo and vision of a goal culture where not only various forms of sexism and patriarchy cease to exist, but where the political and organizational characteristics of society produce genuinely new identities, forms of consciousness, relations among human beings, and relations between humans and nature, liberated from the many dominating tyrannies of male and masculinist power.

Our discussion takes place under several important assumptions. First, that female resistance to male power has occurred, and still occurs, in many forms not directly associated with the modern ideological movement of feminism. Second, that the contemporary feminist ideology, in that name, has its primary, not sole, roots in the West, and in recent times, specifically in the United States, where important conceptualizations of the program of feminism—from nineteenth century efforts to expand the rights of women to the exposure of the combined violences of colonialism and racism on the lives of Native American women—in its various forms has taken place. That is, many primary ideological developments under the explicit heading of feminist theory and practice as a contemporary political ideology have occurred in the United States. This is not to say that feminism has occurred only there, as we hasten to add that feminism and its goals have become very global. We will attempt to address many of these movements in this chapter.

The metaphor of a wave has been used to describe different significant moments in especially North American feminism. In conversation with this notion of a wave, we offer the concept of a shore to indicate differences in feminism that occurred when feminism’s successive waves met other shores, both literally as in the case of
diversifying the contexts of women’s experience for feminist practice both inside and outside North America, and metaphorically as in the case of diversifying the theoretical outlooks that accompany such practice.

FEMINISMS

First and Second Wave Feminisms

The image of a wave suggests succession in time—one wave comes after another—which is accurate to the history of contemporary feminism in many regards. Developments within feminism are commonly discussed as “decades phenomena,” such as “the sixties” or “the nineties,” but we underscore from the start that the tendencies associated with each decade coexist through time as well. The periodic grouping, that is, can be deceptive. Hegel’s concept of aufheben may be helpful to recall: There are elements of the first wave in the second and third waves, and elements of the second wave in the third and first, and so on. We shall therefore point out thematic continuities in the emphases of each wave, in addition to portraying them in their chronological development.

First wave feminism emphasizes the pursuit of equal rights in institutional spaces once restricted to males only; it demands participatory access to political, legal, educational, social, and cultural spheres and forms of influence from which women have been—and continue to be—excluded and within which they have been—and are—denied power. First wave feminism is therefore decidedly ideologically liberal, with currents of both individualist and alternative liberalism. It demands full, open and inclusive rights for women based on the principle of equality, and emphasizing measures that ensure full formal equality, an end to differential, debilitating, and destructive advantages and privileges enjoyed by males over and against females: the right to vote, a voice in legislation, and equal rights in marriage, education, religious, and other institutional spheres of women’s experience. If recent United Nations statistics are any guide, these goals are far from being reached. At the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the UN set the goal of women comprising thirty percent of all national legislatures by 2020. Yet, by 2015, only forty-four legislatures had met that goal, led by Rwanda and Bolivia (whose government, since 2009 “included an entity charged with the depatriarchalization of the economy, state, and society”


First wave feminist movements have occurred, and continue to occur, throughout the world. In the United States’ context, the movement—which was described as feminist well after its founding—demanded and achieved a fulfillment of the liberal democratic promises contained in the U.S. founding ideals, promises that had been secured for most of the country’s history only by white, male property owners. In her now classic *Declaration of Sentiments*, presented in 1848 at a conference held in a chapel in Seneca Falls, New York, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902)—a white opponent of slavery as well as promoter of women’s rights—criticized the extensive injustice and “social and religious degradation” that white women faced because of a denial of their rights. Stanton began her declaration by applying the opening lines of *The Declaration of Independence* to the condition of women: “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” she asserted, “that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted.... The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.”

Stanton proceeded to list the denials and violations of women’s rights, including the oppressive conditions of marriage, the laws of which “compel” a woman’s “submission” in all aspects. In essence, much of her critique was of the traditional, lived conservative values of a society that nevertheless proclaimed philosophically liberal political ideals. Socially, among other critiques, she asserted that man “closes against her all avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable himself.” Assuming to himself the right to “assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and God,” man “has endeavored in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.” Thus “oppressed on all sides” and “feeling... aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.”

The emphasis of first wave feminism was on achieving rights, and therefore equality, in existing liberal democratic institutions and spaces, like marriage, supported and maintained through law. The emphasis on rights was robust: The *Resolutions of the Seneca Falls Convention* had declared “contrary to the great precept of...
nature and of no validity” any laws “which prevent women from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate.” Women were not only demanding access, they were demanding “unjust laws” be abolished and replaced with laws that afforded equality in the pursuit of happiness. The presupposition of the movement was that once women gained suffrage and representation, their voice(s) would be heard and change would follow. Unfortunately, forms of subordination through male domination, including exclusion from political decision-making and representation, have proved significantly intractable.

A fuller and deeper critique of patriarchal and sexist societal norms and patterns of privilege, exclusion, inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and violence emerged with second wave feminism. Second wave feminism emphasizes more transformative goals of actual, thoroughgoing, and effective liberty and equality, from the most intimate and personal aspects of life to the most public. Not only formal rights and institutional access and privilege, but substantive life change: full equality and independence in personal, social, and economic choices, opportunities, decisions, and, where relevant, compensation; awareness and confident control of one’s body and health, including sexual experience and family planning; equal relations with partners and spouses; full, unhindered access to effective rights within male dominated social institutions, such as the military and formerly male-only organizations and clubs; and, neither least nor last, greater and more just representation in the writing of history and school curricula. Those latter spaces of social experience become increasingly important in the 1970s. Feminists perceived the spaces of history or literary writing as sites where transformation urgently needed to happen. An eloquent voice in the 1970s was that of Hélène Cixous, who described “feminine writing” as “a place… which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds.”

In her classic essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” she called on “woman” to write “her self”:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement…. This is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation

---

has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history, first at two levels that cannot be separated.

a) Individually. By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.…

b) An act that will also be marked by woman’s seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression. To write and thus to forge herself the anti-logos weapon. To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process.

It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language.13

Second wave feminism thus engages in a more thoroughgoing critique of all existing obstacles to the fulfillment of women’s emancipation in the everyday lived and embodied experiences of women. For example, second wave feminism takes sharp and direct aim at degrading and objectifying bodily and intelligence stereotypes, male chauvinism, an unjust sexual division of labor in both society and the family (ignored by other “labor” theories), domestic abuse, rape, and anti-women gender employment discrimination and workplace harassment.

“Radical” and “leftist” in its own self-understanding, second wave feminism finds the individual-rights emphasis of the first wave limited and elitist, and borrows upon and develops feminist concerns within a variety of critical theoretical schools of thought, from Marxism and democratic socialism to radical ecological thought. It aims to transform the structures and institutions of society so that everyone has an equal, effective right to a fully human life, rather than to merely secure rights within them. An institution of central criticism is that of the nuclear family in its patriarchal division of labour and how that division is supported by capitalism to ensure pervasive inequalities, both inside and outside the home. Socialist feminism points out Marxism’s inadequate engagement with patriarchal domination, and argues that the emancipation of women from patriarchy must coincide with the transformation of hierarchical structures that reinforce both class rule and patriarchy. The two are intimately connected in a way that frequently makes most women subordinate to males, in both gender and material ways. Insofar as these inequalities persist, second wave feminism is quite alive as a project.

Central to the leftist critique of systematic forms of oppression are simultaneous calls for solidarity and sisterhood among women in the emancipatory struggle. Sisterhood involves sharing and learning about each other’s experiences so as to

feel, create, and produce a common recognition of common oppression, and a common struggle to battle and emancipate each other—and, for many feminists, men—from systems of male power and control.

Second wave feminism has produced a number of world-transforming social and public policy advances, such as women’s rights and anti-discrimination policies (e.g., Title IX, in the United States); women’s health and reproductive services, women’s advancement and full respect within hierarchies of power (as political and economic office holders), affirmative action policies, battered women’s shelters, university women’s studies programs, new small and large-scale organizations, and new empowerment and educational resources (e.g., journals, policy studies, websites). An early example of the latter is the popular book, Our Bodies, Ourselves—and now its website.14 First published in 1971, the book filled a vacuum created by under-researched women’s health issues and provided an accessible guide to bodily health and sexual awareness for women. For second wave feminism, the significance of these achievements should not be underemphasized, and, for many, they remain either incomplete or always under threat, as long as the problems which justified their existence in the first place remain, and as long as there is conservative resistance to feminism’s vision of a fully egalitarian political, social, and economic order.

Questions of Difference (I)

During the decades of the inception of the second wave—the 1960s and 1970s in the United States—the second wave called for solidarity among all women as well as engagement with the lived experiences of women in the multiple contexts of oppression. This produced important exchanges among radical second wave feminists in which feminists with different race, class, and gender identities began to discuss their varied experiences of oppression that affected all of them as women. Indeed, the goal of producing a sisterhood that commonly struggled against sexist and patriarchal oppression opened up space for women whose experiences as women differed to bring those differences into the unfolding conversation about women’s liberation. “Difference” thus became an important concept in the development of feminism as a political ideology.

“Difference” as a central ideological concept has been the subject of extensive discussion, debate, and research for as long as the feminist movement has existed. A major contribution to the debate was the 1982 book by the feminist Harvard

---

psychologist Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*. Gilligan challenged the once conventional (rationalist and sexist) belief, that can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle, that males are naturally more rational than females and females are naturally more emotional than males. Gilligan’s research on the different psychological and social development of males and females involved extensive interviews in which she listened carefully to how women and men discussed and characterized difficult moral choices and conflicts. She suggested that, while men face moral decisions from a more detached, impersonal rule-governed, and egocentric point of view, women face moral decisions with an ethic of care and feelings of attachment and responsibility. To some, her study appeared to reinforce the conventional wisdom that men were more “rational,” but it actually did something rather different. It reversed the conventional valuation of rationality and care: detached, autonomous reason was now seen as less favorable to empathetic, sensitive and responsible caring. Because of differing developmental experiences, women are not less rational than men, Gilligan asserted, but they are more empathetic and caring as well as rational. In how they describe moral dilemmas that they face, they show more of these capacities—capacities that all human beings who aspire to live together democratically as equals can and should have. As she reflected thirty years after the publication of her study,

*Within a patriarchal framework [which values “male rationality” over “female care”], care is a feminine ethic. Within a democratic framework, care is a human ethic. A feminist ethic of care is a different voice within a patriarchal culture because it joins reason with emotion, mind with body, self with relationships, men with women, resisting the divisions that maintain a patriarchal order.*\(^\text{15}\)

Still a matter of controversy, the findings of this study and the strong sense of differences between men and women support equally strong judgments and feelings within feminism that the political, social, economic, cultural structures produced by male supremacy—the world with men in power, with all sorts of violence against many people as well as nature, would not be the world we live in had women been in power. Wouldn’t a world that is governed by what the theorist Joan Tronto has elaborated as “an ethic of care”—a value “traditionally associated with women” but with much broader social and political relevance—be a better world?\(^\text{16}\) Related *gynocentric* ideas—in the sense that they emanate from an explicit valuation of positive qualities, capacities, or virtues that are associated, either by

---


“nature” or “socially,” with females and women—long precede second wave feminism. They are manifested politically in what are sometimes referred to as separatist tendencies, tendencies within second wave feminism to imagine and create a world without men, as imaginatively portrayed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s male-free feminist utopian novel, *Herland*. Written in 1915, *Herland*’s republication in the 1970s and inclusion in the literary canon—comparable to the inclusion of Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings that we will discuss below in the canon of Western political thought—is a perfect example of second wave curricular and educational transformation designed to produce a new awareness of feminist political possibilities for a new generation of students and teachers.

In the field of practical politics, the issue of “separate” agendas based on fundamental differences between men and women had key implications within the feminist movement, as illustrated by what occurred within the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) movement in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s. SDS was the largest, radical democratic movement in the United States, composed mostly of youth of various leftist or progressive ideological leanings engaged in fighting the anti-democratic denial of rights “at home” as well as war and imperialism—especially in Vietnam—abroad. In 1970, a leading feminist, Robin Morgan, published a strong critique of the white male leadership of the movement. “Goodbye to All That,” she wrote, as she contested prevailing male views of overnight social reform and called for an independent movement of “all women, separate [from males] and together,” to produce a society “beyond what is male or female.” We quote extensively from her essay to illustrate a prevailing gynocentric quality of second wave feminism’s radical politics. We also do so to highlight her joining the struggle of women with that of “non-white peoples.” This joining made perfect ideological sense in the context of the radical potential of the anti-imperialist politics of the SDS. In the context of feminism, it reflected the racial aspect of the question of “difference” within feminism that we will address below.

Goodbye, goodbye. The hell with the simplistic notion that automatic freedom for women—or non-white peoples—will come about ZAP! With the advent of a socialist revolution. Bullshit. Two events pre-date capitalism and have been clearly able to survive and post-date socialism: sexism and racism…. Goodbye to those simple-minded optimistic dreams of socialist equality all our good socialist brothers want us to believe. How liberal a politics that is! How much further we will have to go to create those profound changes that would give birth to a genderless society. Profound, sister. Beyond what is male or female. Beyond standards we all adhere to now without daring to examine them as male-created, male-dominated, male-fucked-up, and in male self-interest. *Beyond all known standards*, especially those easily articulated revolutionary ones we all rhetorically invoke. Beyond, to a species with a new name, that would not dare
define itself as Man…. They tell us the alternative is to hang in there and “struggle,” to confront male-domination in the counterleft, to fight beside or behind or beneath our brothers—to show ‘em we’re just as tough, just as revolutionary, just as whatever-image-they-now-want-of-us-as-once-they-wanted-us-to-be-feminine-and-keep-the-home-fire-burning. They will bestow titular leadership on our grateful shoulders…. Sisters all, with only one alternative: to seize our own power into our own hands, all women, separate and together, and make the Revolution the way it must be made—no priorities this time, no suffering group told to wait until after.

It is the job of revolutionary feminists to build an ever stronger independent Women’s Liberation Movement, so that the Sisters in counterleft captivity will have somewhere to turn, to use their power and rage and beauty and coolness in their own behalf for once, on their own terms, on their own issues, in their own style—whatever that may be. Not for us in Women’s Liberation to hassle them and confront them the way their men do, nor to blame them—or ourselves—for what any of us are: an oppressed people, but a people raising our consciousness toward something that is the other side of anger, something bright and smooth and cool, like action, unlike anything yet contemplated or carried out. It is for us to survive (something the white male radical has the luck of never really worrying about, what with all his options), to talk, to plan, to be patient, to welcome new fugitives from the counterfeit Left with no arrogance but only humility and delight, to plan, to push—to strike.17

Morgan’s critique of the sexism and racism of white male leadership in leftist groups indicated feminism’s long-term interest in thinking of the struggle against sexism as parallel to the struggle against other injustices, especially, in the United States, racism. Feminist statements that made these struggles common, however, inadvertently pointed to an Achilles heel or blindness in feminism’s representation of “women.” In saying that sexism and racism were common or joinable struggles, it implied that they had been, and were, separate. This had the further implication that they were not already joined—and inseparable—in the lives of some women, namely women of color who are subject to both intense forms of sexist and racist oppression simultaneously. The issue of relating “women” (in general) to other (perhaps more particularized) forms of oppression opened up a conversation of lasting significance within the second wave—an intense conversation that exposed the white, middle class, heterosexual, and North American/Western emphases and identity foundations of first and second wave feminism. And it is within this conversation that the category of “difference” took on a whole new, deeper meaning, because it became necessary to acknowledge differences among women, within feminism.

Questions of Difference (II)

I am not saying that we ought to never think about or refer to women “as women” or to men “as men.” I am only insisting that whenever we do that, we remember which women and which men we are thinking about.

—Elizabeth V. Spelman

As we have seen, some feminists in both the first and second waves (e.g., Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Robin Morgan) spoke of solidarity with other struggles, but their conceptualization of the women’s movement often appeared to make these struggles seem separate, such that sexism was seen as the main or sole cause of all women’s oppression as women, and there were other forms of injustice which women should acknowledge as well. For women for whom these other forms of oppression exist as simultaneous lived realities—sexist and racist, or sexist and imperialist, or sexist and heterosexist, or sexist and racist and imperialist and heterosexist and classist, or sexist and racist and ageist—these forms of oppression were, and are, inseparable. They are simultaneous and embodied. This makes them consistent with the deep focus on the embodied nature of women’s oppression—how the constraints and restrictions, abuses and harms of oppression are deeply and consistently felt realities. Second wave feminism evolved to become more inclusive of what the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw would later call the intersectional quality of oppression—how various forms of oppression act simultaneously on the bodies of different women. Crenshaw argued that “we must recognize that the organized identity groups in which we and others find ourselves are in fact not monolithic but made up of members with different and perhaps competing identities as well. Rather than viewing this as a threat to group solidarity, we should view it as an opportunity for bridge building and coalition politics.”

