

Articles on Liberal and Radical Feminism

Molotch • Johnson • Bell & Klein

The Rest Room and Equal Opportunity¹

Molotch

At the risk of appearing disrespectful, let me say that the best way to understand equal opportunity is to use the public toilet. Sometimes a gross approach can best clarify a subtle issue. Through the example of how society is organized to provide men and women with the capacity to relieve themselves, we can understand what it takes, as a more general matter, to provide members of different social groups with authentic equal opportunity.

In many public buildings, the amount of floor area dedicated for the men's room and the women's room is the same. The prevailing public bathroom doctrine in the U.S. is one of segregation among the genders, but with equality the guiding ideology. In some jurisdictions, this square footage equality is enshrined in law. Such an arrangement follows the dictum that equality can be achieved only by policies that are "gender-blind" (or "color-blind" or "ethnic-blind") in the allocation of a public resource. To give less to women (or blacks or Hispanics) would be discrimination; to give more would be "reverse discrimination." Women and men have the same proportion of a building to use as rest rooms. Presumably this should provide members of both genders with equal opportunity for dealing with their bodily needs in a timely and convenient way..

The trouble with this sort of equality is that, being blind, it fails to recognize differences between men as a group and women as a group. These differences are not amenable to easy change. Part of women's demand for bathrooms can not exist for men because only women menstruate. Women make trips to the rest room to secure hygienic and socially appropriate adaptations to this physical fact. And because men's physiology suits them for the use of urinals, a large number of men can be serviced by a relatively small physical space. Women in our society use toilets to urinate, and toilets require a larger area than urinals. By creating men's and women's rooms of the same size, society guarantees that individual women will be worse off than individual men. By distributing a resource equally, an unequal result is structurally guaranteed.

The consequences are easily visible at intermission time whenever men and women congregate in theater lobbies. When the house is full, the women form a waiting line in front of the bathroom while the men do their business without delay. Women experience discomfort and are excluded from conversations that occur under more salutary conditions elsewhere in the lobby. If toward the rear of the line, women may experience anxiety that they will miss the curtain rise. Indeed, they may arrive too late to be seated for the opening scene,

¹ Johnson, A. G. (2009). Feminists and Feminism. In *The Matrix Reader: Examining the Dynamics of oppression and Privilege*, (523–543), Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education

dance routine, or orchestral movement. Their late arrival is easily taken by others (particularly men) as evidence of characterological slowness or preoccupation with primping and powder room gossip. All these difficulties are built into the structure of the situation. Equality of square feet to the genders delivers women special burdens of physical discomfort, social disadvantage, psychological anxiety, compromised access to the full product (the performance), and public ridicule.

An obvious solution, one I'll call the "**liberal**" policy, is to make women's rooms larger than men's. Women's bathrooms need to be big enough to get women in and out as quickly as men's bathrooms get men in and out. No more and no less. A little applied sociological re-search in various types of settings would establish the appropriate ratios needed to accomplish such gender equality.

An alternative solution, one I'll call "**conservative**," would be for women to change the way they do things, rather than for society to change the structuring of rest room space. There is no need to overturn the principle of equality of square footage among the genders. Instead, women need to use their allotted square footage more efficiently. If women truly want to relieve themselves as efficiently as men, they can take some initiative. Options do exist short of biological alteration. While women may not be capable of adapting to urinals, they could relieve themselves by squatting over a common trough. This would save some space-perhaps enough to achieve efficiency parity with men. Women are not physically bound to use up so many square feet. It is a cultural

issue, and in this case the problem derives from a faulty element of women's culture. It is not physiologically given that each woman should have her own cubicle, much less her own toilet, or that she should sit rather than squat.

This joins the issue well. Should women be forced to change or should the burden be placed on men who may have to give up some of their own square footage so that women might have more? The re-sponse from the liberal camp is that even if women's spatial needs are cultural, these needs should be recognized and indulged. Cultural notions of privacy and modes of using toilets were not arrived at by women in isolation from men. Men's conceptions of "decency"-at least as much as women's-encourage women to be physically modest and demure. Men's recurring violence toward women encourages bathroom segregation in the first instance because segregation makes it easier for potential assailants to be spotted as "out of place." Providing women with latched cubicles provides a further bit of security in a world made less secure by men. Thus, prescriptions of dignity and protections from assault come from the common culture produced by women and men. Whatever their origins, these cultural imperatives have become a real force and are sustained by continuing pressures on women's lives. Until this common culture is itself transformed, U.S. women can not become as efficient as Tiwi women in their capacity to urinate in public settings, regardless of the efficiency advantages. On the other hand, altering the spatial allocations for men's and women's bathrooms is relatively simple and inexpensive.

