

# SCHOOLS OF FEMINIST THOUGHT/ THEORY

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Arguably, the only views that all schools or branches of Feminism have in common are: (1) women – at least women in all contemporary societies – are oppressed and (2) this oppression ought to be overcome. But how this oppression is described or defined differs considerably between schools of Feminist thought, as do the recommendations concerning how it is to be overcome. Some recent representative books on Feminism which describe and analyze many of the schools mentioned below are:

## Texts:

Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO (1989)

Rosemarie Tong, *Feminine and Feminist Ethics*, Wadsworth, Belmont, CA (1993)

## Anthologies:

Alison M. Jaggar & Paula S. Rothenberg, (ed.), *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), McGraw-Hill, NY (1993)

Janet A. Kourany, James P. Sterba, & Rosemarie Tong (ed.), *Feminist Philosophies*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ (1992)

Nancy Tuana & Rosemarie Tong, (ed.), *Feminism & Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation, and Application*, Westview, Boulder, CO (1995)

## I. “EARLY” SCHOOLS OF FEMINIST THOUGHT/ THEORY

### LATE 18<sup>TH</sup> & 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY EQUAL RIGHTS FEMINISM:

Women are the natural and moral equals of men and must be given equal political and civil rights, most especially the right to vote and to run for and hold political offices (i.e. “suffrage” or “enfranchisement”).

Mary Wollstonecraft – *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)

Harriet Taylor – “Enfranchisement of Women” (1860s)

John Stuart Mill – *On the Subjection of Women* (1869)

### 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FEMININE FEMINISM:

Women’s innate feminine nature is morally superior to men’s innate masculine nature because it is less aggressive and more cooperative and caring. Thus, women ought to promote their feminine natures (and feminine values in society as a whole) and women ought to be promoted to more positions of power and authority in society so that better decisions will be made concerning social, economic, and political institutions, policies, and programs. In addition to the Women’s Suffrage Movement many of these 19<sup>th</sup> Century feminists were heavily involved in the abolitionist (anti-slavery) movement before (and during) the American Civil War, as well as in the temperance (anti-alcohol) movement since they saw alcohol as

a great social evil; especially for the women and children of alcoholic, often abusive husbands and fathers.

Catherine Beecher & Harriet Beecher Stowe – *The New Housekeeper’s Manuel* (1873)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton – *The Women’s Bible* (1895/98) (President of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, 1869-1892)

Susan B. Anthony – President of the National Women’s Suffrage Movement (1892-1900)

### **EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY “RADICAL” FEMINISM:**

The basic thesis of this feminist school (as I am defining it) is that, in order to be fulfilled, avant garde views of women and “women’s liberation” (to use a term not then current) must be joined with avant garde political or cultural views and movements. The political wing of this school of thought held that the aspirations of women for their freedom and equality is intimately tied to the creation of a free and just society and, thus, to political movements aimed at creating such a society. This society was usually taken to be some form of socialism – thus, presaging contemporary Socialist Feminism – but these feminist theorists (and activists) differed in their views of socialism (and the movements associated with its creation). Thus, Gilmore was an advocate of non-Marxian (and non-Anarchist) socialism, perhaps most similar to what has become known as Social Democracy; Luxemburg was a Marxist socialist (who was assassinated in the 1919 revolutionary uprising in Germany); and Goldman was an Anarchist socialist (known for – among other things – being arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned in 1916 for the radical act of handing out birth control literature in New York City). In the cultural wing of Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century “Radical” Feminism (as I am defining it), such women as the influential avant garde writer and cultural figure Gertrude Stein – who was part of the so-called “Lost Generation” of literary expatriate Americans in Paris in the 1920s and 30s – openly flaunted the restrictions on women not assuming masculine gender roles. Stein, for example, was the male gendered partner of Alice B. Toklas and, as such, would discuss literature, art, and current events with Hemingway, Picasso, and other (primarily male) writers, artists, and cultural luminaries while Toklas would be performing the traditional feminine role of serving food – including, of course, her famous brownies – making people comfortable, etc.