Acknowledgement of intersectionality led to calls for more expansive feminist awareness of the conditions of oppression for different women—a sense of inclusiveness and a simultaneous recognition and appreciation for difference.

There were precedents for calls for a women’s movement that acknowledged differences, especially with regard to race. The nineteenth century African American activist and former slave, Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), had given a famous speech in 1851 at a women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio, insisting on the

---


inclusion of African American women in the women’s rights movement. “Ain’t I a woman?” she asked rhetorically, implying that her life experience was as valid as any woman’s, or man’s for that matter.

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ’cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say.\(^{20}\)

The scholar Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964), who had also been born into slavery, similarly made Thomas Jefferson’s vision more inclusive and universal than Jefferson and theorists of white male privilege. In an 1893 Speech, repeating Jefferson’s famous rights motto as Elizabeth Cady Stanton had, she articulated a broad humanistic vision of solidarity among those excluded from (what has come to be known as first wave) justice:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturality and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country or condition…. The colored woman feels that woman’s cause is one and universal; and that… not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman’s lesson taught and woman’s cause won—not the white woman’s nor the black woman’s, not the red woman’s but

the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.  

The more inclusive rights-centric emphasis of first wave feminism was later broadened by the more thoroughgoing critiques of the second wave. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the intersecting forms of oppression that women of color faced came to fuller political expression. In 1972, Elizabeth Martinez described the Chicana who “suffers from a triple oppression:”

She is oppressed by the forces of racism, imperialism, and sexism. This can be said of all non-white women in the United States. Her oppression by the forces of racism and imperialism is similar to that endured by our men. Oppression by sexism, however, is hers alone.  

A recognition of the “multiple” and “simultaneous”—to use the words of the 1977 Combahee River Collective of black feminists—forms of oppression experienced by women of color soon came to be a crucial aspect of second wave feminist politics. The women of the Combahee River Collective asserted that they had “evolved… with the second wave,” but also that they wanted to assert their difference from the dominant identity of the movement. Facing multiple and simultaneous racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppressions, the Collective promoted struggle to contest these forms of oppression both outside and inside the feminist movement, that is, by white women as well as by all men. “We… find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.”

Emphasizing the “low value placed upon black women’s psyches in this society, which is racist and sexist,” the collective asserted its related, but independent struggle: “the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us.” In this context, the black feminist bell hooks rekindled Sojourner Truth’s memory in her 1981 work, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism, in which hooks critically examined the racist, sexist and classist oppression that African American women faced in American history including in the feminist, civil rights and male-led black nationalist movements of the 1960s.


22 Elizabeth Martinez, “La Chicana” in ibid [1972], p. 43.  


24 Ibid.
The awareness that some women could simultaneously face multiple forms of oppression became central to the second wave. The feminist poet Adrienne Rich similarly took sharp aim at the neglect and treatment of what she termed “lesbian existence” in dominant feminist thought.

Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women. Yet everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty. The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.25

Calls for a broader conception of women’s oppression had the paradoxical effect of seeking to make feminism both more encompassing in representing as many of those experiences as possible and more specific in its attention to the particularities of women's experiences. Rich wrote, for example: “The work that lies ahead, of unearthing and describing what I call here lesbian existence, is potentially liberating for all women. It is work that must assuredly move beyond the limits of white and middle-class Western Women's Studies to examine women's lives, work, and groupings within every racial, ethnic, and political structure.”26 By contrast, one sees the emphasis on becoming more specific in an essay written at the same time by Audre Lorde, one of the most eloquent feminist voices in the United States. Speaking as a “forty-nine-year Black lesbian socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an inter-racial couple,” she called for deep consideration of particular differences among women: “There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist…. Ignoring the differences of race [among others she discussed] presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power.”27 Reiterating the important particularities of black women's experience in the context of the 1980 conservative turn in the United States, she wrote:

Today [1980], with the defeat of the ERA [The Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution], the tightening economy, and increased conservatism, it is easier once again for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough,

---

26Ibid., p. 41
pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough, teach the children to behave, hate the right people, and marry the right men, then you will be allowed to coexist with patriarchy in relative peace, at least until a man needs your job or the neighborhood rapist happens along. And true, unless one lives and loves in the trenches it is difficult to remember that the war against dehumanization is ceaseless.

But Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest. We do not deal with it only on the picket lines, or in dark midnight alleys, or in the places where we dare to verbalize our resistance. For us, increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our living—in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us.\(^\text{28}\)

Thirty years later, a noteworthy episode of the struggle to make the lives of Black women an essential part of progressive feminist politics occurred in 2014 in response to President Barack Obama’s initiative, “My Brother’s Keeper,” on behalf of young men of color. Several Black feminists launched a campaign to draw attention to the plight of young Black women as well. At the forefront of that campaign, was the African American Policy Forum, led by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the theorist who coined the term intersectionality. Crenshaw wrote: “As public concern mounts for the needs of men and boys of color through initiatives like the White House’s My Brother’s Keeper, we must challenge the assumption that the lives of girls and women—who are left out of the conversation—are not also at risk.”\(^\text{29}\) This fight coincided with the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which grew in the United States in response to the brutal treatment of Black women and men by the U.S. criminal justice system. One of the founders of #BlackLivesMatter, Alicia Garcia, underscored—among many other concerns—the dominant tendency to ignore the plight of Black queer women. In her “Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” Garcia called for “the celebration and humanization of Black lives” in a way that affirms, not erases Black queer women’s “work”:

When you design an event / campaign / et cetera based on the work of queer Black women, don’t invite them to participate in shaping it, but ask them to provide materials and ideas for next steps for said event, that is racism in practice. It’s also hetero-

\(^{28}\)Ibid., p. 119.

patriarchal. Straight men, unintentionally or intentionally, have taken the work of queer Black women and erased our contributions. Perhaps if we were the charismatic Black men many are rallying around these days, it would have been a different story, but being Black queer women in this society (and apparently within these movements) tends to equal invisibility and non-relevancy.

We completely expect those who benefit directly and improperly from White supremacy to try and erase our existence. We fight that every day. But when it happens amongst our allies, we are baffled, we are saddened, and we are enraged. And it’s time to have the political conversation about why that’s not okay.

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.30

Thus, second wave feminism consistently deepens attention to both solidarity and intragroup differences, within various feminist movements and within the participation of feminists in other movements, like #BlackLivesMatter. It combines its original attention to thoroughgoing structural oppression and empowerment with an imperative to recognize and affirm the various differences women bring to struggles for justice. The scope of differences among women was to be further widened, in relation to global cultural differences, as second wave feminism travelled from North America to other shores.

Global Feminism

Second wave feminism’s politics of difference had already opened up a discussion of significant differences among feminist women, but such differences were rarely characterized as “cultural” because the word “culture” is often used to describe differences between larger, inter-societal groupings. The women involved in the second wave viewed themselves, more or less, as speaking the same language and as sharing more in terms of values and life practices and expectations, including broadly conceived religious and spiritual attitudes. In “cultural” terms, that is, they

shared more than they differed. Where differences in languages, modes of expression, or values were drawn they were characterized in terms such as “ethnicity,” “race,” or “class.”

However, as other feminist voices arrived from other shores, a certain Western character of the foundations and goals of feminism began to be apparent and challenged. By shores we mean both geographically and conceptually: geographically, in the sense of outside of North America, Europe, and its urban and academic centers throughout the world that absorbed and promoted American and European feminist views; and conceptually, in the sense of outside the boundaries of Western feminist thinking, whether inside or outside of geographic North America and Europe.

Indeed, with regard to conceptual differences, feminists from outside the geographic boundaries of the West who also live inside North America have led the intellectual struggle to see feminism’s Western character: political-cultural presuppositions that are so widely shared within the West so as to be difficult to notice as such among those who share them. Those who share them include most American and European theorists, who also tend to see their particular assumptions about culture as universal—as relevant and applicable everywhere, for everyone—rather than as particular. As a result of criticisms emanating from leading global (or Third World or transnational) feminists, what were seen as “universal” presuppositions about the lives of women began to be seen as uninformed perceptions about the material and meaningful conditions of women’s lives outside the West, and as sometimes unintentionally colonizing in their pretense to represent or speak for all women.

A groundbreaking social theoretical intervention was the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a founder of postcolonial, subaltern studies. In her seminal 1988 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she showed that women’s lives outside the conceptual boundaries of the West were systematically missing in feminist and other ideological discourses that claimed to represent them. Spivak criticized the Western intellectual’s tendency to speak “knowledgeably” about “general” phenomena, when, in fact, one is only talking about phenomena in the West. As an example, she mentions a discussion about “the worker’s struggle” and “Maoism” among two prominent (male) European intellectuals. When they spoke about both in “general” terms, they meant only the workers in Europe and French Maoism, not “the worker’s struggle” and “Maoism”—they spoke globally but were thinking only inside continental Europe. In this context, Spivak described what she called the “UN-style feminist” whose “struggles against patriarchal measures are altogether admirable” but “dire when ‘applied’ globally.”

Her essay led the feminist

---

movement to attend more carefully to what is lost when confidently claiming to speak on behalf of all women, when in fact the lives of many women are not represented in those claims. Her specific examples of the erased subaltern voice have had lasting relevance, and thus are useful to elaborate here.

Spivak examined historical representations of women in India who died as satis—widows who took their lives by burning themselves on their dead husband’s funeral pyre. The British colonial administration formally abolished the practice in the nineteenth century. Reading historical and contemporary representations of the satis—women whose testimonies could not be found in the archives, because they had left none as such—Spivak observed how attempts to represent the satis in the official and historical accounts ended up in the erasure of the sati’s elusive “voice consciousness.” It seemed as if every party in the controversy over the practice had a voice, except for the women who died and whose lives were being written or talked about. The British colonial rulers who abolished the practice said the women were oppressed by local tyranny; native defenders of the practice said the women were “heroic” exemplars of devotion; and contemporary feminists said the women were constrained by destructive “traditional” rituals—nowhere could the “voice consciousness” of the sati be found. They left no testimony in the archives, whatsoever.\(^{32}\) As a way of underscoring the colonizing erasure of the sati’s voice, Spivak made explicit the similarity between the British colonial and Western feminist representations.

Spivak’s intervention has had many implications. Her goal was to characterize theoretically the perspective of the subaltern—the subject position whose meaningfulness is paradoxically and simultaneously represented and erased in discourses that pretend to represent her. The satis—and other women Spivak discussed—were spoken for in ways that ensured they did not speak for themselves. Their purposes—the constitutive meanings of their actions and lives, as we discussed in the introduction to this book—were domesticated to and homogenized within the purposes of others (the British, the native “traditionalists,” “feminism”). Spivak’s contribution had implications throughout social theory; here, we underscore her contribution to feminist thought in relation to what may be referred to as “global” differences among women across culture and society. Spivak’s work challenged feminists to examine the ways in which they represent and discuss women “in general,” to attend to how feminist ideological discourse may erase the lives and experiences of women outside the West (both geographically and conceptually) while claiming to talk about, represent, and empower them. What seemed to be an inclusive concept of women was hardly so.

---

\(^{32}\)Ibid., pp. 49–50.
These concerns were echoed and elaborated in different ways in the work and practice of many “Third World Feminists.” At the risk of great oversimplification, let us look illustratively at two broadly conceived, global feminist tendencies that have emerged—one concentrating heavily on specifying profound cultural differences that fully distinguish Western and non-Western women’s experiences; and another that examines differences in what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as “borderlines” between the West and non-West. Let us also have a brief look at an emerging feminist conception of “culture” and possibilities for women’s solidarity across cultures within these discussions.

Chandra Mohanty’s 1984 essay, “Under Western Eyes”—an extensive critique of Western feminism published two years before Spivak’s important characterization of the subaltern—illuminates the first tendency. Mohanty described in great detail the very particular ways that Western feminist ideological and theoretical language homogenized and colonized women’s lives outside the West—that is to say, how “Third World women” are monolithically, ahistorically, and reductively thought of as poor, ignorant, tradition bound, domestic, powerless, exploited, and sexually harassed. This Western feminist oversimplification of their experience, she argued, is “based on a generalized notion of their [common] subordination.” Important to underscore are the “real” political consequences of this oversimplification. Western women have tended to view non-Western women as less fully developed, and therefore, not yet ready for emancipation. We encountered this chasm earlier, in our discussion of the colonial views expressed by the foremost theorist of Western liberal emancipation, John Stuart Mill, as well as in the work of Edward Said. As Mrinalini Sinha has pointed out in a stinging critique of American feminists in the early 20th century, “at the Inter-American Women’s Congress in Panama in 1926, for example, feminists representing the United States abstained from voting on a resolution for woman suffrage in all American nations on the grounds that Latin American women were not ready to exercise political rights.”

Mohanty was not only calling for a recognition of the difference of women’s lives outside the West, she was also calling for deeper inquiry and engagement with the conditions of their lives. “The focus [under Western feminist eyes] is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular group of women as ‘powerless’ in a particular context. It is rather on finding a variety of cases of ‘powerless’ groups of women to prove the general point that

women as a group are powerless.”

Too often, whole concepts like “women in Africa” or “Arab and Muslim women”—two examples Mohanty invokes—“deny the socio-historical and cultural specificities of [their] existence.”

We emphasize that “existence” is the term Adrienne Rich used as well in criticizing the neglect, within the West, of the specific existence of lesbian women. Like Rich and others, Mohanty said that this neglect weakened rather than strengthened the goals of solidarity among women. She called for “specific differentiated analysis” that focused on the meaningfulness of women’s practices in their constitutive contexts to generate a broader political strategy for all women:

Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well as in order to effectively organize and change it. Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis… [that does not deny] any historical specificity to the location of women as subordinate, powerful, marginal, central or otherwise vis-à-vis particular social and power networks.

The theorists of second wave difference in the United States had effectively insisted upon a deeper engagement and recognition of difference as well. Global feminism extends this sense of difference by introducing what is often referred to as cultural perplexity where Western feminist discourses reach limits of knowledge and experience. Spivak and Mohanty point out that there are arenas where, when feminism speaks, it runs the risk of colonizing other women in ethnocentric and Orientalist ways. Thus, we have seen the emergence of indigenous feminist movements that both confidently align their politics with “feminism” and yet distinguish themselves from Western colonial visions.

As an example that still strikingly resonates with contemporary significance, Mohanty discussed, in 1984, the veil or headscarf in the context of the lives of Muslim women. As we noted in the chapter on Islamism, the veil has been the focus of an intense amount of interest and critique by Western feminist scholars, and there are Islamic feminists who embrace the veil as part of their emancipatory politics. Mohanty was among the first feminists to see this fraught area of cultural difference as theoretically significant for feminism, and she did so in the context of the participation of women in the Islamic revolution in Iran. Recalling Spivak’s insight about the subaltern, we may say that, with the veil drawing the attention of feminist and non-feminist scholars in the West, wearers of the veil occupy the position of the subaltern: Western representations routinely characterize women who

---

36Ibid., p. 341.
veil as subordinated to a patriarchal constraint of a patriarchal religion, while dominant traditionalist Islamic discourses represent the woman with a veil as a cultural exemplar. Applying Spivak’s insight we may say that, between these two discourses, there is little room for the voice consciousness of those who veil, not to mention women who veil as Islamic feminists. The force of Spivak’s and Mohanty’s work is to urge an engagement with the specific, constitutive historical, ideological, and meaningful contexts of women who veil—practically, to invite those whose voices have been erased into the discourse. No generalized statement of their absolute subordination (“their Powerlessness”) seems available.

It is an analytical leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women that must be questioned. While there may be a physical similarity in the veils worn by women in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the specific meaning attached to this practice varies according to the cultural and ideological context. For example, as is well known, Iranian middle class women veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution to indicate solidarity with their veiled working class sisters, while in contemporary Iran, mandatory Islamic laws dictate that all Iranian women wear veils… the concrete meanings attached to Iranian women wearing the veil are clearly different in both historical contexts. In the first case, wearing the veil is both an oppositional and revolutionary gesture on the part of Iranian middle class women; in the second case, it is a coercive institutional mandate. Only through context specific differentiated analysis does feminist theory and practice acquire significance. It is on the basis of such analyses that effective political strategy can be generated.38

From a global feminist perspective, effective struggle in solidarity depends, therefore, not only on not imposing or homogenizing identities, but also on learning and being in conversation with the specific and differentiated character of women’s lives. Mao comes to mind here as interesting in this context, when he says that the oppressed, and only the oppressed, know what their oppression is all about. They cannot be told about their oppression. Forging possible relationships globally requires deep conversation among women organizing in all cultural contexts—in all indigenous feminisms, be they “Third World” or “Western.” (After global feminism, Western feminism may be seen as one “indigenous” manifestation of feminism.) None have a fully universal claim on the meanings of either oppression or emancipation, and, therefore, feminism must—for women’s emancipation universally—be developed in conversation. The feminist theorist Nancy Hirschmann, writing self-consciously in the West, has argued for precisely this kind of conversation in the context of the veil. The outcome of greater understanding will be beneficial in many ways, including for the West to better understand its own practices.