It becomes harder to be a liberal as the weight of cultural imper-ative seems to lighten. Suppose, for example, that a part of the reason for the line in front of the ladies' room is, in fact, a tendency for women to primp longer than men or to gossip among one another at the sinks (although the lines in front of toilet stalls would belie such an as-sumption). Should vanity and sociability be subsidized at the expense of the larger community? But here again, the culture that men and women have produced in common becomes relevant. Perhaps women "take a powder" to escape the oppression of men, using the rest room as a refuge from social conditions imposed by the dominant gender? Perhaps the need to look lovely, every moment and in every way, is created by men's need to display a public companion whose makeup is flawless, whose head has every hair in place, and whose body is perfectly scented. Women are driven to decorate themselves as men's commodities and the consequence is bathroom demand. Should men pay for this "ser-vice" through sacrificing their own square footage or should women adjust by waiting in line and climbing all over one another for a patch of the vanity mirror?

Again it turns on who should change what. The conservative an-swer might be for women to give up primping, but that would fly in the face of the demand (also championed by conservatives) that wom-en's cultural role is to be beautiful for their men. Although not because they wished to increase rest room efficiency, **radical feminists** have argued that women should ease up on their beauty treatments, precisely because it ratifies their subservience to men

and deflects them from success in occupational and other realms. But again the liberal view holds appeal: at least until the transition to feminism, the existing cul-tural arrangement necessitates an asymmetric distribution of space to provide equality of opportunity among the genders.

As the issues become subtle, reasonable people come to disagree on who should do what and what community expense should be in-curred to achieve parity. Such controversy stems from the effort to pro-vide equal opportunity for individuals by taking into account differences among groups. The same problem arises no matter what the issue and no matter what the group. If people commonly get their job leads by word-of-mouth through friends and neighbors, then black people-ex-cluded from the neighborhoods of employers and of those employed in expanding job sectors-will be at a labor market disadvantage. Black people's chronically higher unemployment rate stands as evidence of disadvantage: their longer queue for jobs is analogous to the longer line in front of the women's rest room.

Blacks can be told to work harder, to use their meager resources more efficiently, to rearrange their lives and cultures to better their job qualifications.

Alternatively, their pres-ent plight can be understood as structural-stemming from a history of enslavement, Jim Crow segregation, and white prejudice that now results in concrete arrangements that hinder individual life changes. One must be color-sighted, rather than color-blind, to deal with these dif-ferences. But this is no reverse racism: it rests on perception of social structural locations, not upon inherent inferiority

attributed to group membership. Such government mandated policies as open job-searches, ethnic hiring targets, and preference for minority vendors and subcon-tractors can counteract structural biases that hold down opportunities of women, blacks, and other minorities. Affirmative action programs should be conceived as compensatory efforts to overcome such structured dis-advantage (although the legal interpretation of the statutes is usually drawn more narrowly).

Equality is not a matter of arithmetic division, but of social ac-counting. Figuring out what is equal treatment necessitates-in every instance-a sociological analysis of exactly how it is that structures op-erate on people's lives. Besides rejecting the conservatives' penchant for blaming the victim, liberal policies need a concrete analytic basis that goes beyond goodhearted sympathy for the downtrodden. As in the rest room case, we need to specify how current patterns of "equal" treat-ment of groups yield unequal opportunities to individuals. We then should determine exactly what it would take (e.g., square feet to gender ratios) to redress the inequality.

Besides careful analysis, equality also involves a decision as to who is going to change and in what way. These decisions will often take from some and give to others. Thus we have the two-pronged essence of action on behalf of equal opportunity: sociological analysis and political struggle.

Feminists and Feminism (Johnson)²

As a matter of principle, some feminists prefer not to define feminism at all because it's so diverse that no single version of it could possibly do justice to the many forms it takes. In addition, a commitment to being inclusive and nonhierarchical makes many feminists leery of definitions, since definitions can be used to establish an exclusive "one true feminism" that separates "insiders" from "outsiders."

Nonetheless, people do use the word to describe how they think and work. Like any word, "feminism" can't be used unless it has meaning, and any meaning necessarily sets it apart from other possibilities. Without taking anything away from feminism's diversity, I think it's possible to identify some core ideas that most forms of feminism have in common. I've never encountered anything called feminism, for example that didn't in some way begin with the assumption that gender inequality exists and that it's problematic. How and why inequality exists, what forms it takes, and what to do about it are questions with different and sometimes conflicting answers. But the questions all reflect a common focus of attention, and this is how feminism can encompass a diversity of answers.

Having said this, it's important to emphasize the distinction between feminism as a way of thinking

² Johnson, A. G. (2009). *Feminists and Feminism*. In *The Matrix Reader: Examining the Dynamics of oppression and Privilege*, (pp. 523–543), Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education; or In A. G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, (pp. 99–131). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

and two other possibilities. feminism can refer to a set of opinions about social issues such as abortion or equal pay. It can also simply be about going “pro-woman.” Some people identify themselves as feminists, for example, because they favor equality for women or the right to choose abortion; but neither of these necessarily points to a particular way of analyzing gender inequality that one might call feminism. For my purposes here, feminism is a way of thinking—of observing the world, asking questions, and looking for answers—that may lead to particular opinions *but doesn't consist of the opinions themselves*. One could be pro-choice or in favor of equal pay, for example, on purely moral or liberal political grounds without any basis in a feminist analysis of gender. In this sense, feminism refers to ways of understanding such issues from various points of view, all of which share a common focus of concern.

