

# FEMINIST THEORIES

(LICENCE 3)

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## **Objectives of the course:**

**General objectives:** This course aims to teach students of L3 the concept of feminism in a world where we more and more speak of gender equality. It articulates women's struggle to resist patriarchal ideologies that confine them in a peripheral status in society. Finally, it presents feminism as women's desire to have the same rights as men rather than be their subalterns.

**Specific objectives:** At the end of this course, students must be able to know the major feminist branches, namely, Liberal egalitarian feminism, Marxist feminism, Radical feminism or feminism of the break, and Black feminism. More specifically, they must be able to apply them to their fields of research.

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## Introduction

Officially born in the 19th century in a climate of male domination, feminism undergoes the influence of different schools of thought. Each of these schools seeks to understand how and why women occupy a subordinate position in society. Feminism in early 1970s did not behave as a revolutionary movement. But gradually, other feminists claimed other labels. Thus, African-American and/or lesbian women in the USA quickly opposed the type of feminism advocated by neo-feminist pioneers who claimed their specificity, originality, independence of thought and action. The need to classify these various trends therefore became progressively necessary just for personal landmark.

Since 1975, several types of feminism were created, mostly by American university women, each with its own logic of classification. Our concern here is to understand how these different trends attempt to explain the causes of women's subordination and which strategies they propose to eliminate these causes.

Initially, there were three major trends. But first, it would be interesting to go back to the early writings of neo-feminism that addressed this issue in order to see how the then emerging feminist movements were created. In fact, Shulamith Firestone wrote in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972) that there were three feminist trends in the United States in 1970: the **conservative feminists**, that is to say the liberal reformers of the NOW (National Organization of Women) founded by Betty Friedan in 1966, the **politicos** (women of the left wing called movement in the USA) and the **radicals**.

Basically, the political trends of feminism in the first decade of the movement focused on these three major schools of thought: the egalitarian liberal trend, the Marxist and socialist trend and the radical trend. These three major schools still exist today and are benchmarks from which the evolution of feminist thought can be understood for it is in the wake of the shortcomings of this classification and criticisms of which it has been the object that adjustments of existing theories have been possible.

First, let us see how these three major trends characterize and differentiate both at the level of the analysis of women's oppression and the strategies proposed for a change. This will lead us to see some criticisms about this classification and the adjustments made mostly since 1975. But before that, let us try to understand what feminism is.

## What is feminism?

There is not a "general theory" of feminism but theoretical trends that seek to understand how and why women occupy a subordinate place in society. When we speak of "feminist thought" we generally refer to a block of heterogeneous trends that attempt to explain why women are so subordinated.

For some women, there is no subordination of one sex to another, but a natural complementarity. This position raises the question of the definition of feminism because one cannot talk about feminism if there is not first a revolt against one's social position of a subordinate being. Similarly, one cannot speak of feminism if there is not the recognition of a social cause of this subordination. Revolt against one's situation therefore appears as an essential condition of feminism. Feminism can therefore be defined as **"an awareness first of individual, then of a collective revolt against the arrangement of gender relations and women's subordinate position in a given society at a time in its history."** It is also a struggle to change these relationships and this situation. In other words, feminism wants a movement that advocates the extension of women's rights in society. It protests against the imprisonment of the female being in the private family sphere, only performing domestic tasks. The explanation of women's

subordinate position and the strategies to change that position raise debate on the three major traditions of feminist thought and their development as well as attempts of their classification.

## **1 - Egalitarian liberal feminism**

Called reformist feminism or feminism of equal rights, it derives from the spirit of French Revolution (1789) with liberalism as its philosophy and capitalism as an economic incarnation. Individual freedom and equality are two main areas of struggle. Liberal feminist reformers advocate equal rights with men: equal access to education, equality in employment and occupation in terms of wages, equality before the law: civil (full and total legal capacity), criminal (recall of all discriminatory measures) and political equality (voting rights). Complete equality would allow women to participate in society in the same way as men.

The egalitarian liberal feminist trend is not the only trend to claim these rights. On the contrary, it differs from other trends in identifying the causes of women's subordination in society and the strategies for change.

### **1.1. The causes of women's subordination**

In its philosophy and its liberal ideology, liberal feminism thinks capitalist society must be seen as a dynamic rather than a static entity, that is to say a society that can undertake reforms, improve itself. But for liberal feminists, these reforms are ill-fitting. This is justified by the social, political and economic discrimination against women. The cause of this situation is found the differentiated socialization based on prejudice, stereotypes, attitudes and retrograde values. The places where this discrimination is manifested are education, workplace, professions, churches, political parties, governments, the judiciary, trade unions, and the family, say almost everywhere.