38Ibid., p. 347.
I believe it is important to have “East-West” interaction, and moreover that it can occur non-imperialistically. To begin with, Western feminists must recognize that their responsibility for promoting fruitful dialogue is greater than their Eastern counterpart, not only because the latter have already been forced to attend to the West, but also because the West has done much more damage to the East than vice versa. This means that Westerners must listen, if for no other reason than the more comprehensive understanding of our own experiences—including the way we dress and its significance for Western women’s freedom—cannot occur without such attention. Through such a “back and forth” we may be able to operate within our cultures—which is necessary to change them—through the benefit of ‘outside’ perspectives—which are necessary to seeing what needs to be changed. Such a strategy can help sharpen our critical edges and facilitate our understanding not only of ‘the other,’ but of ourselves as well.39

A slightly different emphasis within global feminism emerges when thinking about women’s experiences that transcend neat divisions between “East” and “West.” The conversation over cultural differences revealed that there was another conversation to have, at and on cultural borders, with and for women whose identities and experiences are constituted simultaneously by intersecting cultural differences. In her 1987 book, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa wrote as a woman living between several cultures that simultaneously constituted her identity/ies: between Mexico and Texas, between English and Spanish, and between prose and poetry (as different modes of expression, as different concepts of political speech). On the borders, a homogenous “East” and “West” or “Mexico” and “Texas” gives way to new, inclusive, hybrid, and mutually constituting identifications, in a word to a mestiza consciousness. This second, important tendency of global feminism encourages a more radical awareness of intersecting cultural dimensions of women’s identities who live or experience life between cultures. In the spaces between strictly divided “cultures,” women develop what Anzaldúa described as a “plural personality.”

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns ambivalence into something else.40


Something else is a key term. Anzaldúa envisions a new unifying movement among people between borders, where each is “willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking.”

“What am I?” Anzaldúa asked, exemplifying this new plural consciousness in relation to her feminism. “A third world feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings,” she answered, underscoring her globally hybrid, plural personality.

Global feminism and the plural forms of indigenous feminism that accompany it thus bring many possible cultural inheritances and identities to feminist consciousness. As they do, they establish that cultural traditions once viewed by Western feminism as patriarchal or backward, like the veil or other “cultural” traditions, may nevertheless ground, inform, and contribute to feminist goals, and they highlight how women’s experiences on, at, or over territorial, cultural, language or other borders may be highly plural and varied. An important question thus arises: What is the meaning of culture when it has been moved from having vague implications of “backward” in imperialist Western discourse to a more nuanced, global set of associations where “cultural understanding” may provide the basis for new kinds of progressive thinking? We phrase this question in the broadest possible sense because, as with feminism’s depth of engagement with the question of difference, feminist engagement with the concept of culture is one of the arenas where issues relevant to feminism are relevant outside feminism as well.

A Global Feminist Understanding of “Culture”

Theorizing from her own experience to make political theoretical sense of the concept of culture from a global feminist standpoint, the feminist philosopher Uma Narayan has argued against thinking about cultures as fixed or monolithic. In her contemporary classic essay, “Contesting Cultures,” she argues that cultures are “capacious and complex” in that “cultures and their inhabitants often criticize the very institutions they endorse.”

Narayan describes a controversy that occurred when feminists in India questioned a famous sati case in the 1980s. They were charged with “rejecting Indian values” by defenders of “Indian culture”—that is, Indian feminist concerns were

---

41Ibid., pp. 348.
seen as “Western” “cultural imperialism,” as betrayal of “their own culture.” Narayan disputes the underlying assumption in these charges that culture is singular, fixed, or monolithic. She points out that she learned at home—as a young person in relationships with her mother and grandmothers—to question practices in India that oppress women. That is, it was within her “own culture”—as it is within the cultures of many women globally—that she learned how to question patriarchy. What we see here are two different accounts of culture, one suggesting it is a fixed thing that must be preserved and another that sees it as, in Narayan’s terms, “capacious and complex.” For Narayan, cultures foster their own criticism, and changes occur within cultures. While some changes may be stimulated by outside forces—such as the forces of “modernization” that she discusses—the reasons for those changes cannot be accounted for solely by such forces. To be very specific, there are non- and anti-patriarchal characteristics and forces in “Indian culture.” “We need to move away from a picture of cultural contexts as sealed rooms,” Narayan writes, “with a homogenous space ‘inside’ them, inhabited by ‘authentic insiders.’ Western feminist reflections on their own experiences should teach them that there are many ways to critically and creatively inhabit a culture.”

As we have emphasized, important to all the assertions of difference elaborated with the second wave—“racial,” “class,” “sexual orientation,” “ethnic,” “societal,” “cultural”—is the permanent political assertion that women’s oppression remains nonetheless, at some level, common, and that common struggle should be an emphasis of feminism. Domination may be understood and experienced in various ways, but these ways may be communicated among women committed to being in conversation, identifying the various sources and structures of their oppression, and contesting them in solidarity. As Narayan writes,

If there seems to be a resemblance between issues addressed by Third World feminists and those addressed by Western feminists, it is a result, not of faddish mimicry, but of the fact that women’s inequality and mistreatment are, unfortunately, ubiquitous features of many “Western” and “Nonwestern” cultural contexts, even as their manifestations in specific contexts display important differences in detail. Thus, while women in Western contexts might be unfamiliar with violence against women rooted in the institutions of dowry and arranged marriages, they are no strangers to battery and violence prevalent within their own forms of marriage and family arrangements. They are no strangers either to the sense of shame that accompanies admitting victimization, or to a multiplicity of material, social, and cultural struc-

44Ibid., p. 399.
tures that pose serious impediments to their leaving abusive relationships or seeking assistance.46

Seeing “feminist cultural contestations” as part of the cultures within which feminists have grown, Narayan thus calls for “critical dialogue” and “widespread political debate” about “the cultural elements that should be preserved and those that need to be challenged.”47

Such is the diversity not only of the identities of feminists, but also of the political conversations occurring within feminism’s (ongoing) second wave. The thoroughgoing quality of the second wave’s attention to the micro as well as the macro dimensions of oppression, and to the particular and global aspects of women’s identities, has been profoundly fruitful for feminism as a theoretical outlook and political ideology. As Linda Nicholson has put it, debates within second wave feminism “produced different ‘trajectories’ in feminist thought.”48 These trajectories demonstrate “that the meaning of ‘woman’ shifts over history and over diverse contexts” and, for feminism, establish that “the political meaning of ‘womanhood’ must evolve as different political actors, men as well as women, struggle over how gender is to be understood.”49 Second wave feminism enabled feminism to become a shared, plural, and, as Zillah Eisenstein has stated, “polyversal” movement—that is, a movement with many voices and verses from within many contexts.

One movement that emerged within second wave and has, since its inception, attempted to bring a radical, polyvocal and poly-local plan for social justice together with the second wave’s evolved capacious sense of difference is ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism: Global Bio-Diversity and Justice

The French radical feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne coined the term, ecofeminism, in 1974. As an ideological movement, it was launched in 1979 with the Unity Statement written by women organizing as Women and Life on Earth. The Unity Statement offered a “new vision” and “a growing understanding and appreciation of racial, sexual, and ecological diversity and an end to militarism.” Ecofeminism understands most white male dominated capitalist, imperialist, racist, and militarist threats to nature and women as simultaneous, and suggests that women have a fundamental role to play in eliminating those threats and the emancipation of

46Ibid., p. 401.
47Ibid., p. 412.
50Eisenstein, Against Empire, op. cit., p. 183.
Feminism

women. A comprehensive and prescient piece of political ideological literature, we reproduce the statement in full here.

We are women who have come together to act on a common hope in a fearful time. We enter the eighties with alarm for the future of our planet. The forces that control our society threaten our very existence with nuclear weapons and power plants, toxic wastes and genetic engineering. A society and world economy organized for the profit of a small number of white men has created the conditions for widespread unemployment, violence at home and in the streets, oppression of third world peoples, racist attacks, inadequate food, housing and health care, and finally, the ecological devastation of the earth.

We see connections between the exploitation and brutalization of the earth and her people and the physical, economic and psychological violence that women face every day. We want to understand and try to overcome the historical divisions of race, poverty, class, age and sexual preference that have kept women apart and politically powerless. Our concerns are many, but understanding the problems that confront us helps us imagine how we would like to live.

We are women whose lives and work demand a shared expression of a new vision for society. The vision we seek to express and finally realize is an affirmative one. Our hope for the future is based on a feminist perspective, a growing understanding and appreciation of racial, sexual, and ecological diversity and an end to militarism. We want to live in decentralized communities based on interdependence, self-reliance and other basic ecological principles. These principles are not abstractions. They are conditions for our survival. 

The ecological principles of ecofeminism include those of deep ecology, a perspective and movement that emphasizes non-anthropocentric relationships between human beings and nature, rejecting the idea that human beings are either the center of nature or the source of all value produced by nature. For deep ecology, nature is a system of diverse and interdependent relationships and species. Humans should participate in reproducing that diversity, not destroying it by exploiting and instrumentalizing nature solely for human purposes through modern scientific mastery. Ecofeminism adopts this perspective and applies it to male dominated society and corporate forces that instrumentalize science for their narrow, profit-driven and bio-colonial interests. Of particular criticism are the ways in which modern, instrumental-scientific and egocentric-economic reason combine

---


Chapter 11

not only to objectify nature but also to overwhelm thinking about alternative relationships between human beings and nature, relationships about which women, due to their organic participation in reproducing and nourishing nature, have special knowledge and expertise. It is here where the existence of cultural differences among women has been particularly fruitful for eco- and broader feminist practice and thinking.

Vandana Shiva, the philosopher and founder of the ecofeminist movement, Diverse Women for Diversity, has brought these differences to light and made them effective in ecofeminist struggle, describing in great detail the knowledge and expertise of third world women in relation to biodiversity and sustainability. Their (usually uncompensated) labor practices are invisible to biocolonial Western economic thinking that pursues a homogenizing agenda of monocultural agriculture under the banner of “globalization.” The colonizing dynamic is similar to the early Western Orientalist feminist view of other practices, but here it applies directly to the erasure of the culturally indigenous, biodiverse relationships that third world women have with nature. Science alone is not the problem. The problem is twofold: Western objectivist, positivist rationality thinks its causal and predictive relationship to nature to be universal and superior wherever it travels. For ecofeminism, this is a mistaken, and environmentally destructive error: it ignores the knowledges and expertise of women whose experience with nature is much deeper and lasting. Second—with a significant dosage of Marxist-Leninist concern—Western science serves the profit maximizing, bourgeois and imperialist interests that seek to bring all of nature under their absolute control through, for example, seizure, purchase, and patent rights. These forces appropriate, displace, alienate, and plunder indigenous spaces and peoples, loosening the ties between the people and nature, turning women producers into consumers, and their natural sources of life and value into commodities.

Shiva emphasizes the relational, culturally embedded (in customs, festivals, and sacred rituals), time-memorial—and, therefore, truly conserving and sustainable—character of indigenous women’s relation to nature. Consider her description of women’s knowledge in the context of the indigenous dairy and forestry industries. She writes about India, and emphasizes that her comments are applicable worldwide in low industry and industrialized contexts:

Dairying, as managed by women in rural India, embodies practices and logic rather different from those contained in the dairy science imparted at institutions of formal education in India, since the latter is essentially an import from Europe and North

----

America. Women have been experts in the breeding and feeding of farm animals which include not just cows and buffaloes but also pigs, chickens, ducks and goats.

In forestry too, women’s knowledge is crucial to the use of biomass for feed and fertilizer. Knowledge of the feed value of different fodder species, of the fuel value of firewood types, food products and species is essential to agriculture related forestry in which women are predominantly active. In low input agriculture, fertility is transferred from the forest and farm trees to the field by women’s work, either directly or via animals.

It is in the “in between” spaces, the interstices of “sectors,” the invisible ecological flows between sectors, that women’s work and knowledge in agriculture is uniquely found, and it is through these linkages that ecological stability and sustainability and productivity under resource scarce conditions are maintained.…

Women have been the custodians of biodiversity in most cultures. They have been selectors and preservers of seed. However, like all other aspects of women’s work and knowledge, their role in development and conservation of biodiversity has been rendered as non-work and non-knowledge. Their labour and expertise has been defined into nature, even though it is based on sophisticated cultural and scientific practices.…

Sacredness is a large part of conservation in the indigenous setting and carries with it the intrinsic value of diversity. As a relationship of the part to the whole sacredness recognises and preserves integrity. Profane seed violates the integrity of ecological cycles and linkages. It fragments agricultural ecosystems and breaks down relationships that are responsible for production.… Sacredness of seeds and their diversity is located in a world view entirely different from that in which seed is only a commodity, and its only value is profit.54

Ecofeminists thus have organized to emancipate through the decolonization of eco-colonized societies. The aim is not only to liberate nature from capitalist and imperialist patriarchy but also to save the relationship women have with nature. Doing so, will ensure diverse cultural and environmentally sustainable relationships with nature. Universal in its emancipatory aims, ecofeminism illustrates the gynocentric orientation of the second wave, asserting that a world governed by women would be a better world—for women, nature, and men—than the world governed by men. For ecofeminists patriarchy is one, not the only, organization of power in human his/herstory. Women’s herstory provides more relational, diverse, nurturing, peaceful, harmonious, and ecologically sound examples and possibilities. Ecofeminism thus marries global or transnational feminism’s critique of colonialism with deep ecological environmentalism to elaborate the global qualities of differ-

ences among women in a radical social justice program for nature and women. As such, it illuminates the more encompassing, radical, leftist political aspirations of the second wave agenda for unmarginalizing women’s voices, empowerment, and making herstory/ies with real, substantive change in women’s lives.

The Third Wave

Even as the second wave was about expanding the range of thinking about women’s experiences, its call to transform power structures by opening them to women in their greatest diversity could not but evolve beyond its imagination. In the 1990s and beginning of the twenty-first century, understandings of women’s experience, and the meanings of gender, evolved to such an extent as to give meaning to the existence of a third wave—again in the United States and milieus elsewhere that are influenced by developments in the U.S. The third wave has two discernable, related emphases: one that follows the structural change emphases of the second wave and seeks, in the conservative era’s backlash against women’s rights, to maintain and extend the gains of the second wave within the new structures of feminist progress. The second emphasis aims to open up the categories of gender identity and political practice in more radical ways. These emphases emerged simultaneously and mutually catapulted feminist ideological practice into new directions.

Third wave feminism seeks not to take any of the second wave progress for granted and to continue to insist on women’s liberty, equality, and empowerment. Time has passed since the clarion calls for social change; contexts have shifted. The conservative era of the 1980s and 1990s brought criticisms of the social reform agenda; threats to the rollback of reproductive rights and affirmative action policies; crass and thoughtless “fascistic” characterizations of feminism (as, e.g., “Feminazis”) depicting it as destructive of traditional values and proper social order; and the organization of “men’s groups” for men’s rights—a version of the “reverse discrimination” logic that constituted assaults on affirmative action in the 1970s and 1980s.

The American feminist and author Rebecca Walker is said to have coined the term “third wave” in a 1992 essay in Ms. Magazine. As a publishing center for women’s voices and empowerment, the magazine was one of the achievements of the second wave. Walker famously wrote, “I am not post-feminist. I am third wave.”

The context of her statement was the aftermath of the appointment to the United States Supreme Court of the conservative Justice Clarence Thomas, who, in his senate confirmation hearings, when asked about his thoughts on Roe v. Wade—

the landmark US Supreme Court decision that affirmed a woman’s reproductive rights—said that he had not formed an opinion. As if this strategic avoidance for a jurist most likely to vote to reduce reproductive rights for women was not worrisome enough for feminists, during his confirmation hearings, the senators heard testimony that Judge Thomas had engaged in workplace sexual harassment. The testimony came from Anita Hill, an attorney who, like Thomas, was a graduate of Yale Law School. Hill had worked for Judge Thomas when he was the head of the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission—the U.S. government office responsible for eliminating and protecting workers from workplace discrimination. Both Thomas and Hill are African Americans, adding to the intense stakes of a discussion involving issues of discrimination. Hill offered testimony of detailed, sexually explicit, verbal abuse and a pattern of long-term harassment she experienced by then Judge Thomas. And yet, the U.S. Senate confirmed Thomas to a place on the U.S. Supreme Court where he routinely defends the most conservative reading of U.S. law.