Although all feminist thought begins with gender as problematic, from there it follows various paths, especially in relation to patriarchy. In general, I think it's useful to distinguish among branches of feminism according to the degree to which

- They understand various aspects of social life—such as sexual domination and violence, religion, warfare, politics, economics, and how we treat the natural environment—in relation to gender;
- They explicitly recognize patriarchy as a system, as problematic, as historically rooted, and in need of change; and

- They see men as a dominant group with a vested interest in women's subordination, the perpetuation of patriarchal values, and control over the political, economic, and other institutions through which those values operate.

Some brands of feminism, for example, have little use for the term “patriarchy” and don't see men as particularly problematic. They may go out of their way to avoid doing or saying anything that might challenge men or make them feel uncomfortable or raise the possibility of conflict between men and women. Other define patriarchy, male privilege, gender oppression, and conflict as basic points of departure for any understanding of gender. In some cases the focus of change is quite narrow, as it was in the turn-of-the-century struggle for women's suffrage, while in others, such as ecofeminism or feminist spirituality, the focus is often global change spanning multiple dimensions of human experience.

Most feminist work draws to varying degrees on a handful of major approaches to gender that usually go by the names of liberal, radical, Marxian, and socialist feminism. These aren't the only kinds of feminist thought—psychoanalytic and postmodern feminism are two notable additions to the list—but they certainly have played a part in most attempts to understand and do something about patriarchy and its consequences. They also aren't mutually exclusive. Although liberal and radical feminism, for example, differ dramatically in some ways, they also have a lot in common and trace back to similar roots. As such, “liberal,” “socialist,” “Marxian,” and “radical” aren't

little boxes into which feminists can neatly and unambiguously fit themselves. If I tried to identify the feminist approaches that have shaped the writing of this paper, for example, I'd find them all in one way or another even though I lean more toward some than others. It helps, then, to think of various feminist approaches as threads woven together to form a whole. While the threads are distinctive in many ways, they are strongest in relation to one another.

Liberal feminism

The basic idea behind liberal feminism, and liberal thinking in general, is that humans are rational beings who, with enough knowledge and opportunity, will realize their potential as individuals to the benefit of themselves and society as a whole. Things go wrong primarily through ignorance, bad socialization, and limited access to opportunities. Equality of opportunity and freedom of choice are seen as the bedrock of individual well-being, which in turn makes possible an enlightened society and progressive social change. Liberalism assumes that the individual person is the highest good and the key to social life. From this perspective, societies are little more than collections of people making choices, and social change is largely a matter of changing how individuals think and behave, especially through education and other means of enlightenment.

From a liberal feminist perspective, the main gender problem is that prejudice, value, and the norms deny women equal access to the opportunities, resources, and rewards that society offers. Forcing women to choose between child care and employment; excluding women from positions of

authority in economic, political, religious, and other orgs; segregating women in the job market, from the pink-collar ghetto to exclusion from the Catholic priesthood and combat roles in the military; devaluing, objectifying, and portraying women as inferior in a wide variety of cultural stereotypes; and socializing women and men in ways that enhance male privilege and female subordination are all identified as central to gender equality.

The liberal feminist solution is to remove the barriers to women's freedom of choice and equal participation, from restrictions on reproductive control to providing day care to breaking the glass ceiling at work. The liberal method is to persuade people to change by challenging sexist stereotypes and demanding equal access and treatment. This includes rewriting school textbooks and curricula; reforming legal codes; lobbying for child-care facilities and equal access to professions, corporate management, and elected office; breaking the glass ceiling and promoting women's advancement through networking; and providing victimized women with resources such as battered women's shelters and rape crisis services. Liberal feminism calls on men to change how they think about and behave toward women, to be less violent, harassing, and exploitative and more supportive, emotionally sensitive and expressive, and committed to their roles as fathers and partners. And it calls on women to assert and believe in themselves, to strive to achieve and not be deterred by the barriers they must overcome. In short, liberal feminism ultimately relies on men to be decent and fair, to become enlightened and progressive as they

learn the truth about gender inequality and women's true potential, to give women their due by allowing them to participate as equals in social life, and to support this by doing their fair share of domestic work. And it relies on women to believe in themselves, to strive and achieve, to push against barriers until they give way. All of this strikes a deep chord, especially in the American Dream consciousness, whose root ideology extols the virtues of individual freedom as the answer to most social problems. This is one reason why the liberal perspective has shaped so much of the women's movement and general public perceptions of what gender issues are all about.

Liberalism has improved the lives of many women, but after several decades of hard-won gains, the women's movement seems nearly swamped by a backlash and stalled by stiff resistance to further change. A recent study conducted by the U.S. Dept. of Labors' Women's Bureau, for example, found that a majority of working women, and especially women of color, continue to be devalued, underpaid, and not taken seriously, and still struggle with the demands of domestic responsibilities with little help from employers, government, or most important, husbands. None of this is the fault of liberal feminism, but it does reflect its underlying limitations as a way to make sense of patriarchy and help find alternatives to it.