### **1.2. Strategies for change**

The means of struggle to eradicate women's oppression are numerous. The most effective according to Canadian Louise Toupin, lies primarily in the non-sexual education. The aim is to socialize women differently by changing mentalities because it is where society's change lies. The other way is in the pressures to change discriminatory laws. These pressures may take the form of memoir to government, public awareness through seminars, creation of coalitions to support demands, lobbies, etc. The aim is to undertake action group to break the barriers of oppression that keep women on the periphery of society. At this level, the "Affirmative Action"<sup>1</sup> in the USA proves a good example for liberal feminists in their struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> This term was officially used for the first time in 1961 by President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in an ordinance claiming non-discrimination in all federal contracts. Affirmative action is generally seen as an active form of non-discrimination, including identification in all job conditions, of the under-representation of women, racial/ethnic minorities and other qualified members of protected groups, then the undertaking of specific actions permitting employers to use the members of protected groups according to their availability. These actions can include additional recruitment and more advertisement for the members of protected groups as well as development, implementation and monitoring of job policies meant to encourage increased representation of protected groups. But Affirmative Action does not determine illegal quotas unless required by law when there is discrimination. In addition, it does not seek to have women, members of racial/ethnic minorities and other members of protected groups hired. The most qualified person for a job must be hired, promoted regardless of race, sex, nationality or other characteristic not related to the job. However, the employer must recruit qualified people among women and members of protected groups.

Another objective of the struggle of liberal feminists is sexual harassment. Defined as a sexual proposal between job colleagues or partners that puts the victim in an uncomfortable situation and generates a feeling of fear, this act is a source of women's oppression which leads to the loss of their dignity and limits their opportunities. It therefore sparked waves of protest in recent years in several countries.

The use of the theory of liberal feminism in real life is problematic. Liberal feminists believe that men and women are autonomous subjects with inalienable rights regardless of gender and race. Now autonomy requires objectivity. But liberal feminists are highly critical about women's desires when they do not fit their ideal. They think that a woman must be free to pursue a goal as long as it does not violate her other rights as a woman.

Finally, egalitarian liberal feminism is the moderate trend of feminism. But over time, it was influenced by other schools of thought. Thus the concept of systemic discrimination (which gave rise to claims of programs for the access of equality and equity pay) stems, at the level the analysis, from two other trends: Marxist and radical for whom women's oppression results from a system and not from retrograde mentalities or individual values.

## **2 - Marxist feminism**

This trend was born in a climate of social unrest highly influenced by the ideals of the left wing from the Marxist tradition. It produced the second breath of the feminist movement in the early 1970s in Western countries. Most Marxist feminists lean on it to position themselves within the Marxist tradition or to differentiate themselves from it or else, to contest its foundations.

### **2.1. The causes of women's oppression**

For orthodox Marxist feminists, the main causes of women's oppression are found in the economic organization, that is to say, capitalism with its exploitation of Man. Women's oppression is historically dated. It was born with the appearance of private property. It was, as Engels argues, "the great historical defeat of the female sex which coincides with the rise of a society divided into classes and the advent of capitalism." For these Marxists, the need to transmit one's properties by inheritance, which means that one must be sure of one's descendants, instituted monogamous marriage and put women under the control of their husbands in the family, except for social production in the sense that all the means and relations of production are under male domination.

Women's oppression is due to capitalism. It was born with the advent of private property and will disappear with its overthrow as Karl Marx proposed it to the proletariat. The main enemy is not unjust laws or prejudice against women as with liberal feminists but the economic system and the gender division of paid work it introduced. Men were given the social production and paid labor while women were confined in domestic work and those related to childbearing.

For Marxist feminists, the places of women's oppression are in the world of employment and in the economy. Women's oppression remains linked to the capitalist economy, which established production relationships in society, transforming the once predominant roles of women in secondary roles and of dependence.