The appointment by the Democratic President Barack Obama of three female justices to the Supreme Court, and the prospect of women Presidents on the horizon, have altered the balance somewhat, but the lasting significance for feminism of Justice Thomas’s confirmation cannot be understated. As Patricia Ireland, president of the National Organization for Women in the 1990s, put it: “[T]he Hill hearing was the first time that many women had made the connection between what goes on in Washington and what goes on in their lives, and the first time they had seen such dramatic evidence of what it means that women have been excluded from the senate and other positions of power.”56 Threats to women’s rights—in Justice Thomas’s claim to the lack of an opinion on Roe v. Wade—and the intersecting injustices of sexism and racism at the heart of second wave were vocalized publicly, and a mostly white male group of U.S. senators voted Judge Thomas to the highest court in the United States. This action constituted nothing less than a major defeat for feminism. His appointment showed that any gains achieved by the movement could be lost, at any time, by a rejuvenated anti-feminist, culturally conservative movement. In this context, Walker wrote her 1992 essay:

So I write this as a plea to all women, especially women of my generation: Let Thomas’ confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman’s experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don’t

Chapter 11

prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminist feminist. I am the Third Wave.57

Third wavers are beneficiaries of many institutional achievements of the second wave, from publishing spaces like Ms. Magazine and enhanced employment opportunities to Women's Studies programs where they study and situate themselves in relation to feminist struggles. Third wavers also inherit the achievements of diversity and intersectional inclusiveness within the movement. But there are differences. While social justice remains a priority—and is expanded into new spheres, including prison reform—sisterhood, still widely felt, appears to be less emphasized at the ideological level than empowerment through liberty, as in “prioritize our freedom to control our own bodies and lives.” This joining of first and second wave emphases makes sense in the context of threats to justice already achieved by the first and second waves. Third wavers inherit a sense of pride from such progress, and they experience the constant threat of the conservative rollback on a very personal level.

Complementary to this experience of living out feminism's achievements, the third wave is characterized by ongoing conversation about what empowerment, agency, emancipation, and liberation entail. In this context, the third wave includes a revitalized engagement with new issues of gender and political possibility. These developments need to be understood against the background of an emerging postmodern politics of deconstruction, central to reshaping thinking about gender both inside and outside of feminism.

Deconstructing Gender

Postmodernism is a mode of thought characterized by a deep critique of inherited truths. It seeks to show how truths that are assumed to be universal, or natural and necessary—like patriarchy's constitutive ideal that males are naturally superior to, and therefore should rule over females—are, to the contrary, neither natural nor necessary. Rather, they are historically contingent and varying—meaning changing truths that emerge in specific historical contexts under specific historical conditions—and thus particular, not universal. More significantly, these truths are politically dangerous: They do not just establish natural differences, they hierarchicalize them in such a way that does violence to differences not seen as naturally superior. Thus, patriarchy promotes males to a superior position and subordinates females. Subordinated females are excluded from power—placed or sent to the margins (“marginalized”), and their voices silenced or devalued. Deconstruction shows how

57Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave.”
presumed natural and necessary truths carry out these violences: how they establish and hierarchalize “binaries” between superior and subordinated identities (male/female; white/black, heterosexual/homosexual; human/non-human, West/East, etc.), and how those hierarchalized binaries exclude, marginalize, and occlude—conceal from view—other ways of being, thinking, and valuing the world.

There are more, or less, radical versions of the politics of deconstruction. Some forms, for example, might hold the hierarchalized categories of presumed truths stable while altering their valuation. Feminism’s various waves have done this with the devalued patriarchal categories of “female” and “woman.” Other deconstructions might jettison the terms altogether—considering “male” and “female” or “man” and “woman” as violent categories (sustained by both patriarchy and feminism) that prevent us from thinking more capaciously about gender possibilities. This latter form of deconstruction has taken place inside feminism, but it is less characteristic of feminism than it is of queer or transgender studies and movements, as well as feminisms that intersect with them. Such studies, which offer a more thoroughgoing challenge to the heteronormative and cisgender assumptions of gender discourses, share concerns for gender justice with feminism but do so in pursuit of goals that include but are not limited to, strictly speaking, women’s emancipation. Given the purposes of this chapter, we will focus our attention on the Third Wave’s opening up and rearrangement of feminist gender possibilities.

In essence, first wave feminism challenged hierarchical thinking of the man/woman binary. It sought to alter the political valuation by including women as full citizens with equal rights in spheres that previously excluded them. The politics of difference of the second wave further challenged hierarchy by opening up the category of “women” to include many identifications as woman. Citizenship and empowerment would no longer be defined on especially exclusionary white, middle class, heterosexist, or narrow cultural terms. All women would be included as full and equal members of both the feminist movement and the social and political institutions it sought to transform. The third wave, by contrast, undertakes a different project, namely showing how the man/woman and related heterosexual male/female and masculine/feminine binaries occlude or blind us from thinking about different gender possibilities.

Deconstructing the categories of sex and gender entails showing how what are understood to be “males” and/or “females” share a range of gender identities that may inhabit any and all bodies differently. Studies in psychoanalysis and gender theory have been very important to the politics of deconstruction—especially to undoing the harmful violence of dominant heteronormative gender discourses. Such studies show how a person’s identity/ies are shaped by social forces that manifest themselves in language and everyday practices in society. These forces combine to
produce what the philosopher Judith Butler described as gender *performances*—gendered ways of living or being—that, in their repetition, simultaneously marginalize or blind persons to other aspects of their being, because they are produced in some ways by the dominant discourses and not in other ways. Gender discourses of masculinity, for example, circulate particular ideals for both males and females in language, and these ideals are enforced in various every-day, social practices—in the very minute particulars of a person’s existence, from expectations and relations within the family, to childhood games and school curricula. Thus the combination of dominant languages and disciplinary practices produce certain masculine gender identities—the “macho” male, for example, and the “attractive” female who is sexualized from the perspective of—and for—such males. In this way, the discursive power of gender discourses produces identities to fit particular discursive patterns that are, in principle and practice, at odds with how life may have been lived if those discourses had been otherwise, or if people begin to interrupt and resist them and live out other possible gender identities. Rebecca Walker has spoken about this as the third wave’s broader appreciation for a gender continuum:

Influenced by the postmodernist movement in the academy, third-wave feminists sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that have transmitted ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity, among other things. There was a decided shift in perceptions of gender, with the notion that there are some characteristics that are strictly male and others that are strictly female giving way to the concept of a gender continuum. From this perspective each person is seen as possessing, expressing, and suppressing the full range of traits that had previously been associated with one gender or the other. For third-wave feminists, therefore, “sexual liberation,” a major goal of second-wave feminism, was expanded to mean a process of first becoming conscious of the ways one’s gender identity and sexuality have been shaped by society and then intentionally constructing (and becoming free to express) one’s authentic gender identity….58 (emphases added)

Deconstructive forces in contemporary politics have awakened an awareness—in many circles of political resistance, not only feminism—of discursive power and the need to un-subjugate subjugated aspects of a person’s being in the micropractices of their lives. Thus, the family, the school, the schoolyard, the media have become sites of fierce political contestation, of forces of domination and efforts to resist those forces. In every social space, that is, from the bedroom and bathroom to the boardroom, dominant gender discourses produce dominant identities and do violence to others. Third wave resistance in its multiple forms thus entails

living, as Walker stressed, authentically in one’s identity—not simply in one’s mind but in one’s desires, feelings, bodies, relations, and deepest understanding of oneself—whether it is carried consciously as resistance or not. Confident and authentic gender identification and expression for women in their various ways of being are central to the third wave. This centrality has several important implications in relation to the emphases of the prior waves.

Whereas feminists of the second wave focused mainly on changing structures that subordinated women—structures of the family, the school, the government—those of the third wave, who have been educated and socialized in the institutions of the second, inhabit those structures both to resist ever-present patriarchal and sexist discourses in the languages and practices of everyday life and to explore and manifest ways of identifying and living that have yet to come to full expression in the identity politics of the second wave. Given the third wave’s emphases on liberty, some of its manifestations may be seen, from the perspective of the second wave, as individualist and even regressive, as opposed to collectivist. But from within the third wave, they are empowering. The objective of authentic living may even entail a practical political focus less on sisterhood as such than on the freeing expression and manifestation of authentic and as yet insufficiently realized ways of living on a gender continuum. As Walker has written: “There is no betrayal in being yourself, home must be made within, and the best communities are those built on mutual respect.”

The third wave eschews struggling simply as victims: certain forms of justice have been achieved, and the struggle continues, confidently and, sometimes, in even highly controversial, risky, upfront, and artistic forms that demand respect for women in their greatest diversity.

In this regard, third wavers appreciate a form of politics that encourages playing with gender identities to undermine harmful gender stereotypes, opening up new, empowered identifications and performances of femininity and sexuality that first and second wave might have dismissed as reproducing sexist stereotypes. On her website, Rebecca Walker endorses a description of the third wave that notes the intersection between postmodern thought and the third wave and offers an extensive list of examples of third wave expression that offers a sense of the range of modes of expression that have come to be seen—not without controversy—as feminist:

In expressing their concerns, third-wave feminists actively subverted, co-opted, and played on seemingly sexist images and symbols. This was evident in the double entendre and irony of the language commonly adopted by people in their self-presentations. Slang used derogatorily in most earlier contexts became proud and defi-

ant labels. The spirit and intent of the third wave shone through the raw honesty, humour, and horror of Eve Ensler’s play (and later book) *The Vagina Monologues*, an exploration of women’s feelings about sexuality that included vagina-centred topics as diverse as orgasm, birth, and rape; the righteous anger of punk rock’s riot grrrls movement; and the playfulness, seriousness, and subversion of the Guerilla Girls, a group of women artists who donned gorilla masks in an effort to expose female stereotypes and fight discrimination against female artists.

The third wave was much more inclusive of women and girls of colour than the first or second waves had been. In reaction and opposition to stereotypical images of women as passive, weak, virginal, and faithful, or alternatively as domineering, demanding, slutty, and emasculating, the third wave redefined women and girls as assertive, powerful, and in control of their own sexuality. In popular culture this redefinition gave rise to icons of powerful women that included the singers Madonna, Queen Latifah, and Mary J. Blige, among others, and the women depicted in television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), and *Girlfriends* (2000–2008). Media programming for children increasingly depicted smart, independent girls and women in lead roles, including Disney heroines such as Mulan (1998) and Helen Parr and her daughter, Violet (*The Incredibles*, 2006), and television characters such as Dora (*Dora the Explorer*, 1999–2006), Carly and Sam (*iCarly*, 2006–), and *Sesame Street’s* first female lead, Abby Cadabby, who debuted in 2006. The sassy self-expression of ‘Girl Power’ merchandise also proved popular.60

Some of these examples underscore a difference between the second and third waves: some second wavers may find Madonna—or, more recently, the sextremist group Femen—as much less subversive feminism than as playing directly into male domination by reproducing sexist stereotypes, including of erotic displays of aggressive or violent political theater and protest. It is indeed difficult to draw a line between a reproduction of sexist stereotypes, their authentic reclaiming, or ironic critique of them through artistic performance. Also, from the perspective of queer and transgender politics, both of which seek a thoroughgoing deconstruction and dispensing of reigning male-female gender hierarchies, a third wave embrace of “smart, independent girls and women,” may be good for feminists who identify as such but not for queer and transgender persons seeking a more encompassing language of gender justice—a program that may transcend the confines of a “female-” or “woman-”centric, feminist politics. These reservations aside, what may appear to some feminists or others as a regressive, individualistic, loosening of feminist practice is, from within the third wave, a different era of feminist practice in which “there are an infinite number of moments and experiences that make up

female empowerment.”61 It is an era which pluralizes gender identifications among women who seek to carry out authentically their own plans for living, sometimes by reintroducing roles and forms of femininity that had once been questioned as sexist or problematic.

**Unending Feminisms**

In the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, some feminists have started to describe a new, fourth wave of feminism, spurred on by enhanced communicative and innovative strategic uses of the Internet. As with all ideological movements, instant messaging, collectively authored blogs, Twitter, and so on have facilitated nearly instantaneous, transnational and global social protest in ways not previously seen, often with great effect. The UK website, *Everyday Sexism*, is an important example. It encourages women and girls to share their stories, anonymously if necessary, to “show the world that sexism does exist, it is faced by women everyday, and it is a valid problem to discuss.”62 This purpose reflects a third wave imperative to continue the battle against sexism started in the earlier waves. That is, to say that these so-called “fourth wave” movements appear less to be new than a new technological reframing of especially second and third wave emphases, especially if one views Internet communications devices as social structures—in the sense of second wave emphases—that women may now creatively inhabit, transform, and use to end male domination and violence.

This new wave thus has important ideological significance in the herstory of feminism: it underscores the ongoing intensity of women’s oppression and the ongoing importance of feminism as an action-orienting ideology capable of mobilizing people with a broad vision for another world. That there are fundamental flaws in the current status quo is obvious to feminists. One need not be a true believer to see that there are many things amiss in the relations between genders, and that most political orders are designed to ensure the rule of men and the ways of being they deem right. There is no shortage of examples: ongoing real as well as subtle forms of underrepresentation, exclusion and inequality (e.g., in pay and promotion opportunities) inside political, economic, and social power structures; serious inattention to the particular circumstances of women’s lives in their great diversity; a range of coercive discriminations, denials, constraints, exploitations, harassments, objectifications, and instrumentalizations therein; violations and threats to basic rights, including reproductive rights; intersecting

---

61 Walker, to be real, p. xxxvi.
institutional coercions like racism, sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism; actual abuses, aggressions, sexual violences, and brutalities, including sex slavery and rape in near epidemic proportions; vast media and commercial stereotypes, myths and objectifications; and emotional/psychological, and eating disorders related to all of these.

In all of these manifestations, the various aims and emphases of each wave appear to be ongoing. Together, they constitute contemporary feminist politics—a home to great diversity of thought and practice, with often aligning and sometimes competing visions of a non-patriarchal world; yet all intersecting, and, as the world still needs changing, none completely outdated. Circling around and back with each other, they all engage in questioning gender roles within various contexts of difference, trying to identify conditions of subordination and creatively overcoming them, sometimes independently but most often with each other, and sometimes with supportive males—all while accounting for contextual difference and without overgeneralizing about women’s experiences.

Persons who benefit from feminism’s successes—men and women—do not all identify as feminists, and feminists differ about the relationship between feminists and non-feminists, especially men. An examination of feminist discourse on men reveals, again, different emphases. Some feminisms anticipate that males can alter with social change, others do not. Some open space for solidarity with males in pursuit of justice, others do not. Some borrow for justice on ideals formulated by men, others on ideals and practices formulated by women. We shall address some of these issues further below. Here, let us conclude by underscoring how feminism offers significant ideological diversity within, all of it centered on “justice”: full rights and equalities, social and institutional spaces with a deep awareness of women’s abilities and needs in all their varieties, diversification and deconstruction of gender presuppositions and a genuine opening of life possibilities, as well as various kinds of communities and solidarities in the struggle for—to make and live in—a differently gendered world than the one we currently know and experience. Let us therefore turn now to two women who may be seen as offering philosophical roots for the feminisms we have described.

PHILOSOPHIC ROOTS IN THE WEST, AS PRECEDENT IN PRINCIPLE AND IN CONTROVERSY

As should be clear by now, feminism in ideological name has a much shorter life than women’s resistance to patriarchy. Adrienne Rich once commented that women’s resistance to male power is a “central fact of women’s history”—“A feminism of action, often though not always without a theory, has constantly re-emerged in
Feminism • 503

every culture and in every period.” Women have drawn upon a wide variety of
sources, embedded in many traditions, for this feminism of action. Indeed, inso-
far as there are multiple feminisms, there are multiple philosophic roots for each
of them, from literature like Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) to the
sacred texts or customary practices of women’s varying, inherited traditions. Our
discussion of roots is more a glance at two prominent figures in the particular his-
tory of Western political thought from which the waves of Western feminism that
we have discussed—along with feminisms outside the West that have constituted
themselves as feminism in conversation with Western feminism—may be traced. As
with the other ideologies we have studied, the works we shall discuss—Mary Woll-
stonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and Simone de Beauvoir’s
*The Second Sex* (1949)—have played a major role in motivating action on behalf
of feminism’s goals. Of course, sentiments for social change in the direction pro-
moted by feminism existed well before reading these works, just as sentiments for
a classless world existed before Karl Marx.

But reading these works has also had an effect specific to ideologies: it has pro-
duced action-orienting belief. Let us turn, then, to examine the ideas of Mary Woll-
stonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir as they relate to and inspire feminist action.
Reading their works in light of our discussion of the different waves of contempo-
rary feminism suggests that they set important precedent both as forceful and elo-
quent voices for some of feminism’s principal objectives and, in relation to some
of feminism’s relatively recent concerns, as controversy. Our analysis will describe
these features as we show the depth of their thinking. Even if they commit flaws
in reasoning from the perspective of more contemporary theoretical work, one
may credit them for putting many of the foundational ideas of feminism out there
boldly and eloquently, for making the difficult conversation happen where it wasn’t
yet happening: Mary Wollstonecraft in the context of early white, male centric liberalism; and Simone de Beauvoir in the context of the liberation struggles for oppressed Others of the twentieth century.