A basic problem with liberal feminism (and liberalism in general) is that its intense focus on the individual blinds it to the power of social systems. This is one reason why liberal feminism doesn't

recognize patriarchy as something to be reckoned with. It never looks at the underlying structures that produce women's oppression and that shape the individual men and women liberal feminism aims to change. A liberal feminist approach to getting fathers more involved in childcare, for example, emphasizes changing men one at a time. This might be done by appealing to a sense of fairness or the importance of having closer relations with children. By ignoring patriarchy, however, liberal feminism turns male privilege into an individual problem only remotely connected to larger systems that promote and protect it. In the case of childcare, this misses the fact that when men don't do their "fair share" of domestic labor, they gain in terms of nondomestic rewards such as power, income, and status as "real men." In the dominant patriarchal culture, these rewards are value far more highly than the emotional satisfaction of family life. In opinion polls, many men *say* that family life is more important than work, but when it comes to actual choices about where to invest themselves, the results reflect a different set of cultural values embedded in powerful paths of least resistance. Liberal feminism then often puts women in the position of negotiating from a position of weakness, depending on men to give up male privilege and endanger their standing in relation to other men because it's the right thing to do and might enrich their or their children's emotional lives.

Liberal feminism's individualism also backs us into a no-win position between denying that patriarchy even exists, on the one hand, and claiming that all men are engaged in a conspiracy to oppress

women on the other. if nothing significant exists beyond the rational individual, then by definition the only thing larger than ourselves that we might participate in is a conspiracy or other form of deliberate planning among individuals. Since it's easy to refute the existence of a massive conspiracy in which men gather to plot a patriarchal future, any kind of systemic understanding of gender privilege and oppression becomes virtually impossible, as does the hope of doing much about it.

Liberal feminism is also limited by its ahistorical character. It offers no way to explain the origins of the social arrangements it's trying to change, nor does it identify a social engine powerful enough to keep oppression going. Liberal feminism's main assumption is that oppression results from ignorance whose removal through enlightened education clear the road to equality and a better life for all. But when ignorance and misunderstanding perpetuate an oppressive system grounded in privilege, they become more than a passive barrier that dissipate in the light of truth. Instead, they become part of a willful defense that puts up a fight, and a good one at that. Liberal feminism is ill-equipped to deal with this, for the closest liberalism comes to acknowledging the forces that perpetuate patriarchy is its frequent reference to "tradition" (as in traditional roles). There is no theory of history or systemic oppression here. Instead we have a vague sense that things have been this way for a long time and for reasons that are apparently not worth exploring beyond "it's hard for people to change."

Liberal feminism's "tradition" catch-all obscures the underlying dynamics that make patriarchy work, and it trivializes oppression by making it seem a matter of habit. Imagine, by comparison, how unacceptable it would be to attribute racism or anti-Semitism to nothing more than tradition, as in "Racial segregation, discrimination, and violence against people of color are a matter of tradition in the U.S." or "Persecuting Jews is just the way we do things here—for as long as I can remember." "Tradition" doesn't explain oppression, it merely characterizes ones aspect of how it's practiced and women into the fabric of everyday life so that it's perceive as normal and taken for granted.

Liberal feminism's lack of historical perspective has serious consequences because it leads away from questions about patriarchy and systemic oppression, concepts that have little place in liberal thinking. Patriarchy is treated as a shadow concept with no serious analytical role to play in making sense of gender. Avoiding patriarchy and oppression also fits nicely with the liberal focus on individuals as the be-all and end-all of human life, with little appreciation for how feelings, motivations, thoughts, and behavior are shaped by participation in larger social contexts such as patriarchy. From a liberal perspective, for example, men who rape are merely sick individuals, and there's no reason to ask why such "sickness" is more common in some societies than others or how the violent coercion practiced by rapists might be related to the less violent "coercion" that figures so prominently in "normal" patriarchal heterosexuality, especially in some of its more

romanticized versions. Unless we want to argue that men are conspiring to produce violence against women on a massive scale, we're stuck with no larger understanding of what's going on.

A deeper problem is liberal feminism's single-minded focus on the right of women to be men's equals—to do what men do in the way that men do it. In this, it doesn't ask what might be wrong with a way of organizing the world that encourages men to do what they do in the way that they do it. As a result, when women demand access to positions of power in corporations, government, the church, universities, and the professions, they also affirm the basic patriarchal character of social life. Rather than question warfare as a way to conduct international relations, for example, liberal feminism champions the right of women to serve in combat. Rather than question capitalism as a way to produce and distribute what people need in order to live, liberal feminism targets glass ceilings that keep women from moving up in corporate hierarchies. Rather than challenge the values that shape how professions are practiced—from medicine and law to science—liberalism focuses on equal access to graduate schools, legal partnerships, and the tenured ranks of university faculties.