### **2.2. Strategies for change**

For Marxist feminists, the end of women's oppression coincides with the abolition of the capitalist

society and its replacement by collective ownership. The family will now be replaced by a collective care of children and domestic work. Equality can only recover when both sexes have equal legal rights. Since women's oppression stems from their confinement in the private family sphere, outside social production, the strategies for change relate to their reintegration into the social production in the paid labor market and their participation in class struggle to abolish capitalism. Marxist feminists condemn autonomous struggle they think is a source of dispersion in their fight against patriarchy. They are, like their liberal counterparts, favorable to reforms needed to improve women's situation. Their ultimate goal is to reveal the contradictions of the capitalist system and the depth of women's subordination. However, Marxist feminism had ramifications.

### 3 - The metamorphoses of the Marxist trend

Controversies within the Marxist trend of feminism gave rise to internal trends, namely, the socialist trend, the popular trend, and the trend of the "wage against housework."

- **The socialist trend:** unlike orthodox Marxists who see classes and capitalist economic system as the sole responsible for women's oppression, this trend sees patriarchy and capitalism as the responsible for this oppression. It seeks to understand how patriarchy and capitalism mutually articulate in explaining women's suffering. It then speaks of two systems. With the development of the lesbian perspectives, of Third World Feminism and even the transience of Marxist ideology in most Western countries with the collapse of Eastern Bloc and the Berlin Wall, the analyses aiming to unify the explanation of women's oppression are set aside. Now women's oppression relates to several forms or systems of domination: racism, (hetero)sexism, ethnicism. Some advocate the abandonment of the idea of social transformation or of systemic change as desired by liberal feminists, sometimes reducing the social to representations, oppression to speeches. Others engage in an increasingly multicultural or global feminism, trying to articulate all forms of oppression of women around the world, thus moving closer to Third-World feminists and women working in the popular media of poor countries.
- **The said popular trend:** it encompasses the activism of thousands of poor women across the world. Although not defining themselves as feminists, these women have a vision and practices similar to the feminist tradition. The aim is the tireless struggle of women to improve their conditions in their respective communities. This trend stems from the daily experience and its mobilizations evolve around the living conditions of families or communities. These mobilizations are places of women's self-affirmation and self-appropriation. The root of this trend also lies in the riots related to the disturbances caused by famine in history during which women are at the forefront of the struggle for bread. We find this activism in the so-called "third world" of developed countries or "fourth world," that is to say working and poor classes of these countries. One of the messages of popular feminism relates to the necessity to broaden the definition of all the feminist movement in order to redefine its ideology so as to take into account the totality of women's oppression.
- **The trend of the salary against housework:** it aims at the recognition of women's invisible work at home. It was born from the idea of militant groups in favor of a salary against domestic work in several countries. Although this trend does not have a great influence among feminist masses, one must acknowledge however that it was at the basis of the theories and analyses contributing to make visible women's invisible and unpaid work. While orthodox Marxist feminism is interested in the production of goods, the trend of the salary against domestic work focuses on the reproduction of human beings, generally carried out by women in the family. The

home appears as women's first working place. They produce life and also allow men to go to work by taking care of the home, helping care for and maintain the elderly. This work is according to this trend, a place of women's exploitation. This is why it advocates that wage is paid to women in exchange for the different roles they play for the well being of the household.

#### **4 - Radical feminism or the break**

It appeared for the first time in 1967 as a small movement composed mostly of white middle-class feminists and American university intellectuals. It quickly turned into a popular political movement of the vanguard of the feminist movement often seen as militant as designated by the radical movement. It reveals as a response to liberal and Marxist feminisms through the rejection of their ideologies. In fact, for radical feminists, capitalism is not the root cause of women's oppression in the same way as they reject women's confinement in the domestic sphere. For them, only a revolution is the means for women's liberation. Similarly, they criticize liberal feminists who refuse to recognize that women's inequality in the public sphere is linked to their subordination in the family.

##### **4.1. The causes of women's oppression**

According to the ideology of radical feminism, the causes of women's oppression are neither in prejudice, unjust laws (liberal feminism) nor even in capitalist system (Marxist feminism). While with Marxist feminists, capitalism plays a central role in the oppression of women and that patriarchy is secondary, with radical feminists, patriarchy plays a prominent role and capitalism a secondary one. The main enemy becomes therefore men as sexual class. The first oppression exercised by patriarchy manifests in the control of women's bodies, including the control of their motherhood and sexuality.