**A Vindication of the Rights of Women**

Wollstonecraft’s ideas relate in several interesting ways to the waves we have stud-
ied. If the essence of first wave feminism, as articulated by Elizabeth Cady Stan-
ton, is a critique of the fraudulent denial of (the Abrahamic) God’s-given rights
to women, and a demand that those rights be achieved, then Wollstonecraft’s
political theory clearly provides the roots of first wave feminism. In an argument

that partly recalls John Locke’s views of God-given natural rights, Wollstonecraft argues that tyrannical male prejudices enslave and falsely cultivate women by denying their God-given rational powers, that all human beings are equal and rational by nature and should, therefore, have equal political and social rights. But her argument resembles alternative liberal tendencies more closely than those of individualist, market liberalism. She is critical of Rousseau’s characterization of women but agrees with him that human beings may be re-formed, consistent with their nature, to create a more virtuous society.

At the center of Wollstonecraft’s argument is the progressive potential of coeducation, which ought to foster and create morally correct dispositions for both males and females. In this context, her arguments also relate positively to the social transformation goals of the second wave. The shared presupposition is that institutional changes, specifically educational changes, can combat and defeat widespread prejudices, change the thought and character of human beings, and thus change society. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft’s extensive account of how harmful social prejudices produce attitudes and behavior in women that are at odds with their liberation resembles elements of the third wave’s attention to discursive power. Wollstonecraft’s late 18th century thought, however, is anything but radical or thoroughly discourse analytical. Her educational proposals remain somewhat classist, and her particular form of rationalism is perhaps too narrow for the third wave, post-modern opening. In addition, aspects of her analysis display a kind of Western ethnocentric Orientalism that global feminists have criticized.

Patriarchal Prejudices and the Current Condition of Women

For Wollstonecraft, the condition of women’s lives is at odds with what God intends for creation. Women, she argues, are “slaves” in every way to the “prevailing prejudice” that male “superiority [exists] not in degree but in essence.” This patriarchal prejudice empowers male despotism and simultaneously, for Wollstonecraft, harms both women and men, by denying them, especially women, their real powers as virtuous, ambitious, rational, thinking individuals capable living as equals. She is, moreover, critical of both the men who have used power to degrade and deny women their rights and women of “her own sex” (and class) for being “enfeebled by false refinement”—weakened by a society that deprives them unjustly of their rights, powers, and duties. “I do not wish them to have power over

---

64Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 112.
65Ibid., p. 139.
The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.

In a treatise, therefore, on female rights and manners, the works which have been particularly written for their improvement must not be overlooked; especially when it is asserted, in direct terms, that the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement; that the books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of Mohametanism, they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species.

Immediately we note an example—from the perspective of the contemporary global feminist outlook we described above—of precedent in controversy in Wollstonecraft’s ideas. Her statement equating “the true style of Mohametanism” with the denial of women of their humanity is Orientalist in at least two ways: one relating to a theme we discussed in our chapter on Islamism, the other more pertinent to our discussion of feminism. The first is her naming Islam as “Mohametanism,” a common feature of European Orientalist thought, because it names Islam as “Christians” name “Christianity,” using the name of their central sacred figure to identify the tradition. Recall from our other chapter, the important difference between Muhammed in Islam and Jesus Christ in Christianity: the latter is seen as a divine figure while the former is seen as a messenger of God, a paragon of righteousness in Islam, but not a divine figure in himself. Hence to describe “Islam” as “Mohametanism” is to see the tradition in and through a Christian lens, ignoring its significant difference. It is the second aspect of this Orientalist prejudice, however, that is more relevant to our discussion of feminism. Wollstonecraft’s assertion here suggests that

---

66 Ibid., p. 138.
67 Ibid., p. 74.
Islam’s “true style” is patriarchy. This locates her thought within the Orientalist tradition insofar as it ignores diversity within Islam, including—reading the comment in relation to contemporary knowledge—Islamic feminism that, like Jewish and Christian feminisms, argues that the tradition is more hospitable to women and their rights than male, patriarchal Muslim rulers have made it, or said it is.

Nonetheless, additional scrutiny of what Wollstonecraft says about Islam suggests that her assertion evinces something other than her widely-shared, non-globally feminist, European Orientalist prejudices. Her point is not so much about Islam as it is about the educational system Wollstonecraft is referring to—education in her own society. In “the books of instruction, written by men of genius,” women are “treated as a kind of subordinate beings” and “alluring mistresses,” “not as a part of the human species.” “Mahometanism” may be the archetype of patriarchy in Wollstonecraft’s (shared) Orientalist thinking, but she is using that signifier to criticize her own educational system as a “false system” of education, where the books, written by males, teach natural male superiority—something some Islamic feminists claim about the books in their educational systems as well!68

Wollstonecraft’s obvious critical target in these opening paragraphs is the exclusion of women from categories of full, rational individuality (the grounds for their natural rights) and their subordination through differential, feminized roles. This is the principle of first wave feminism. Women, she avers, are defined as “feminine” or “a sex,” not “individuals with virtue.” They are treated with hollow respect, degraded by adornment and flattery, taught to value coquetry, to please others, but denied “reciprocation of civility.”69 In “the present modification of society,” women are not engaged in “a rational conversation;”70 They are busy with affairs of the heart and constantly living in the opinion of others, not forming their own plans and living with virtue and dignity; they are “robbed of dignity.”71 They are sedentary or too busy with pleasure, not with making themselves useful. Wollstonecraft is highly critical of women who live in these ways. “[T]hey have… resigned their natural rights, which the exercise of reason might have procured them, and chosen rather to be short-lived queens than labour to obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality.”72

As with first-wave feminism, Wollstonecraft takes aim especially at marriage, where women’s “slavery” is apparent—“slaves in every way to prejudice,”73 “slaves

---

68Ibid., p. 174.
69Ibid., p. 130.
70Ibid., p. 273.
71Ibid., p. 127.
73Ibid., p. 243.
of pleasure,” and “slaves of men”—and where they ought to be activating their capacities for judgment, thought and improvement as wives and mothers. As a wife, “[She] seldom exerts enlightened maternal affection; for she either neglects her children, or spoils them by improper indulgence…. To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women posses who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands.” They are humble, gentle, and docile. In short, women are living according to mistaken notions of beauty and excellence.

** Becoming Masculine, Rational Equals **

Wollstonecraft’s text is a challenge to women of her time as much as it is to male tyranny. In criticizing women’s “weakness” and tendency to live according to their senses, Wollstonecraft is aware that she is demanding of women that they become, in the gendered parlance of the day, “more masculine”—that is, more like what men are understood to be. In this regard, as with first-wave feminism, she does not deconstruct patriarchy’s hierarchical binary of men-rational/women-not-rational, she seeks to include women in the characterizations and privileges of rights supposedly reserved only for men. Indeed, for Wollstonecraft, *rationality* is neither male nor female: it is human. The men-rational/female-not-rational binary of patriarchy is not rational. Hence, she addresses her pleas for change to rational men:

If then it can be fairly deduced from the present conduct of the sex, from the prevalent fondness for pleasure which takes place of ambition and those nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul; that the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire—mere propagators of fools!—if it can be proved that in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over; I presume that rational men will excuse me for endeavoring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable.

This is quite a play with gendered terms. Wollstonecraft is saying that if rationality is considered more “masculine and respectable,” then women ought to become

---

74Ibid., p. 270.
75Ibid., p. 243.
76Ibid., p. 77.
77Footnote in original reads: “A lively writer, I cannot recollect his name, asks what business women turned of forty have to do in the world?” (Ibid., p. 78).
78Ibid., p. 78.
that. Women ought to be included within the realm of all those seen as fully rational, mature, strong and independent, and therefore, as equal human beings deserving of full and equal rights. She is arguing for the rationality of all. The rational person is mature, noble, independent, and virtuous.

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt. ... I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone. 79

Such assertions resonate powerfully with first wave feminism’s demand for full recognition of the equality of women, that women not be seen or treated as weak and naturally subservient pleasures, unequal to men who claim to be stronger, more rational and so on. Wollstonecraft is indirectly addressing what we described above as the sexist convention that says that men are more rational than women, who are more emotional. Recall Carol Gilligan’s work on the differences between men and women. Gilligan asserted that women are just as rational as men, and they are more caring and empathetic. Wollstonecraft’s judgment is not dissimilar; her endorsement of rationality is not to the exclusion of feeling. She maintains that the cultivation of the rationality of females will enhance their lives as affectionate beings. In her words, she seeks not “to dry up the feelings” but to cultivate a woman’s “understanding” so that, she argues, even the experiences of affection and the passions may be enhanced.

I am, indeed, persuaded that the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation; and by, which may not appear so clear, strengthening the organs; I am not now talking of momentary flashes of sensibility, but of affections. And, perhaps, in the education of both sexes, the most difficult task is so to adjust instruction as not to narrow the understanding, whilst the heart is warmed by the generous juices of spring, just raised by the electric fermentation of the season; nor to dry up the feelings by employing the mind in investigations remote from life. 80

79Ibid., p. 77.
80Ibid., pp. 142.
The Power of Generalizing Ideas

This view of human rationality is, of course, located in a particular historical tradition (more on this shortly), with particular emphases, especially an emphasis on particularly conceived rational powers from which women, in possession of this dormant power, have been excluded. Wollstonecraft specifies the character of the rational faculty she wishes to see developed in females as a particular kind of power—"the power of generalizing ideas." Exercising this God-given rational power is what it means to be fully human.

The stamen of immortality, if I may be allowed the phrase is the perfectibility of human reason;... Reason is... the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?...

The power of generalizing ideas, of drawing comprehensive conclusions from individual observations, is the only acquirement, for an immortal being, that really deserves the name of knowledge. Merely to observe, without endeavouring to account for any thing, may (in a very incomplete manner) serve as the common sense of life; but where is the store laid up that is to clothe the soul when it leaves the body?81

The power to generalize is the exercise not of simply “observation” but of “thinking powers,”82 of “understanding” and “serious scientific thinking.” Its activation fulfills the morally progressive goals of humans by undermining false prejudices and destroying power structures built upon them. For Wollstonecraft, this mode of understanding is lacking in both men and women, but “every thing (emphasis added) conspires to render the cultivation of the understanding more difficult in the female than the male world.”84

This power has not only been denied to women; but writers have insisted that it is inconsistent, with a few exceptions, with their sexual character. Let men prove this, and I shall grant that woman only exists for man. I must, however, previously remark, that the power of generalizing ideas, to any great extent, is not very common amongst men or women. But this exercise is the true cultivation of the understand-

---

81Ibid., pp. 127–8.
82Ibid., p. 282.
83Ibid., p. 91.
84Ibid., p. 128.
ing; and every thing conspires to render the cultivation of the understanding more difficult in the female than the male world.\textsuperscript{85}

That is, \textit{both} men and women lack sufficient reason and knowledge of their moral duties but, for Wollstonecraft, the “female” has been more neglected.

\textbf{Neglect in Male Political Thought}

This neglect is apparent not only in society but also in the work of male political theorists who have placed women on the side of emotion and sensuality, rather than logic and reason. Chief among those she criticizes is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. She agrees with him that nature was better than “civilized life”—recall Rousseau’s idea that the state of nature was a time of great enjoyment, where human beings were compassionate, feeling people—and that civilization has established “unnatural distinctions,”\textsuperscript{86} but, she argues, Rousseau’s \textit{sensualist} depictions of women, in his work \textit{Emile}, echo widely shared sexist sentiments and are very much a part of the problem. “I war… with the sensibility that led him to degrade woman by making her the slave of love.”\textsuperscript{87} She read him closely:

Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her \textit{natural} cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a \textit{sweeter} companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries the arguments, which he pretends to draw from the indications of nature, still further, and insinuates that truth and fortitude, the cornerstones of all human virtue, should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because, with respect to the female character, obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour.

\textit{What nonsense!}\textsuperscript{88} ...

As for Rousseau’s remarks, which have since been echoed by several writers, that [women] have naturally, that is from their birth, independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking—they are so puerile as not to merit a serious refutation.\textsuperscript{89}

In addition, whereas for Rousseau reason engenders egocentrism, for Wollstonecraft it engenders virtue, goodness, and justice, because it is created by God

\begin{footnotes}
\item[85] Ibid., pp. 127–8.
\item[86] Ibid., p. 93.
\item[87] Ibid., p. 172.
\item[88] Ibid., p. 94.
\item[89] Ibid., p. 113.
\end{footnotes}
to make justice possible. This emphasis on the moral quality of reason recalls John Locke’s account of human nature, specifically the role reason plays in ensuring justice for rational individuals. Recall that, for Locke, reason, which is the law of nature, provides human beings with moral capacity—free individuals know that they ought not harm each other. This becomes the basis for the individualist liberal account of the role and function of government, the grand solution to the problem of ensuring individual freedom and societal stability.

But there is a difference between the political importance of Locke’s understanding of reason and Wollstonecraft’s—a feminist difference. For individualist liberals—“the crowd of authors”—“all is now right.” They think humanity has arrived at its goal culture. For Wollstonecraft, however, “all will be right.” The emancipation of women has yet to be achieved. God’s creatures have yet to fulfill their duties to the fullest extent. The conduct of both males and females in “civilized life” is odious; in every sphere, “the two sexes mutually corrupt.” They are not doomed to live like this. God has constituted them to be good. God is “the model of perfection,” “the only sound foundation for morality.” And nature is God’s presently corrupted, creation: “Nature, or, to speak with strict propriety, God, has made all things right; but man has sought him out many inventions to mar the work.”

The only solid foundation for morality appears to be the character of the supreme Being; the harmony of which arises from a balance of attributes;—and, to speak with reverence, one attribute seems to imply the necessity of another. He must be just, because he is wise, he must be good, because he is omnipotent.

If the submission demanded be founded on justice—there is no appealing to a higher power—for God is Justice itself. Let us then, as children of the same parent, if not bastardized by being the younger born, reason together, and learn to submit to the authority of reason—when her voice is distinctly heard.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Women* thus combines a Rousseauian understanding of a socially corrupted nature of “civilization” with a rights-based conception of God’s progressive creatorship—improving upon the individualist liberal version

---

90Ibid., p. 82.
91Ibid., p. 229.
92Ibid., p. 81–2.
93Ibid., p. 118.
94Ibid., p. 99.
95Ibid., p. 118.
96Ibid., p. 183.
of rights by calling for a morally virtuous, not only free, society. The institutions that now produce corrupted characters may be changed by the progressive use of reason.

**Emancipation, the Importance of Enlightened Coeducation**

Males and females can mutually “improve” by activating their capacity to reason for justice (God) and freeing women from the restraints they face by “allowing them to participate in the inherent rights of mankind. Make them free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual.…”

Inclusion means full political rights and equal access to society’s most important institutions, especially education, for it is the place where the virtues are either formed or malformed, and thus foundational for all other institutions. Current education perpetuates a corrupted being by cultivating selfishness among males and coquetry among females, whereas education ought to treat everyone as a moral being capable of living virtuously. It is “the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection.” It thus ends the blind obedience of man’s despotism, in both mind and body.

Let an enlightened nation then try what effect reason would have to bring them back to nature, and their duty; and allowing them to share the advantages of education and government with man, see whether they will become better, as they grow wiser and become free. They cannot be injured by the experiment; for it is not in the power of man to render them more insignificant than they are at present.

To render this practicable, day schools for particular ages should be established by government, in which boys and girls might be educated together. The school for the younger children, from five to nine years of age, ought to be absolutely free and open to all classes.

Her proposals for public coeducation—school uniforms, exercise, subjects for study, coeducational vocational tracking, further coeducational elite training—as well as their effects are worth quoting in detail, as they continue to have relevance in many contexts of feminist practice. Coeducational schools “where boys and girls, the rich and poor, should meet together” are schools for morality in the sense

---

97 Ibid., p. 229.
98 Ibid., p. 272.
99 Ibid., pp. 262–63; note also Footnote in the original: “Treating this part of the subject, I have borrowed some hints from a very sensible pamphlet written by the late bishop of Autun on public Education.” (263).
that, in treating boys and girls equally, they cultivate friendship and respect—still severely lacking in non-feminist milieus—improving all other social relations.

[T]o prevent any of the distinctions of vanity, they should be dressed alike, and all obliged to submit to the same discipline, or leave the school. The school-room ought to be surrounded by a large piece of ground, in which the children might be usefully exercised, for at this age they should not be confined to any sedentary employment for more than an hour at a time. But these relaxations might all be rendered a part of elementary education, for many things improve and amuse the senses, when introduced as a kind of show, to the principles of which, dryly laid down, children would turn a deaf ear. For instance, botany, mechanics, and astronomy. Reading, writing, arithmetic, natural history, and some simple experiments in natural philosophy, might fill up the day; but these pursuits should never encroach on gymnastic plays in the open air. The elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics, might also be taught by conversations, in the Socratic form.