This is essentially what Naomi Wolf promotes as “power feminism”: women should beat men at their own game and run the world—hence their title of her book *Fire with Fire*. Initially, she seems to favor the more radical goal of changing the game itself rather than merely winning at it. She disagrees with Audre Lorde's proposition that “The Master's tools will

never dismantle the Master's house,” arguing instead that patriarchy can be undone through the use of patriarchal forms of power and domination, whether political, economic, or interpersonal. But it soon becomes clear that Wolf isn't concerned with dismantling the Master's house, but with breaking down the door and getting into it. “Women should be free to exploit or save, give or take, destroy or build, to exactly the same extent that men are.” Apparently it doesn't occur to her to ask whether *men* should be allowed to do such things to the extent that they are, or whether this is a good standard for organizing the world. Part of Wolf's problem is that she never tells us just what the Master's house is—she doesn't define patriarchy or describe how it works. But a deeper problem is her liberal assumption that the only thing wrong with the status quo is unequal opportunity for women to participate in it as men do.

There's nothing wrong with equal opportunity, equal access, and equality under the law. These are important goals. But there are some serious unanticipated consequences to working for equal access to a system without also asking what kind of system this is and how it produces oppression of all sorts, especially when based on characteristics other than gender, such as race, sexual orientation, and social class. One consequence of following a liberal feminist agenda, for example, is that successful women often join men at the top of systems that oppress working-class men and women and people of color, obscuring the fact that equality for “women” comes to mean in effect equality for white women of a certain class. This does not mean that women

shouldn't pursue power now held predominantly by men. It does mean, however, that the liberal feminist perspective that shapes and informs such striving omits huge chunks of reality. As such, it can't be our only feminist approach to understanding gender oppression or doing something about it.

Because liberal feminism has little to say about how patriarchy organizes male competitive bonding and women's oppression, it focuses on the consequences of oppression without looking at the system that produces them. Sexist behavior and sexist attitudes, for example, are discussed out of their social context, as if they were simply the result of "bad training," to be replaced with "good training" at home and in school. But socialization and education are social mechanisms that serve much larger patriarchal interests, including the perpetuation of male privilege and social institutions organized around core patriarchal values. As such, socialization isn't the problem, no more than programs that train workers in weapons factories are the key to understanding war.

Perhaps the most ironic problem with liberal feminism is that by focusing on equality only in terms of individual choice and opportunity within patriarchy, it actually undermines the liberal ideal of free choice. By ignoring how patriarchy shapes and limits the alternatives from which people might "freely" choose, it ignores the power to determine just what those alternatives will be. This means that the freedom to participate in the world on patriarchal terms is freedom only in a context that ignores non-patriarchal alternatives that patriarchal culture doesn't tell us about. This also means that the limited liberal

agenda for change assumes that society as it currently exists defines the limits of what is possible. But the freedom to choose among existing alternatives is only part of a larger feminist agenda:

For although feminists do indeed want women to become part of the structure, participants in public institutions; although they want access for women to decision-making posts, and a voice in how society is managed, *they do not want women to assimilate to society as it presently exists but to change it.*

Feminism is not yet one more of a series of political movements for their adherents access to existing structures and their rewards...it is a revolutionary moral movement, intending to use political power to transform society...The assimilation of women to society as it presently exists would lead simply to the inclusion of certain women...along with certain men in its higher echelons. It would mean continued stratification and continued contempt for "feminine" values. Assimilation would be cooption of feminism."

In the above sense, critics of liberal feminism would take feminism well beyond issues of gender equality. A broader and deeper feminism is about the very terms on which equality is figured. It is about women's right to participate as men's equals in society, but also about the power to shape the alternatives from which both women and men may choose. It's about the power to affect the forces that shape experience, thought, feeling, and behavior; it's about the power to change society itself. It's about fundamentally changing the Master's house, if not dismantling it altogether, which is a far cry from just getting in the door. This goes well past the limits of

liberal feminism to the roots, the radicals, of the patriarchal tree, which leads us into the kinds of questions that so often provoke a backlash of resistance and denial. This is a major reason why liberal feminism is so widely viewed as the only legitimate and socially acceptable form that feminism can take, because it's also the most palatable, the least threatening, and the most compatible with the status quo. This is also why one of its major alternatives, radical feminism, is so routinely maligned, misunderstood, and ignored.

Radical Feminism

As we move toward more radical areas of feminist thought, the landscape is taken up with far more than issues like sexist attitudes and unequal pay. Radical feminism of course pays attention to patriarchy's consequences and how people experience them. But unlike liberal feminism, radical feminism carries that attention to the underlying male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered, control-obsessed patriarchal system that produces gender oppression. Radical feminism aims to make sense of patriarchy in relation to history and social contexts that help explain not only where it came from, but how and why it persists and affects us so deeply.