The place of oppression is first in the family and in the whole field of reproduction but also in society at all levels: political, economic, legal as well as social representations. Patriarchy is therefore a social system of sexes that creates two different cultures: one male, dominant and the other female, dominated. In this context, the group of women and men evolve according to ideological relationships of domination similar to those embodied by the couples master/slave, capitalist/proletarian, black/white, etc. Radical feminists want a non-patriarchal society. For them, the domination of women is universal and present in all cultures. Their subordination is the origin of all systems of oppression. Therefore they view male domination as a source of all social problems such as racism, the idea of class, war and environmental destruction.

Radical feminists believe that women's oppression is primarily rooted in biological and man's control of fertility and sexuality through marriage. Patriarchy keeps them in a status of forced mothers and sexual slaves. Even as mothers, women have little power.

##### **4.2. Strategies for change**

For radical feminists, there is a need to reverse patriarchy. This objective involves women's appropriation of their own bodies. To do this, several strategies are proposed: first the development of an alternative women's culture through the creation of female spaces such as health centers, shelters for abused women, theaters, cinemas, festivals, shops, publishing houses, bookstores, magazines for women. It is for this purpose that in the history of feminism in France, *Le Journal des femmes* (1832-1838), *La Gazette des femmes* (1841-1843) which were specialized in the dissemination of feminist ideas were created. There was also *La Fonde* published from 1897 to 1930, political journals such as *Le Journal des femmes* in the 1900s. In the 20th century, for example, there was *Questions féministes*

(1977) which dealt with theoretical issues on feminism. This journal was renamed *Nouvelles questions féministes* in 1981.

In terms of common ideology, feminists have demonstrated a great desire to speak. They wanted to develop a specifically female political culture, hoping to reach a wider audience. The notion of politics was recorded in *La Revue d'en face* published from 1977 to 1983. With *Chosir* (1971), another journal edited by Gisèle Halimi, the ideological term of "self-appropriation" was at stake.

The strategies to eradicate women's oppression proposed by radical feminists also aim at separatism, that is to say, the opportunity to live without a man. This is the case of lesbians or women who choose bachelorhood. For lesbians, heterosexual relationships are a means of oppression of women. Lesbianism therefore offers them a form of social freedom. According to their ideology, the specific relationship with a man implies physical obligations to escape. For them, it is only going from themselves that they can assume selfhood.

The last strategy proposed by radical feminists concerns the direct revolt against patriarchy: protests against pornography, beauty contests, military deployments, genital mutilation, support for abortion. The protest is against those who expose the intimate side of the female body as in a beauty contest. Through these events, the female body no longer belongs to her, but rather to the person who manipulates or exposes it for material need, for conformism to tradition or to satisfy an immediate libidinal need.

## 5 - The metamorphoses of the radical trend

It is difficult to enumerate all the metamorphoses of the radical trend because there is a wide range of texts from very fragmented movements, from diverse disciplines and backgrounds beyond Western countries. Any attempt of classification would be approximate. Therefore, the aim is just an indication of useful landmarks to understand the dynamics of the evolution of the feminist thought.

The metamorphoses of the radical trend followed several directions and were carried out under various influences. One of them came from psychoanalysis and caused a more comprehensive explanation of the concept of female difference. Radical feminism is based on a premise: the influence of a group of women who share a common oppression. Under the influence of psychoanalysis, it is now more and more question of common "difference" instead of common oppression.

### 5.1. The thought between social explanation and biological explanation

Here the radical trend varies along a continuum with several theoretical positions oscillating between two poles according to the greater or lesser importance that we give to biology or social in explaining women's common. The more we believe female difference is social, the more we are on the side of the materialistic pole. The more we believe that this difference is natural, the more we are on the side of the femaleness pole.

The metamorphosis of radical trend with regard to women's oppression

Materialistic ..... "Specificity" ..... "Femaleness"

Social explanation ..... less social ..... more biological ..... biological



## 5.2. The radical materialistic trend

The radical materialistic trend derives from a critique of both Marxist and radical trends. It is an attempt to combine these two trends but differs from the socialist movement. It is composed of several sub-trends often delineated by the borders of countries. We have, for example, a French radical materialistic trend, an Anglo-American materialistic feminism.

The French radical materialistic trend, while criticizing Marxism keeps the materialistic method and concepts to seek to understand women's oppression. It gives to these concepts different contents stemming from the radical problematics. Here, the relationships between sexes are seen as labor relations, exploitation. Men and women are sexual classes.

This trend seeks to understand women's oppression in a more global context than the one of capitalist economy and its mode of production. It tried to overcome the sex/class division and the socialist perspective to understand the specific nature of women's oppression. We no longer think in terms of class/sex dialectics but in terms of social system of sexes.