After the age of nine, girls and boys, intended for domestic employments, or mechanical trades, ought to be removed to other schools, and receive instruction, in some measure appropriated to the destination of each individual, the two sexes being still together in the morning; but in the afternoon, the girls should attend a school, where plain work, mantua-making, millinery, etc. would be their employment.

The young people of superior abilities, or fortune, might now be taught, in another school, the dead and living languages, the elements of science, and continue the study of history and politics, on a more extensive scale, which would not exclude polite literature.

Girls and boys still together? I hear some readers ask: yes. And I should not fear any other consequence than that some early attachment might take place; which, whilst it had the best effect on the moral character of the young people, might not perfectly agree with the views of the parents, for it will be a long time, I fear, before the world is so far enlightened, that parents, only anxious to render their children virtuous, shall allow them choose companions for life themselves.

Besides, this would be a sure way to promote early marriages, and from early marriages the most salutary physical and moral effects naturally flow. What a different character does a married citizen assume from the selfish coxcomb, who lives, but for himself, and who is often afraid to marry lest he should not be able to live in a certain style. Great emergencies excepted, which would rarely occur in a society of which equality was the basis, a man can only be prepared to discharge the duties of public life, by the habitual practice of those inferior ones which form the man.

In this plan of education, the constitution of boys would not be ruined by the early debaucheries, which now make men so selfish, or girls rendered weak and vain, by indolence, and frivolous pursuits. But, I presuppose, that such a degree of equality should be established between the sexes as would shut out gallantry and coquetry, yet allow friendship and love to temper the heart for the discharge of higher duties.
These would be schools of morality—and the happiness of man, allowed to flow from the pure springs of duty and affection, what advances might not the human mind make? Society can only be happy and free in proportion as it is virtuous; but the present distinctions, established in society, corrode all private, and blast all public virtue.\(^{100}\)

This idea—that schools can be schools for morality in which the moral qualities of human beings are brought forth through education—is very consistent with the ideas of alternative liberalism and very much at odds with those of individualist liberalism. Though with a higher dosage of theopolitical commitment than that of Rousseau or Jefferson, she argues that human beings have a natural capacity for goodness that, once cultivated, can produce a society other than one of egocentrism, inequality, and—in conversation with Wollstonecraft we can add—enfeeblement of half the species. She seeks not only the realization of humanity’s moral sense, but “the discharge of their mutual duties” to God.\(^{101}\) “Be whole and sin no more, said Jesus.”\(^{102}\) Grant women their rights, open up social institutions for their full and equal participation, and women will be and be seen as more significant, the world more rational, and relations among males and females more respectful and affectionate.

In light of the politics of difference of second wave feminism, some of Wollstonecraft’s proposals quoted above clearly set a controversial precedent for feminism. Some of her proposals have clear class and gender biases. She anticipates a distinction between girls and boys “intended for domestic employments” and those of “superior qualities.” Some will be tracked to lives of laboring for others, others will join the elite ranks of society. Similarly, her conception of marriage and proper relations is fully heteronormative—making no mention of other gender and relational possibilities. Indeed, it is interesting to wonder what Mary Wollstonecraft might make of the contemporary same-sex marriage movement. Perhaps she would receive it favorably, given her emphasis is very much on developing in children what she calls private virtues of friendship and love so important to ensuring adult relations of equality and respect.

This view of the importance of “private virtues” underlies her confidence that social progress can be attained through educational reform. Human beings need not be egocentric and inconsiderate in their formation and relations with one another. Moral progress in social and political spheres thus follows the cultivation of “private virtues” in public education.

\(^{100}\)Ibid., p. 263–265.
\(^{101}\)Ibid., p. 260.
\(^{102}\)Ibid., p. 279–80.
Public education, of every denomination, should be directed to form citizens; but if you wish to make good citizens, you must first exercise the affections of a son and a brother. This is the only way to expand the heart; for public affections, as well as public virtues, must ever grow out of private character.\textsuperscript{103}

In short, if society wants a virtuous public, it needs virtuous people. “Public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue.”\textsuperscript{104} Inclusion in the world of the fully rational and the full development of women’s rational faculties is what will make women not only good citizens, but also “good” wives, mothers, daughters and sisters.

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens. We should then love them with true affection, because we should learn to respect ourselves; and the peace of mind of a worthy man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife, nor the babes sent to nestle in a strange bosom, having never found a home in their mother’s.… The conclusion I wish to draw, is obvious; make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives, and mothers; that is—if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.\textsuperscript{105}

**Wollstonecraft and Feminism**

This emphasis on private virtues, and women as better wives and mothers, clearly locates Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought as precedent for especially first wave feminism: men and women ought to fulfill their duties in society’s existing institutions as equal, rational creatures of a creator God. This means changing laws and social institutions to make a more just society. We have also seen aspects of her thought that set a controversial precedent from the perspective of second wave and global feminism: Wollstonecraft’s vision of women’s emancipation does not seriously account for inequalities or differences of class, gender, and culture. The experiences of women with those, possibly intersecting, differences do not come to expression within this vision. Indeed Wollstonecraft’s thought appears to be a classic example of Eurocentric, classist, and heterosexist emphases of first wave feminism. Two additional issues relevant to these considerations remain: How are we to understand her effort to encourage women to be more like men and adopt

\textsuperscript{103}Ibid., p. 256.

\textsuperscript{104}Ibid., p. 229.

\textsuperscript{105}Ibid., pp. 240-41, 275.
what are understood to be masculine qualities, and—something we have yet to touch upon—her likening women’s condition to that of slavery. These are areas of controversies in themselves, but a brief analysis of them also enables us to see Wollstonecraft’s central focus on male power. That is, that first and foremost, she is a theorist of the unequal and unjust effects of the deprivation of women’s rights by males in power.

In the era of third wave feminism, Wollstonecraft’s insistence that women’s emancipation requires their acquisition of what are considered conventionally “masculine” traits, such as rationality, independence, and strength, is controversial. For first wave feminists, these values were often at the center of feminist demands: women contested the narrow view of them as weak, emotional, and dependent persons. These were characteristics associated with their unequal subordination. Emancipation meant to be free, equal, independent, and fully respected as equally rational beings capable of doing everything males denied them and that only males were presumed to be able to do. Wollstonecraft’s position needs to be located in this conceptual context. Also important to consider is, as we have seen, Wollstonecraft’s view that rationality is a moral quality—not merely instrumental—and ought to function as a complement to other, emotive human capacities, like love and affection.

Nonetheless, her position is what contemporary philosophers of the third wave call logocentric: It privileges rationality, even ethically informed rationality, over other aspects of the human being—all the nonrational, emotional and bodily possibilities released into authenticity by the deconstruction aspect of third wave feminism. For Mary Wollstonecraft, as for most other mainstream philosophers of the time, reason is the authority, the corrective to all prejudice, and the source of all moral duty and knowledge—not, for example, compassion or pity as we saw in the thought of other alternative liberals. Full participation in the affairs of life requires being and being seen as fully rational beings. Insofar as she associates this with masculinity and maintaining primary roles as wives and mothers, it appears that, for Wollstonecraft, women’s freedom requires their taking on the identities of their oppressors in their current, socially relegated identities. From the perspective of the third wave, it is hard to avoid challenging these commitments. The third wave does not exclude first wave gender emphases—including reason as an important characteristic of human beings—but it makes gender more fluid along a continuum, welcoming other identities and identifications as well.

Wollstonecraft is not unaware of the way language implies and imposes certain gendered meanings, however. Indeed, differences among women show up in the very language she uses when writing about them. This is not the place for an exhaustive analysis of this kind, but we note her usage of “woman” as general
Feminism • 517

term for “my sex.” By contrast, she uses the word “women” when she is critical of “females” or her “own sex.” “Females” and “my own sex” are more neutral terms for her (as in, “mistaken notions that enslave my sex”).¹⁰⁶ When she writes about “women,” she generally means women who have been falsely “refined by civilization,” what she pejoratively calls “gentlewomen.”¹⁰⁷ These are the beings whose bodies are “sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty”¹¹⁰ and ought to cultivate strength and independence. For her, these “women” are distinct, for example, from “poor women who maintain their children by the sweat of their brow and keep their families together that the vices of their fathers would have scattered abroad”—a hint that her thinking about “women” has some class foundations—or from “a woman of a more cultivated understanding” who “give[s] a rational turn to the conversation” but “seldom get[s] husbands.” The title of her treatise is *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, not women. So Wollstonecraft is conscious of the meaning of words related to gender identification and appears to acknowledge differences, specifically class, among women.

More important than these differences, however, is the degree of rationality, strength, and independence that, in her judgment, women display. To make sense of these standards according to which Wollstonecraft judges other women, one might view her evaluations within the historic tradition or culture she inhabits, specifically the Abrahamic, enlightenment, and liberal traditions that inform her depiction of humanity and its goals. Wollstonecraft is consistent in measuring both male and female progress according to the standards inherent in each tradition — standards she takes to be natural and universal, not particular and varying in relation to different traditions.

In this regard, it is important to note that while she definitely borrows on masculine characteristics of this tradition to underscore her message of woman’s rights, it would be incorrect to say that she associates these masculine characteristics with the men of her day. Recall that she says few men or women display their rational faculties to the fullest. What is male is not what is rational; rationality is shared. Male is tyrannical despotic rule. Indeed, she most often thinks that both females and males fail to realize their God given potentials to live, be schooled, relate, govern and love together as equals. Hence, while her vision evinces the traditional liberal, enlightenment emphasis on reason—emphases that were used to justify men’s rights well before women’s—she is not, within the terms of her masculinist

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 107.
¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 154.
¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 77.
¹¹⁰Ibid., pp. 154–155.
That her emphases emerge from European traditions is clear above in her invocation of “the seraglio” and constant references to the worst of all possible human conditions in European history, slavery.

...as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing. The sensualist, indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming that they reigned over them.

The allusions to power and tyranny, reigning and duping, suggest that, in writing within a particular set of traditions, Wollstonecraft’s main concern when she evokes slavery is power, specifically male power, and how it is used to fundamentally deny women their humanity. Wollstonecraft thus writes of slavery “in a political and civil sense” as the denial of the rights of woman. In an important footnote at the end of the above passage mentioning slavery, Wollstonecraft distinguishes the enslaved condition of women from other meanings of slavery: She quotes from Knox’s Essays: “Supposing that women are voluntary slaves—slavery of any kind is unfavorable to human happiness and improvement.” That is, she reminds her reader of her objections to slavery in a political sense. She is writing to end the subordination of “females”/“woman”/“own sex.” All her work eventually comes back to this essential point, emphasizing the vindication of the rights of woman against the tyrannies of unjust male power over women, especially how the prejudices and sexist ideologies are embedded in every sphere of a woman’s life. Does she homogenize the experience of women? Yes, and feminism endeavors to correct that in its later waves.

But that should not lead us to overlook continuities in the revolutionary qualities of Wollstonecraft work in relation to feminism’s second and third waves. When

---

77. “[Their] strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves—the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act: they dress; they paint, and nickname God’s creatures [citation to Hamlet]—Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!—Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?” (Ibid.)

78. Ibid., p. 93.

79. Ibid., p. 262.

80. Ibid., p. 155.
she writes about women's condition, her intention is to depict that condition in terms of the unjust power relations that women experience that need to be transformed. They have been “kept in the dark” about their “real interests;” women must act to emancipate themselves through “revolution.” She is, that is, foremost a theorist of power, tyranny, slavery, oppression, justice and revolution to secure women’s “real interests”—all language that occurs within and also passes from first wave feminism into its second and third waves.

It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners…. I know that it will require a considerable length of time to eradicate the firmly rooted prejudices which sensualists have planted; it will also require some time to convince women that they [presently] act contrary to their real interest on an enlarged scale, when they cherish or affect weakness under the name of delicacy, and to convince the world that the poisoned source of female vices and follies, if it be necessary, in compliance with custom, to use synonymous terms in a lax sense, has been the sensual homage paid to beauty.114

Wollstonecraft's insights about the real interests of women thus stand as a precedent to the much more intense critical work not only of the second and third waves, but also of the twentieth century philosopher and critic of women's condition, Simone de Beauvoir. It is her work that more clearly aligns with second and third wave tendencies to which we now turn.

Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex

Beauvoir's lengthy, two-volume work opens up further what women's emancipation should mean beyond the acquisition of rights. Written in the 1940s in France—more than a decade before path-breaking second wave works like the American Betty Friedan's classic, The Feminine Mystique (1963)—it sets a precedent for the deeper questioning characteristic of both second and third waves. Beauvoir is also quite critical of women for being complicit with their male oppressors, but she offers a more thoroughgoing critique that proposes woman's transformation through what she describes as radical change. Her work exemplifies several aspects of the second wave, both as precedent and as controversy. In addition, it has been given further importance in the context of feminism's third wave: Judith Butler has

114Ibid., pp. 117–19.
pointed to Beauvoir’s assertion, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman”\textsuperscript{115} as a forerunner to understanding gender as a discursively constructed, not natural, concept. Beauvoir’s understanding of gender as—in her terms—“situationally” “made” is clearly important, and, as we shall show, is itself situated in a broader political, theoretical, and more specifically ideological, context. Her positing gender as constructed is part of her critique of the current status quo.

Indeed, she would much prefer that the identities of women were less situationally constructed than, again, in her terms, permanently free. Her concept of emancipation participates in the liberty-centric tendencies of several modern political ideologies. She does not, however, identify as a liberal. The source of her political inspiration is not liberalism but the philosophical school of existentialist ethics which emphasizes the liberty of human beings to exercise their humanity as they undertake projects in the world, as they live their everyday existence. Thus, while there may be no “essence” of “woman,” it is essential for human beings to live freely as agents, capable of facing, transforming, and transcending—not being constituted by—the circumstances they face, in equal, reciprocal, loving relations with others, including men. To be human is to be a free agent, not what she refers to as a passive, docile, and dominated “Other.”

Interestingly, Beauvoir does not identify as a feminist nor does she describe her analysis as a feminist analysis. She writes about feminism in the context of her examination of the meaning and condition of women as “Other”—its history and psychology, accompanying myths and customs, the lived experience of childhood, adolescence, marriage, sexuality, motherhood, rituals, comparisons with boys and men, and various forms of violence, inequality, and oppression that women experience. She engages anthropological studies about other cultures and offers extensive critiques of the portrayal of women (as, for example, “nature”) in European literature. In several places, she subjects the feminism of her time to several criticisms—which we will note in our discussion—appearing to distance herself from feminist politics. Nonetheless, in our reading, her view is that her existentialist, philosophical commitments concerning the meaning of women’s liberation have important contributions to make to thinking about women’s emancipation, insight that is unavailable in the political feminism she addresses. Specifically, she calls on women to refuse their subordination as “Other,” to assert themselves as existentially free subjects, and thus to transform relations between human beings. In her explication of her vision, we see the concept of the “free” “self” so dominant in Western feminism. Let us look carefully at this philosophical dimension of her analysis, as well as her related understanding of woman as “Other”—the key

\textsuperscript{115}Simone de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, 283.
term underlying Beauvoir’s analysis and prescription for how women should act to achieve emancipation.

Women’s Condition Now: “A Period of Transition”

Beauvoir considers her time as a “period of transition.”\textsuperscript{116} Noting “feminism’s breakthroughs,” she emphasizes that the acquisition of “abstract” rights in some places is very different from achieving “concrete equality” anywhere.\textsuperscript{117} “Abstract rights” in the form of access to politics, economic life, education, and social institutions “have never been sufficient to guarantee woman a concrete hold on the world.”\textsuperscript{118} Women may be involved in spheres from which they have been previously excluded, but their success within those spheres is “more difficult” because, Beauvoir avers, “another kind of accomplishment is demanded of her: she must also be a woman; she must not lose her femininity.”\textsuperscript{119} “This world,” she writes, “that has always belonged to men is still in their hands; patriarchal civilization’s institutions and values are still to a great extent alive… there is not yet real equality between the two sexes.”\textsuperscript{120}

In no country is her legal status identical to man’s, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage. Even when her rights are recognized abstractly, long-standing habit keeps them from being concretely manifested in customs. Economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in industry, in politics, and so forth, and they hold the most important positions. In addition to their concrete power, they are invested with a prestige whose tradition is reinforced by the child’s whole education: the present incorporates the past, and in the past all history was made by males. At the moment that women are beginning to share in the making of the world, this world still belongs to men: men have no doubt about this, and women barely doubt it.\textsuperscript{121}

There are differences in the specific conditions and dispositions of women, of course. Some women are “emancipated” and engaged in “overthrowing the myth of femininity,” “begging to affirm their independence concretely.”\textsuperscript{122} But

\textsuperscript{116}Ibid., pp. 152.
\textsuperscript{117}Ibid., pp. 152, 758.
\textsuperscript{118}Ibid., p. 152, 296.
\textsuperscript{119}Ibid., p. 296.
\textsuperscript{120}Ibid., p. 152.
\textsuperscript{121}Ibid., pp. 9–10.
\textsuperscript{122}Ibid., p. 279.
the “emancipated woman” faces most difficult challenges. She is “subjugated still by the burdens traditionally implied by her femininity,” and, in an effort to free herself, she acts like, and battles with, man in a struggle between “sexes.” (“The battle of the sexes” became a common idiom to capture this experience.). The “emancipated woman” does not experience concrete emancipation in free, equal, reciprocal relations. “Even the woman who has emancipated herself economically from man is still not in a moral, social, or psychological situation identical to his.”