For example, male violence against women is more than an individual male pathology; it is also a path of least resistance that patriarchy provides for men to follow and for women to accept. From a radical perspective, that path doesn't exist in isolation from the rest of social life but is rooted in and helps to maintain male privilege in patriarchy as a system. In similar ways, a radical perspective on family divisions

of labor that still saddle women with most domestic work is quite different from a liberal view. Radical feminism sees this as more than "tradition" or an expression of female and male personality tendencies or a lack of appropriate training or encouragement for men. The family is an institution with a complex history as a vehicle for keeping women in their place, and men's resistance to domestic labor has been an important part of that dynamic. Whatever reasons individual men may offer for not doing child care and housework, it is rooted in male privilege, and its cumulative effect is to reinforce that privilege.

The connection with male privilege also appears in a radical analysis of things as mundane as how difficult it is for women and men to communicate with each other. From Tannen's liberal feminist perspective, for example, power and control are secondary issues in gender communication. The real problem is that men and women speak different languages and use different "styles" that reflect men's concern with status and women's concern with intimacy and relationships. Tannen believes that the styles are "different but equally valid" and result from being socialized into different cultures, each with its own traditions. If men interrupt and otherwise dominate conversation, for example, it's because that's "their way," just as the Spanish enjoy siesta and Japanese traditionally remove their shoes before entering a house. Since there's a lot of pressure these days to respect cultural differences, Tannen's somewhat anthropological approach to gender dynamics tends to make it off limits to criticism. Her perspective offers some comfort to those feeling

stressed from gender conflict: there's no problem here that can't be cured with a good dose of education and tolerance for differences—the classic liberal remedy for just about everything. But the comfort masks the messier reality that men and women don't grow up in separate cultures in any sense of the term but share common family, school, and work environments and swim in the same cultural sea of media imagery. However soothing it might be to think of gender issues as a matter of “East meets West,” it simply isn't so.

A radical critique of Tannen's feminism might begin with her liberal preoccupation with individual motives and how she confuses these with social consequences. Tannen bends over backward to discourage women's anger at men who behave in dominating, aggressive ways, arguing that men don't *mean* to be this way. What she misses is that a hallmark of privilege is not having to mean it in order to exercise or benefit from socially bestowed privilege, whether it be taking up conversational space or being taken more seriously and given more credit for new ideas. Awareness and intention require commitment and work, in comparison to which arrogance or innocence is relatively easy. And when men's conversational style promotes privilege, whether it's intended or not is irrelevant to the social consequences that result. If anything, men's lack of intent makes change even more difficult because it reflects how far they have to go to even be aware of what they're doing and why it matters. This is why liberalism's intense focus on the individual is so limiting. We can be so preoccupied with individual

guilt, blame, and purity that we don't realize that participating in the social production of bad consequences doesn't require us to know what we're doing or, in particular, to intend bad results.

A radical perspective assumes from the start that patriarchy is real, that it doesn't spring from some vague wellspring of cultural “tradition,” and that it sets men and women fundamentally at odds with one another, regardless of how they might feel about it as individuals. Radical feminism's historical perspective identifies patriarchy as the first oppressive system, the originator of the religion of control, power, and fear that provided a model for other forms of oppression. As such, patriarchy is also the most deeply rooted and pervasive form of oppression and the most resistant to change. It manifests itself in every aspect of social life, making women's oppression and social oppression in general part of something much larger and deeper than what they may appear to be within the rhythms of everyday life.

Since radical feminism takes patriarchy and gender oppression to be real, it looks hard at men as the prime beneficiaries and enforcers of the patriarchal order. Regardless of how individual men may behave or see themselves, they participate in a system that grants them gender privilege at the expense of women and encourages them to protect and take advantage of it. The truth of this can be seen not only in obviously sexist men but in men who consider themselves sensitive to gender issues and supportive of the women's movement, for all too often they do little about it. Sometimes known as “sensitive New Age guys,” these men rarely take the

initiative to learn more about patriarchy or their participation in it; they don't speak out publicly against women's oppression; and they don't confront other men about sexist behavior. They may protest that they don't want women to be oppressed and hate the idea of benefiting from it, but they also show little interest in making themselves uncomfortable to the extent of confronting the reality of what's going on beyond the pale of their good intentions. Unless prodded into action by women, most men choose to leave things as they are, which, by default, includes their unearned gender privilege. This is especially striking when it appears in men whose politics are otherwise progressively left. In fact, radical feminism emerged from women's experience in new left civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s in which male colleagues often treated them as subordinate, objectified "others" whose primary purpose was to meet men's needs.

The distinction between liberal and radical feminism is important not because one is right and the other is wrong, but because they focus on different kinds of questions and problems. As a result, they also lead to different kinds of answers and solutions. Liberal feminism, for example, tends to interpret sexist stereotypes as false beliefs and bad attitudes that can be corrected through exposure to the truth. The belief that women are weak and dependent, for example, can be undone by showing people how strong and independent women can be; male attitudes of contemptuous superiority can be changed by making men aware of how injurious, unfair, and groundless such views are.