The idea of female difference was created by men as a pretext to enslave women. Women's oppression must then be found in the materiality of social facts, gender relations and not in women's psychology or biology. The struggle is to address the social roots of the difference. The radical materialistic trend is therefore at an end or a pole of the really social explanation of women's oppression.

## 5.3. The radical trend of the difference

This trend has various issues. But to better understand it, these issues must be classified into two categories:

- ✓ **The radical trend of specificity:** this trend focuses on women's appropriation of their own bodies. The struggle for women's health, to combat violence against women, service groups created for this purpose, feminist reflections on new reproductive technologies are among the embodiments of this trend.
- ✓ **The trend of femaleness:** it focuses on identifying the woman to her own body. It is concerned with a more and more biological explanation not of women's oppression but of female difference.

## 6 – The new perspectives

As aforementioned, in addition to the metamorphoses of the Marxist and radical trend, other fundamental criticisms undermined all the three traditions of feminist thought.

### 6.1. Black Feminism

It was created by African-American women in the 1970s and was instrumental in enriching feminist thought. For these women, the critical thing in understanding their oppression lay not only in class or sexism but also in the racism that permeated throughout their lives. We must acknowledge their merit of having urged feminists to articulate in their analysis of women's oppression not only gender/class duo but the trio gender/class/race or ethnicity. For some of them, there is a fourth element, discrimination against lesbians, constituting thus the quartet gender/class/race/homophobia. The addition of the fourth

element in understanding women's oppression is due to black lesbians. African-American feminists have actually contributed to bringing the concept of "common difference" among women. For them, the difference quite well hid differences. The feminism of women of color "Women of color feminism" directly stems from the analyses and struggles of Black feminism.

## 6.2. Lesbianism

Lesbians, self-identified or not, have always been numerous in the feminist movement and were in all the struggles. However, the theoretical efforts to systematize lesbian experience dated from the post-war period.

The "Daughters of Billis" were the first in the US to publicly talk about the existence of lesbian movement within the movement for the defense of the rights of homosexuals during the 1950-60. This trend espouses a liberal perspective of human rights.

At the beginning of the 1970s, radical lesbians (in the American sense of separatism) appeared. As radical feminists, they were the first to establish the autonomy of their group. For these women, autonomy means being autonomous with regard to any group other than lesbian. The "Furies" (not of their group and their journal) and "Radical Lesbians" were associated with the trend which, in the same way as the other sub-trends of radical feminism, intended to develop an autonomous culture, rather lesbian, outside today's society.

In mid-1970s, Marxist lesbians created an autonomous trend within the trend of the salary against housework. They also brought to this trend an additional dimension, namely that making love is part of the unpaid housework that women do within the couple.

In late 1970s lesbian feminists appeared. Adrienne Rich, Susan Brownmiller, Nicole Brossard are associated with this trend that carries farther the analysis by identifying, namely heterosexuality, as an institution at the core of the relation of power between men and women, a binding institution for women as a series of coercions is necessary to force them to.

Also, in late 1970s, a materialistic trend appeared among lesbians. Collette Guillaumin with her theoretical work on appropriation *La Pratique du pouvoir et l'idée de nature* (1978) (*Practice of Power and the Idea of Nature*) is a key figure. These lesbians found this theory as a means to withdraw from gender relations.

Finally, lesbians do not fall into one encompassing category but in all feminist perspectives: liberal, Marxist, radical materialistic. Their main contribution is probably found in questioning the universal and immutable character of heterosexuality as an organizational model of interpersonal relations. They therefore helped create a break in the naturalistic paradigm through which sex, gender, and heterosexuality were conceptualized.

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### **Assignment**

**Instructions: Instructions:** organize in groups of 10 students maximum to deal with this assignment. Give concise and precise answers. Papers are to be collected on October 26, 2020. No document will be taken after the deadline. Papers are to be collected on October 26, 2020. No document will be taken after the deadline.

- 1) During a conversation at home, your uncle states that a woman's place is in the family to care for her husband and the children while his friend states the contrary. As a witness of that debate, give your personal view to decide between them. **(2 pages)**
- 2) "Today, a feminist is not someone who hates men, and it is not even necessarily someone who identifies as a woman." Explain this assertion **(2 pages)**
- 3) "No person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended. Or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into the world." Discuss this assertion from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* by Alice Walker **(6 pages)**