Other women continue to aspire to the “feminine ideal”—akin to Mary Wollstonecraft’s women enfeebled by false refinement and soft phrases—“to ardently want to please men.” Their continued subordination testifies to the power of “men’s economic privilege, their social value, the prestige of marriage, [and] the usefulness of masculine support.” Those women “are on the whole still in a state of serfdom.” To be sure, girls are being educated but education itself is still not equal: “parents and teachers accept that the girl’s level is lower than the boys’… in spite of the fact that the curricula are identical, girls’ intellectual growth in secondary schools is given less importance.” In short, “the destiny of women still unclear, especially how to ‘accomplish freedom.’” This situation is “so damaging” to everyone: “the fact is that neither men nor women are satisfied with each other today.”

A Question of Freedom

Beauvoir states clearly that she is not interested in asking the question what makes women happy. She’s interested in what makes women free, and therefore, unfree. According to Beauvoir’s “existentialist morality,” human beings live an authentic, free life when they are “subjects” or agents of their own existence. When they understand themselves as having a capacity to carry out their “projects” in the

\[\text{Ibid., p. 736.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 723.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 156.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 738.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 16.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 764.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 753.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 16.}\]
world freely, to make an impact on the circumstances they face according to ends they determine for themselves, they are said to be “positing” or viewing themselves as a *transcendence*. Positing oneself as a transcendence is the authentic and free way to live. It is freedom, autonomy, and sovereignty in the circumstances an individual faces, not passivity, stagnancy, or subordination to those circumstances. When one lives as a transcendence, one transcends oneself and opens up new horizons of freedom and possibility in an ongoing life-long way. This is the essence of human freedom.

Every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects: it accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future.\(^\text{133}\)

The principles of existentialist morality insist on a person’s subjectivity, not passivity. When a human being lives *inauthentically* in passivity, it is understood as living as “immanence” or “stagnation.”

In such a condition, there is a degradation of existence into the “in-itself” [“en-soi”], of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil.\(^\text{134}\)

Beauvoir is clear: living as immanence would be wrong for the human being because it is contrary to fundamental, existential needs. “Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself.”\(^\text{135}\) Such is not the condition of women.

What singularly defines the situation of women is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence…\(^\text{136}\)

In defining the “situation of women” as “forced to assume herself as Other,” Beauvoir sees herself as offering a new answer to an age old question, “What is

\(^{133}\)Ibid. p. 16.
\(^{134}\)Ibid.
\(^{135}\)Ibid., p. 17.
\(^{136}\)Ibid.
woman?" She opens The Second Sex with this question, rejecting the notion that women have some kind of natural essence. Her famous statement, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” —which we noted above as well—may be understood in this context. Woman is, Beauvoir maintains, what she is in sociological, social, moral, psychological, and cultural contexts. This is consistent with both contemporary science and ordinary experience. “Science considers characteristics as secondary reactions to a situation”; and, besides, she says, women are very commonly “urged, ‘Be women, stay women, become women.’ So not every female human being is necessarily a woman.” If one is told to be something, one must not be that by nature. Her use of “female human being” here parallels our usage of “women” throughout this discussion. She sees “women” and, especially, “woman” as constructed gender categories for the less constructed category “female human being.” “Female human beings” are “made” to be “woman,” meaning, being a woman is essentially—to use her term—a situational identity. This point must be emphasized. In their situation, women ask who they “are,” but the “secret essence” they and men search for “does not exist”:

For many women, the roads to transcendence are blocked: because they do nothing, they do not make themselves be anything; they wonder indefinitely what they could have become, which leads them to wonder what they are; it is a useless questioning; if man fails to find that secret essence, it is simply because it does not exist.”

In saying that “what women are” is situational, Beauvoir also rejects the “abstract” idea that “women” are “human beings.” “Certainly, woman like man is a human being; but such an assertion is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always uniquely situated.” Her “more concrete” description is that women are made women, meaning that woman is essentially a situational identity; and the main, enduring situation is in relation to man, for whom she

137Ibid., p. 5.
138Insofar as “conceptualism has lost ground” (e.g., platonistic formalism)—“The biological and social sciences no longer believe there are immutably determined entities that define given characteristics like those of the woman, the Jew, the Negro” (4).
139Ibid., p. 283.
140Ibid., p. 4.
141Ibid., p. 3.
142Ibid., p. 271.
143Ibid., p. 4.
144Ibid., p. 14.
is Other—a “situation... [that] constitutes her as inessential.” Thus, she is not “sex,” function, biology, or even “situation” generally. She is “Other”—what in contemporary, discourse analytical parlance is described as discursively situated in relation to man in the man/woman binary. The inessential in relation to the essential. And what Beauvoir wants, ultimately, is for women to be Subject as well, subject of their own existence, not the Other of another’s. Her insistence that women refuse to be the Other and become transcendent subjects may be contrasted with Mary Wollstonecraft’s insistence that women become, simply, more like men. Let us look further, then, at the condition of women as Other.

The Other

Beauvoir takes otherness as a fundamental category in human thought. In introducing the term in *The Second Sex*, she cites the philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the concept of the Other was central. Importantly, Beauvoir gives Levinas’s concept a very particular meaning. Levinas writes of the Other in the context of ethics, specifically the ethical responsibility all human beings have to all Others. Recall the concept of Abrahamic hospitality we discussed in our chapter on theopolitics. This is Levinas’s meaning: all human beings have a responsibility to welcome the face of the Other—the uniqueness of every human being—and not seek to relate to, or transform Others into an extension of themselves. In addition, for Levinas, the idea of the Other is also related to freedom, but one that differs very much from Beauvoir’s. Writing within the Jewish tradition of ethics, Levinas thinks of freedom as obedience to God’s command to be lovingly responsible to the Other—a difficult freedom, he says, in which one fulfills one’s responsibility as a creature of God, not as an autonomous self, by assuming the responsibility especially for the burdens of the less fortunate and those different from the self who arrive serendipitously in one’s life, as in at the doorstep of one’s hospitality.

Beauvoir’s understanding of the Other is fundamentally different. For her, the Other is a category of subordinated denigration, of antagonism and hostility. Woman is “posited as the Other by the One positing himself as One.”

no group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself. It only takes three travellers brought together by chance in the same train compartment for the rest of the travellers to become vaguely hostile ‘others.’ Village

---

145Ibid., p. 17.
147Ibid., p. 7.
people view anyone not belonging to the village as suspicious ‘others.’ For the native of a country inhabitants of other countries are viewed as ‘foreigners;’ Jews are ‘others’ for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous people for colonists, proletarians for the propertied classes.\footnote{Ibid., p. 6.}

Here, the Other is the human being who has been dominated and oppressed by those claiming sovereignty over them. The autonomy of the Other has been denied. The relation between the One and the Other is an unethical relation that needs to be transformed by the Other refusing to be Other and gaining its subjectivity as an agent of its own existence.

The relation between One and Other for Beauvoir may be formulated in terms of a hierarchialized binary: One over Other, man over woman, masculine over feminine. “Man represents both the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French \textit{hommes} designates human beings, the particular meaning of the word \textit{vir} being assimilated into the general meaning of the word ‘homo.’ Woman is the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.} “Man, that is, is taken for sovereign, objective truth; woman is taken for thinking in certain ways because she is a woman, because she has ovaries.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.} In a fashion similar to Mary Wollstonecraft’s engagement with Rousseau’s work, Beauvoir shows this binary to underlie the ideas of towering figures in the history of political thought. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, in particular, defined women as lacking or incomplete in qualities men were said to uniquely possess in full. She shares Wollstonecraft’s conclusion: the history of political thought is part of the patriarchal apparatus: “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; \textit{she is not considered an autonomous being}” (emphasis added).\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.}

And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called “the sex,” so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject, he is that Absolute—she is the Other.\footnote{Ibid., p. 6.}

The citation to Levinas occurs right here, as Beauvoir is analyzing how women are thought and talked about in the discourse of her time. This sort of analysis—analyzing the content and implications of language about “woman” or “sex”—

\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.}
illustrates an engagement with the discursive power of language that has come to be pronounced in feminism’s third wave. But her main contribution is not an explication of the politics of language. It is a demand that women become agents in every aspect of their lives. Remember, it is still the 1940’s, in Europe. Abstract rights and institutional accesses may be happening (the first wave), but the struggle for concrete equality and freedom must be intensified. In this regard she may be seen as offering the philosophical bases of second wave with its emphasis on the radical transformation of society.

Comparison with Other Oppressed Groups

Indeed, published in 1949, *The Second Sex* was prescient in relation to the revolutionary sensibilities of the second wave that emerged over a decade later. Recall the solidarity that second wavers sought to achieve with other oppressed groups and revolutionary struggles. Beauvoir examined the relationship between these oppressions as well, hoping to identify the uniqueness of women’s oppression, and therefore the unique key to their emancipation. Comparisons she evokes between women’s oppression and that of “Jews” and “American blacks” also recall Wollstonecraft’s ideas on slavery. Beauvoir speaks of the “slavery of half of humanity,” for example.

What distinguishes women’s oppression from that of other groups and struggles, in her judgment, is their dispersion among, and complicity with, their oppressors.

At the start of the second volume of the work, she quotes Jean Paul Sartre—the existentialist philosopher and Beauvoir’s life-long companion—favorably, when he says: “Half victim, half accomplice, like everyone.”155 Women delight in their treatment as passive, pleasing, docile, and irresponsible objects. She does not condemn as much as analyze:

All of society—beginning with her respected parents—lies to her in extolling the high value of love, devotion, and the gift of self… she cheerfully accepts these lies… this is how the woman is raised, without ever being taught the necessity of assuming her own existence; she readily lets herself count on the protection, love, help, and guidance of others; she lets herself be fascinated by the hope of being able to realize her being without doing anything.157

153Ibid., p. 768.
155Ibid., p. 276.
156Ibid. p, 757.
157Ibid.
In addition, unlike “American blacks” or “the Jews,” women are neither a minority nor has their oppression occurred, as with those groups, with “an event”—like enslavement or genocide—prior to which “for the oppressed there was a before: they share a past, a tradition, sometimes a religion, or a culture.”158 (In these comments, she does not express an intersectional awareness characteristic of the politics of difference, an element of her thinking to which we will return.) Women have “no past, no history, no religion of their own.” “They have always been subordinated by men… their dependence is not the consequence of an event or a becoming, it did not happen.” Their subordination as Other is from time immemorial, she says, not like “proletarians” whose existence may be explained as a “historical development.” And “unlike the proletariat, they have no solidarity of labor or interests.”159 Dispersed among men, women have also not sought to unify as a group to change their condition.

If woman discovers herself as the inessential and never turns into the essential, it is because she does not bring about this transformation herself. Proletarians say “we,” so do blacks…. Women—except in certain abstract gatherings such as conferences—do not use “we;” men say “women,” and women adopt this word to refer to themselves; but they do not posit themselves authentically as Subjects. The proletarian made a revolution in Russia, and blacks in Haiti, the Indo-Chinese are fighting Indochina. Women’s actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received…. They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women. As bourgeois women, they are in solidarity with bourgeois men and not with women proletarians; as white women, they are in solidarity with white men and not black women.160

The “opposition” between man and woman “took shape within a primordial Mitsein”—an ancient, oppositional connectedness—“and she has not broken it.”161 In that relation, “woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally, even though her condition is changing.”162 And so, in addition to a diagnosis of the political and societal condition of women, Beauvoir offers a philosophical diagnoses of their condition: “Women have thus never constituted a separate group that posited itself for-itself before a male

---

158 Ibid., p. 8.
159 Ibid., p. 8.
160 Ibid.
161 Ibid., p. 9.
162 Ibid., p. 9.
group; they have never had a direct or autonomous relationship with men. The fact that some women are “emancipated” does not mean that women have been liberated from their situation as subordinated Other to men. Stated in philosophical terms, the “period of transition” is one in which woman is “hesitating between the role of object, of Other that is proposed to her and her claim for freedom.”

Refusal, Men, and Feminists

What ought to be done?

Women must decline, refuse, Otherness: They “must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths to the future; resignation is only surrender and an evasion; for woman there is no other way out than to work for her liberation.” Beauvoir observes that “refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them.” Woman is “often very well pleased with her role as the Other.” “Refusal to pose as Subject, unique and absolute, requires great self-denial.” It is tempting “to flee freedom and to make himself [oneself] a thing… passive, alienated, lost.” But, in such a condition, one is “prey to a foreign will, cut off from his transcendence, robbed of all worth.” For emancipation, the woman today must do for herself, transcend circumstances purposefully, act in and upon the world, not simply live and let the world happen to her as a static, passive being. The “metaphysical risk of freedom” is far more valuable than the advantages given up, though there are obstacles in the way, erected by both men and “feminists.”

Men understand the threat of women. The man “is pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being; he refuses to consider his companion concretely as an equal.” “He has never questioned his rights in the world.” For him, “the myth of the Woman, of the Other, remains precious.” When it comes to emancipation, therefore, “many men,” are not to be trusted.

---

163 Ibid., p. 61, 80.
164 Ibid., p. 61, 755.
165 Ibid., p. 664.
166 Ibid., p. 10.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid., p. 754.
When he has an attitude of benevolence and partnership toward a woman, he applies the principle of abstract equality; and he does not posit the concrete inequality he recognizes. But as soon as he clashes with her, the situation is reversed. He will apply the concrete inequality theme and will even allow himself to disavow abstract equality. This is how many men affirm, with quasi good faith, that women are equal to men and have no demands to make, and at the same time that women will never be equal to men and that their demands are in vain. It is difficult for men to measure the enormous extent of social discrimination that seems insignificant from the outside and whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in woman that they appear to spring from an original nature. The man most sympathetic to women never knows her concrete situation fully. So there is no good reason to believe men when they try to defend privileges whose scope they cannot even fathom. We will not let ourselves be intimidated by the number and violence of attacks against women; nor be fooled by the self-serving praise showered on the “real woman”; nor be won over by men's enthusiasm for her destiny, a destiny they would not for the world want to share.

Beauvoir’s assertions resonate with contemporary feminism, but it is important to point out that she considered the arguments of the feminists with no less suspicion. “We must not, however, be any less distrustful of feminists’ arguments: very often their attempt to polemicize robs them of all value.” She finds their politics too shaped by the battle with men. Such politics leads to a quarreling of opposite arguments, which is not very fruitful, she maintains, for emancipation.

If the “question of women” is so trivial, it is because masculine arrogance turned it into a “quarrel”; when people quarrel, they no longer reason well. What people have endlessly thought to prove is that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man: created after Adam, she is obviously a secondary being, some say; on the contrary, say others, Adam was only a rough draft, and God perfected the human being when he created Eve; her brain is smaller, but relatively bigger; Christ was made man, but perhaps out of humility. Every argument has its opposite, and both are often misleading. To see clearly, one needs to get out of these ruts; these vague notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality that have distorted all discussions must be discarded to start anew.

Starting anew requires a fuller transformation, both of the relations between human beings and their central concerns. They should wish not to be locked in a contest with each other. Something else should happen. What might starting anew look like? What would happen if human beings learned to “recognize each other

173 Ibid., p. 15.
174 Ibid., p. 15.
as subject?” What would “a society where sexual equality is concretely realized” look like?

Affirming Fraternité, Beauvoir and Feminist Ideology

Beauvoir concludes her magnum opus with a vision of relations between human beings after patriarchy that is reminiscent, in very important ways, of Karl Marx’s account of a society after capitalism. She even quotes Marx in the very last pages of the work. Like Marx’s vision of a communist society, her vision is mixed with a confidence that starting anew would transform humanity for the better and an intellectual honesty that such a world is very difficult to fathom under current conditions of oppression. Recall that, for Marx, the relations characteristic of communism were very difficult to imagine in a world whose ideas and outlooks were shaped by capitalism. He could only offer some suggestions, powerful suggestions and creative metaphors, about those relations. In a very similar manner, Beauvoir suggests that achievement of freedom for women will create a world that, to a large extent, is both unrecognizable and unknowable under current conditions of oppression. Newness will come into being in ways that can only be generally sketched because humanity’s experience is currently too tainted by the condition of woman as Other. In a manner also similar to Marx’s relation to Marxism, Beauvoir’s account of women’s refusal to be Other may be said either to underlie or motivate all sorts of action against the patriarchal status quo, whether or not it is undertaken in her name or even with knowledge of her writings. In this way, The Second Sex—or, more specifically, its opening and concluding sections, which contain the bulk of her theoretical diagnosis—is akin to a Manifesto for women’s liberation (for her, distinct from, but obviously related to, feminism). Let us quote selectively, though in some detail, from the concluding pages of the work to illustrate this.