Radical feminism, however, reminds us that negative stereotypes about women don't exist in a vacuum. Especially when something is so pervasive in a society, we have to ask what *social* purpose it serves beyond the motives and intentions of individuals. Whose interests does sexism support, and what kind of social order does it perpetuate? From this perspective, misogyny and other forms of sexism are more than mistaken ideas and bad attitudes. They are also part of a cultural ideology that serves male privilege and supports women's subordination.

As such, sexism is more than mere prejudice: *it is prejudice plus the power to act on it*. The belief that women are weak and dependent, for example, and the cultural identification of strength and independence with maleness combine to make women's strength and independence invisible; it masks most men's essential vulnerability and dependence on women; and it promotes the illusion that men are in control—all of which are keys to maintaining patriarchy. As a form of sexism, misogyny also helps stabilize patriarchy by encouraging men to use women as targets for the feelings of contempt, frustration, and anger that arise from their competitive relations with other men. Patriarchy sets men against other men, but it also rests on male solidarity in relation to women. Using women as scapegoats for negative feelings maintains this delicate balance while minimizing the personal risk to men.

Because radical and liberal perspectives interpret sexism differently, they also suggest different solutions to it. From a radical perspective,

the liberal reliance on socialization is short-sighted and futile, for anything that truly undermines the definition of women as inferior and men as superior challenges the entire patriarchal system and therefore will provoke resistance. By itself, socialization won't bring about fundamental change because families, schools, and other agents of socialization are dedicated to raising children who will be accepted and succeed in society as it is, not risk living their lives in the shunned status of troublemaker or radical. This is what makes liberal feminism so appealing and also what limits its ability to create fundamental change. After decades of liberal feminist activism, for example, a small minority of elite women have been allowed to embrace patriarchal masculine values and achieve some success in male-identified occupations; but for women as a group, sexism still abounds. The problem isn't how we train children to fit into the world; the problem is the world into which we fit them and into which they'll feel compelled to fit if they're going to "get along" and "succeed."

If sexism reflected no more than a need for the light of truth to shine on the reality of men and women as they are, then it wouldn't have much of a future, given how much knowledge is readily available. But sexism isn't simply about individual enlightenment; it isn't a personality problem or a bad habit. Sexism is rooted in a social reality that underpins male privilege and gender oppression. Sexism isn't going to disappear from patriarchal culture through appeals to people's sense of fairness and decency or their ability to distinguish stereotypes from the facts of who people are.

For all its limitations—or perhaps because of them—liberal feminism is all that most people actually know of feminist thought, and it therefore defines gender issues in public discussion. Radical feminism is virtually invisible in the mainstream except for the occasional distorted sound bite references to its most provocative expressions or its ideas taken out of context. As a result, radical feminism is known primarily as an attitude (such as man-hating), or as rigid orthodoxy ("only lesbians are real feminists"), or as a form of essentialism ("women are superior and ought to rule the world"). To be sure, all of these can be found somewhere in feminist writings; but they pale beside the overwhelming bulk of the radical analysis of patriarchy, whose insights can help both men and women work for something better.

Liberal feminism has more popular appeal than radical feminism because it focuses on gender without confronting the reality of patriarchal oppression and without seriously threatening male privilege. It avoids the uncomfortable work of challenging men to take some responsibility for patriarchy rather than merely being sensitive to "women's issues" or helping women out with domestic responsibilities when it suits them. And liberal feminism allows us to stay within the relatively comfortable familiarity of an individualistic, psychological framework in which individual pathology and change are the answer to every problem.

Under the liberal umbrella, women can confront themselves with the idea that the men in *their*

lives are personally OK and uninvolved in gender oppression or male privilege. Successful women can enjoy their status without having to question the patriarchal terms on which they achieved it, except when criticizing “victim feminists” who spoil things by calling attention to patriarchy and what it does to women. Men can reassure themselves that so long as they don’t behave with conscious malevolence toward women, they aren’t part of the problem. Men who don’t rape, harass, or discriminate against women can wash their hands of gender issues and get on with their lives, with an occasional acknowledgement of the ever-fascinating “battle of the sexes” and men’s and women’s “cultures” and all the ins and outs of getting along with one another and appreciating gender “differences.”

Radical feminism is avoided, dismissed, and attacked precisely because it raises critical questions that most people would rather ignore in the hope that they will go away. Radical feminism forces us to confront relationships that most men and women depend on to meet their needs. It challenges us to see how patriarchy divides women and men into subordinate and dominant groups with different interests that put them at odds with one another. And it violates one of patriarchy’s core principles by daring to place women rather than men at the center of the discussion, focusing women’s energy on themselves and other women and encouraging even heterosexual women to identify with women rather than with a male-identified system that marginalizes and oppresses them.

It shouldn’t surprise us, then, that the mass media and so many people are content to settle for negative caricatures of radical feminism, to make feminist thought invisible, discredited, and ghettoized in the underground press and the shelves of alternative bookstores. But liberalism isn’t enough to work our way out of patriarchy because it can’t provide a clear view of patriarchy and how it works. We wind up in Wolf’s confusion between dismantling the Master’s house and getting into it, a confusion based on having no clear idea of just what the Master’s house *is* or what it would mean to dismantle it. To change the system, we can’t just focus on individuals; we also have to find ways to focus on the *system*, and for that we have to go to its roots, which is what radical feminism is all about.

A purely liberal approach to gender—or to race or class or any other form of oppression—can take us just so far, as is painfully clear from the current antifeminist backlash, a stalled civil rights movement, and a resurgence of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and racism both in the U.S. and in Europe. Liberalism is a crucial first step in the journey away from oppressive systems. But that’s all that it is, because it can take us only as far as the system will allow, and in oppressive systems that isn’t far enough.

Radical Feminism³

Bell & Klein

The first and fundamental theme is that women as a social group are oppressed by men as a social group and that this oppression is the *primary* oppression for women. Patriarchy is the oppressing *structure* of male domination.

³ Bell, D., & Klein, R. (1996). *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*. Spinifex Press.

Radical feminism makes visible male control as it is exercised in every sphere of women's lives, both public and private. So reproduction, marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and motherhood are primary sites of attack and envisaged positive change. (11)

Radical feminism stresses that "emancipation" or "equality" on male terms is not enough. A total revolution of the social structures and the elimination of the processes of patriarchy are essential...Gail Chester outlined her position, clearly defining herself as "active in and believing in the need for, a strong, autonomous, revolutionary movement for the liberation of women. To her radical feminism is both socialist in its intent and revolutionary... T-Grace Atkinson wrote in 1974 that "the analysis begins with the feminist *raison d'être* that women are a class, that this class is political in nature, and that this political class is oppressed... "Women will not be free until all oppressed classes are free. I am not suggesting that women work to free other classes. However in the case of women oppressing other women, the exercise of class privilege by identification in effect locks the sex class into place. In identifying one's interests with those of any power class, one thereby maintains the position of that class. As long as any class system is left standing, it stands on the backs of women." (1974)

"From this manifesto⁴ we can pull together some common threads: radical feminism insists that women as a social class or a social group are oppressed by men as a social group as well as individually by men who continue to benefit from that oppression and do nothing to change it; the system through which men do this has been termed patriarchy; radical feminism is women-centered and stresses both the personal as political and the need for collective action and responsibility; it is "power" rather than "difference" which determines the relationship between women and men..."

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a system of structures and institutions created by men in order to sustain and recreate male power and female subordination. Such structures include: institutions such as the law, religion, and the family; ideologies which perpetuate the "naturally" inferior position of women; socialisation processes to ensure that women and men develop behavior and belief systems appropriate to the powerful or less powerful group to which they belong... Within the private domain of *the family*, marriage, and reproduction, men have structured a system whereby woman's reproductive capacity leaves her vulnerable, domestically exploited, and often entrapped in

economic dependence. Patriarchal *ideology* maintains these structures. The family is maintained through the concept of romantic love between men and women, when in fact marriage contracts have traditionally had an economic base.

Women's labour within the family, which has been unpaid and unacknowledged, and which includes the emotional servicing of members of the family as well as their physical servicing, continues to be defined as a "labour of love." Men have managed to create an ideology which defines men as the "natural" owners of intellect, rationality, and the power to rule.

Women "by nature" are submissive, passive, and willing to be led. Processes such as the socialization of children encourage this situation to continue. So, for example, in playground games, boys soon learn that they are to act and girls to create an "audience" for male performance. (15) Men as a social group enjoy the privileges of power. It is in the best interest of men to maintain the existing patriarchal system, and the world has been structured in order to maintain this power imbalance, for example, in their structuring of pay inequality, and the sex-segregated work world. They need to maintain the unpaid labour of women; emotional and physical servicing by women; the sense of being in control which they feel individually and collectively. Men experience both a fear and an envy of women's reproductive power. It is an area of life which is owned by the less powerful group, women. In order to wrest control back, men develop laws regulating and controlling abortion and contraception. (17)

Biology

Radical feminists are well aware of the dangers of basing analysis in biology. If men and women are represented as having "aggressive" and "nurturing" characteristics because of their biology, the situation will remain immutable and the continuation of male violence against women can be justified. But this is not to say that there are not differences between the sexes. This is patently so. These differences, however, do not need to be rooted in biology nor do they need to be equated with determinism. "...we acknowledge a biological difference between men and women, but it does not in itself imply a relationship of oppression between the sexes. The struggle between the sexes is not the result of biology" (*Questions Feministes*, 1980, 14). Men are the powerful group. But men need women, for sexual and emotional labor, for domestic labor, for admiration, for love, and for a justification of the existing power imbalance. In order to maintain the more powerful position and so feed on their need of women without being consumed by it, men as a powerful group institutionalize their position of power. (34).

⁴ Pachaci, R., Warrick, J., Chester, G., Sebestyen, A., Liensol, C., Leonard, D., & Henderson, R. (1979). *Feminist Practice: Notes from the Tenth Year*. In Theory Press.