If, from the earliest age, the little girl were raised with the same demands and honors, the same severity and freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies and games, promised the same future, surrounded by women and men who are unambiguously equal to her, the meanings of ‘the castration complex’ and the ‘Oedipus complex’ would be profoundly modified. The mother would enjoy the same lasting prestige as the father if she assumed equal material and moral responsibility for the couple; the child would feel an androgynous world around her and not a masculine world.175

175Ibid., p. 766.
176Ibid., p. 761.
The use of the ambiguous concept androgynous is interesting. Beauvoir is not saying girls should play the games of boys—this is not a reversal of the current condition. She is asking for something more ambiguous. It is not clear if an androgynous world would be sexed in partly male and partly female ways, or in ways that are indefinite in relation to both. In any event, androgyny changes the terms of discussion away from masculinity or femininity—as well as from the gynocentrism characteristic of important feminist tendencies. As a category of alternative political vision, it opens up more gender possibilities. It is not a fully explicit opening as is found in third wave feminism’s *continuum*, but it is neither an affirmation of masculinity nor a reversal affirmation of gynocentrism. Beauvoir’s discussion continues:

…were [the little girl] more affectively attracted to her father—which is not even certain—her love for him would be nuanced by a will to emulate him and not a feeling of weakness: she would not turn to passivity; if she were allowed to prove her worth in work and sports, actively rivaling boys, the absence of a penis—compensated for by the promise of a child—would not suffice to cause an “inferiority complex”; correlativey, the boy would not have a natural “superiority complex” if it were not instilled in him and if he held women in the same esteem as men. The little girl would not seek sterile compensations in narcissism and dreams, she would not take herself as given, she would be interested in what she does, she would throw herself into her pursuits… How much easier puberty would be if she surpassed it, like the boy, toward a free adult future; menstruation horrifies her only because it signifies a brutal descent into femininity; she would also assume her youthful eroticism more peacefully if she did not feel a frightening disgust for the rest of her destiny; a coherent sexual education would greatly help her to surmount this crisis…. the conditions in which women’s sexual education and initiation take place today are so deplorable that none of the objections to the idea of radical change are valid.\footnote{bid., p. 762.}

Seeking to create the nourishing and educational conditions “toward a free adult future,” this is a conceptually and practically imaginative, action inspiring and orienting text for “radical change.”

The call for “coherent sexual education” recalls the work, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and the broader emphasis on bodily health in second wave feminism. Beauvoir continues with a discussion of coeducation and sexual relations, praising “sexually balanced couples for whom notions of victory and defeat yield to an idea of exchange.” Were sexual relations between man and woman equal, “they would recognize each other as peers and living the erotic drama in harmony.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 763.}
In these comments, Beauvoir makes an interesting statement related to the politics of difference that, in the context of situating her work in relation to contemporary feminism, requires attention. She suggests that differences among human beings are less important than their commonalities: “The fact of being a human being,” she writes, “is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings.”

The context of her statement is her rejection of the idea that women’s emancipation will flatten relations between men and women. Contrary to these pessimistic assumptions, Beauvoir argues that what is unknown in the present about the future might be the best liberation has to offer. Women and men will exist as peers, as subjects in reciprocal relations. Radical change is not to be feared but welcomed for the possibilities—unknown and unrecognizable under current conditions—that it opens up for all. Yet Beauvoir’s comment appears as well to ignore important differences among women.

It is not that The Second Sex is inattentive to “difference.” As her comparisons between the various forms of oppression suggest, she does not think in simple, generalizing terms. Moreover, concerning the question of sexuality, she thinks carefully about the experience of lesbian women. Nonetheless, she is less attentive to intersectional oppressions—such as that of black, Jewish, working women—than feminists working with a consciousness of difference. As a result, when she discusses the condition of “women,” she appears to homogenize the experiences of all women. In this regard, insofar as her discussion overlooks the particularities of differently situating and identified women who face multiple, simultaneous forms of oppression, The Second Sex sets a precedent-in-controversy for forms of feminism that fail to account for a politics of difference. The work might be seen as an early instance of “white and middle class feminism”—though this is very complicated because Beauvoir does not identify as a feminist, not to mention she was writing in the wake of the death and destruction of the Second World War, a race war, where other prominent oppressions clearly drew her attention. While she is not inattentive to homosexuality, it must be said that there is, nevertheless, a heteronormative emphasis in her characterization of emancipated sexual relations. Her references and examples in The Second Sex are most frequently to sexual relations between males and females. Thus, when she writes, “The fact of being a human being is infinitely more important than all the singularities that distinguish human beings,” her emphasis seems to be on differences between males and females, not among females.

179Ibid.
Within these contexts and her layered, complicated, and controversial assertions, Beauvoir is asserting that human beings have the capacity to live together as equals in a variety of diverse relations of companionship that are not threatened by women's freedom. A future of equality of freedoms may entail some loss, but it will be much better.

There are certain ways of living the sexual adventure that will be lost in the world of tomorrow: but this does not mean that love, happiness, poetry, and dreams will be banished from it. Let us beware lest our lack of imagination impoverish the future; the future is only an abstraction for us; each of us secretly laments the absence in it of what was; but tomorrow's humankind will live the future in its flesh and its freedom; that future will be its present, and humankind will in turn prefer it; new carnal and affective relations of which we cannot conceive will be born between the sexes: friendships, rivalries, complicities, chaste or sexual companionships that past centuries would not have dreamed are already appearing. For example, nothing seems more questionable to me than a catchphrase that dooms the new world to uniformity and then to boredom. I do not see an absence of boredom in this world of ours nor that freedom has ever created uniformity. First of all, certain differences between man and woman will always exist; her eroticism, and thus her sexual world, possessing a singular form, cannot fail to engender in her a sensuality, a singular sensitivity: her relation to her body, to the male body, and to the child will never be the same as those man has with his body, with the female body, and with the child; those who talk so much about ‘equality in difference’ would be hard put not to grant me that there are differences in equality. Besides, it is institutions that create monotony: young and pretty, slaves of the harem are all the same in the sultan’s arms; Christianity gave eroticism its flavor of sin and legend by endowing the human female with a soul; restoring women's singular sovereignty will not remove the emotional value from amorous embraces. It is absurd to contend that orgies, vice, ecstasy, and passion would become impossible if man and woman were concretely peers; the contradictions opposing flesh to spirit, instant to time, the vertigo of immanence to the appeal of the transcendence, The absolute of pleasure to the nothingness of oblivion will never disappear; tension, suffering, joy, and the failure and triumph of existence will always be materialized in sexuality.¹⁸⁰

Thus refusing to be Other and gaining transcendence does not mean that relationships between men and women will end. The masculine/feminine relationship will be undone, transformed into a new form of emancipated relations in which each subject is in relation with others who are subjects. In a remarkable set of assertions, she says that “the miracle” that divided human beings into “two separate categories” will not be transcended; man and woman will continue to

¹⁸⁰Ibid., p. 765–6.
exist and, when emancipated from patriarchy, will continue to exist for each other, again—note the lowercase o—being others with and for each other (a new **mitsein**), not one sovereign and the other Other. “The human couple will discover its true form”:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to enclose her in the relations she sustains with man, but not to deny them; while she posits herself for herself, she will nonetheless continue to exist for him as well: recognizing each other as subject, each will remain an **other** for the other; reciprocity in their relations will not do away with the miracles that the division of human beings into two separate categories engenders: desire, possession, love, dreams, adventure; and the words that move us: “to give,” “to conquer,” and “to unite” will keep their meaning; on the contrary, it is when the slavery of half of humanity is abolished and with it the hypocritical system it implies that the “division” of humanity will reveal its authentic meaning and the human couple will discover its true form.¹⁸¹

Like her comments concerning difference, Beauvoir’s assertion of a “true form” of the “human couple” raise important questions, especially in relation to her critique of a natural essence of “woman.” Recall that “woman” has a situational identity. Gender, as a result, is a construction—an outcome of social, not natural forces. Beauvoir is stating explicitly that there is, nonetheless, a true nature to humanity—a transcending ideal to which their social relations ought to conform. In fact, this presupposition underlies her entire analysis. We have seen it in her existentialist commitment: the authentic human being lives as transcendence. Now we see that there is an “authentic meaning” for male and female relations as well. The pendulum between human relations as socially constructed and human relations as having a true standard with which they must align swings throughout Beauvoir’s analysis.

Interesting in itself, the fact that she posits a true ideal for human relations also makes her theoretical work distinctly ideological. In positing a true way of living for both the individual (as transcendence) and the human male-female couple, she sets up standards toward which human beings ought to strive. The natural standards of individual freedom and authentic coupling establish a true order—and thus what we have called a goal culture of human relations—that human beings ought to act to fulfill. It is, though, interesting—and perhaps not coincidental—that at this point in her concluding pages, Beauvoir turns, as we mentioned above, to Karl Marx. She quotes Marx’s vision of unalienated human relations from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1848*. Marx had considered “the relation of man to woman” as in the most direct natural and true relation of person to person. He

¹⁸¹Ibid., p. 766.
had written, “The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the relation of man to woman.” After quoting this line, Beauvoir elaborates the Marxian concept of a species-being, in which “man’s natural behavior has become human, or the extent to which the human essence in him has become a natural essence—the extent to which his human nature has come to be natural to him.”

This is a full endorsement of the existence of a true human essence on Beauvoir’s part. For her, while women do not have a natural essence, human beings—what she sometimes refers to in the masculine pronoun as “man”—do, and that is to live together as equals. Humans have a nature and their emancipation consists in manifesting that in their lives. After quoting and elaborating Marx’s vision, she concludes her work with the following statement:

This could not be better said. Within the given world, it is up to man to make the reign of freedom triumph; to carry off this supreme victory, men and women must, among other things and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood (fraternité).

From within contemporary concerns about the gendered quality of language, one may be stumped by these male-gendered terms. Beauvoir is, like Mary Wollstonecraft, urging the species to produce equality on emancipatory terms that have been reserved until now only for men. Hence her appeal to “man” and “brotherhood”—the third prong of the French Revolutionary motto, liberty, equality, and fraternity. She, of course, does not mean “men” and “patriarchy.” Throughout The Second Sex, she uses the “female” pronoun “her.” In her final words, however, she aligns herself with a tradition of radical thought in which males have been, for the most part, the primary voices. One supposes that this was the case ever since feminism demanded “rights”—a term most prominently theorized and circulated by male theorists.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

By way of conclusion, let us reflect upon this relationship between feminist theorizing and visions of emancipation that are so clearly associated with male perspectives in the history of (especially Western) political thought.

It is important to point out that, just as Marx said he was not a Marxist, Simone de Beauvoir was no feminist. Marx was critical of the practices of workers in his


183 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. 766.
time; Beauvoir, of “woman”: she suggested that women needed to lose many of the qualities they cherish as part of their identity. It is a separate issue, but perhaps it is a characteristic of founding ideologists, that the content of their vision is deeply at odds with those whose beliefs they seek most to change. How could it be otherwise? They seek to inspire action toward alternative worlds by pointing out fundamental flaws in the status quo. Indeed, while *The Second Sex* is not feminist, it is essentially a work of existentialist critical theory for feminism as an ideology and the various goals that have informed the pursuit of women’s emancipation from patriarchy since its inception. Beauvoir is certainly in conversation with feminism, offering classical critical insights: facts and truths to correct both “masculine ideologies” and “feminine myths” so as to provide the philosophical basis for concrete, radical change—change in “laws, institutions, customs, public opinion, and the whole social context.” Beauvoir’s work is a second wave deepening of what living freely means: the pursuit of “abstract rights” is inadequate to the task of women’s complete emancipation, the change must be a thoroughgoing departure from a patriarchal way of life, in every sphere, starting at the most intimate levels of human experience and then reaching outward, as a free being able to achieve existential transcendence. While Beauvoir’s message was not sisterhood, she was a theorist of freedom, freedom that both men and women ought to achieve together.

Still, that this vision so clearly participates in the largely European male tradition of conceptualizing emancipation continues to raise questions. Does an expansion of the franchise of emancipation—making sure that women and females have the freedoms that males have had—indicate real emancipation, or is it the fulfillment of a particular, largely male-inspired form of emancipation? Are women who are liberated from patriarchy in ways consistent with such forms genuinely free, or have they fulfilled goals primarily conceptualized by males? This is not to undervalue the transformative goals that occur in the processes of emancipation: rights are so much better than no rights, equality with men so much better than inequality, the more egalitarian reconstitution of social spheres is certainly far, far, far, better than oppression.

But theorizing what further feminist emancipation would or should look like does not appear to be at an end. After the third wave, one cannot but ask: are there not other conceptual bases for theorizing human possibility, even other possible modes of “authenticity”? Similarly, Beauvoir’s comments about harems (one of which we quoted above) recall Wollstonecraft’s Orientalism and suggest a com-

---

184 Ibid., p. 149.
185 Ibid., p. 762.
186 Ibid., p. 760.
mon non-global, Western discursive tendency that has been subject to critique by contemporary global feminists. After global feminism and fourth wave interconnectedness, one cannot but ask: are there not other possible subjectivities, other authentic ways of living for persons in the world other than transcendence? What human *emancipatory* possibilities might be occluded by the seemingly universal transcendence/immanence (or freedom/stagnation) binary? Those options may be less universal than particular to a specific tradition—the European liberty-centric tradition, which no doubt has universal appeal but may, nonetheless, occlude other possible ways of living, and even living freely, in the world. To the extent that Western feminism, the roots of which may be found in works by Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir, participates in the tradition of theorizing by males, contemporary feminism—in all its richness and diversity—asks if there are alternative outlooks, more compelling in their capacity to depart from the norms that underlie patriarchy and male and masculine power relations.

Answers may be found in the third wave, ecofeminism, and various feminisms that have sprung up around the world in last hundred years or so, each tracing its own foundations to roots other than, or in addition to, those in the West. These openings require feminism to be a constantly evolving arena of ideological thought and practice. They offer a positive answer to the theorist Saba Mahmood’s call for feminism to be “open to the possibility that our political and analytical certainties might be transformed in the process of exploring nonliberal movements”—movements that do not constitute their “modes of being, responsibility and efficacy” in terms of the particular European freedom-seeking emancipatory traditions, even as those terms remain significant for the majority of feminist practice.

Feminism, as the arena for thinking deeply about all women’s lives, cannot but respond to this challenge. In this context, we note Zillah Eisenstein’s recognition of both “feminism’s” history of erasing the experience of non-White and non-European women and the necessity of it as an arena in which these violations are addressed and overcome: “The term ‘feminism’—its racist and colonialist past—inhibits an embrace of all women’s lives. And yet it calls attention to women like no other term in any other language.”

That there is no single feminist answer to any of the significant questions facing feminism only underscores the importance of the political and theoretical work within its realm today.

In this chapter we have travelled from feminism’s present era to some of its past roots in late eighteenth- and mid-nineteenth century Europe to describe and high-

---


189 Eisenstein, *Against Empire*, p. 189.
light the important tendencies of feminist political ideology. As we conclude we are led to reflect from that past to the present and on the cumulative and expansive character of modern feminist thought. The initial concern to attend politically to excluded women and the oppressive nature of that exclusion has, over time, stimulated more and more inclusive thinking in relation to broadening understandings of women and gender. Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir located these concerns within the central concepts of modern European political ideology, setting a context for explicit attention to women’s lives and the various oppressions they face globally. Their towering voices, however problematic from alternative contemporary perspectives, opened up conversational space for other voices, no less towering than theirs, to be heard as well. When Sojourner Truth asked, “Ain’t I A Woman,” it was both communication within the tradition and important departure from its narrowing racial and class prejudices. So, too, with the other pivotal figures and their more inclusive visions we have discussed in this chapter.

All of these voices participate in making feminist ideology an unmistakably active, dynamic, and diverse arena of political thought and practice, constantly attending to real, felt injustices that occur in contexts of gender difference. All of them seem guided, in the most robust sense, to encourage feminists to act—intellectually and politically in multiple ways—to emancipate women from the harmful and often brutal relations of male domination and sexist practice and to live, write, and be other-wise, in ways women have always envisioned as better for all humanity. “The imperative,” succinctly expressed by Michele Wallace, “is clear: either we will make history or remain victims of it.”

CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

1. How do the evolving waves and tendencies within feminism come to produce a more inclusive feminist vision?

2. If you wanted to make your university or college a feminist institution, what would need to be done?

3. How do the analytical concepts of any of the feminisms discussed here offer insights and possible resolutions to the violences and colonial encounters discussed in prior chapters?

4. What should be the role and function of the state from the varying feminist perspectives?

---

SUGGESTED READINGS


Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, We Should All Be Feminists. New York: Anchor, 2015.