Charlotte Perkins Gilmore (Socialist) – *Men and Women: The Economic Connection* (1898)

Rosa Luxemburg (Marxist) – *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Mary Alice-Waters, ed.), Pathfinder Press, 1970.

[See also: Raya Dunayevskaya – *Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution* (1982).]

Emma Goldman (Anarchist) – *The Traffic in Women and Other Essays on Feminism* (published 1970)

[See also: C. Falk – *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*]

Gertrude Stein (Avant Garde Writer) – *Autobiography of Alice. B. Toklas* (1933)

## **II. LATE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SCHOOLS OF FEMINIST THOUGHT/ THEORY**

**LIBERAL FEMINISM:** discrimination and violence against women must be eliminated and can be eliminated in most contemporary societies by changes in the legal system and by enlightening the public (by “consciousness raising”). Women must be given equal opportunities and it is important to get more women into positions of power and authority. Abortion rights, equal opportunity laws, affirmative action (if necessary), stronger anti-rape laws, laws against domestic violence, fairer divorce and family support laws, women’s self-help groups, etc. are the primary ways of achieving women’s liberation (i.e. the elimination of women’s oppression). But all of this can be accomplished within a liberal capitalist society.

Gloria Steinem (President of NOW; founding editor of *MS Magazine*; former Playboy Bunny) – *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (1983)  
Bella Abzug (Long term U.S. Congress woman from New York.) -- *Gender Gap: Bella Abzug's Guide to Political Power for American Women* (by Bella Abzug with Mim Kelber)  
Kate Millett – *Sexual Politics* (1970)  
Betty Friedan – *The Feminine Mystique* (1974)  
*The Second Stage* (1981)

LIBERAL FEMINIST THEORIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE:

Susan Moller Okin – *Women in Western Political Thought* (1979)  
*Justice, Gender, and the Family* (1989)  
Carole Pateman – *The Sexual Contract* (1988)  
Martha Nussbaum – *Sex and Social Justice* (1999)

MARXIST FEMINIST THEORY: Although discrimination against and oppression of women is a reality in class societies, these forms of oppression are somehow reducible to or at least intimately linked with class divisions. In any case, these problems are insolvable outside of socialism. Thus, the feminist movement ought to ally itself with the Marxist movement and tradition.

Evelyn Reed – *Problems of Women's Liberation* (1970)  
Angela Davis – *Women, Race, and Class* (1981)  
Heidi Hartmann – “Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex (1976) and  
“The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More  
Progressive Union”

SOCIALIST FEMINISM: A combination of Marxist and Radical (Reproductive) Feminist Perspectives (as defined below): Class divisions are immensely important but Gender divisions and oppression are independent of Class divisions and are equally as important. Although they agree with Marxist Feminists that problems of women's oppression are insolvable outside of socialism, they do not agree with Marxist Feminists that eliminating Class divisions and oppression – by the creation of a socialist society – will automatically eliminate gender divisions and oppression. Rather, they contend that both must be overcome for the creation of a truly just, equal, and free society. However, socialist feminists don't necessarily accept the more radical proposals of the Radical (Reproductive) feminists, such as equal responsibility for pregnancy between men and women.

Juliet Mitchell – *Women's Estate* (1966)  
Barbara Ehrenreich – “What is Socialist Feminism?” (1976)  
Alison Jaggar – *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983)  
Zillah Eisenstein – *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (1986)  
Ann Ferguson – *Sexual Democracy: Women, Oppression, and Revolution* (1991)  
Nancy Fraser – *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (1989)  
Iris Marion Young – *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990)  
Iris Marion Young – *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (1990)

**RADICAL (REPRODUCTIVE) FEMINIST THEORY:** Discrimination against and oppression of women has nothing – or at least very little – to do with class divisions. On this Feminist view, women’s oppression is primarily the result of the fact that women are saddled with the responsibility of bearing and raising children (which is partly due to biological causes and partly due to culture). The solution to women’s oppression is, therefore, to abolish this division of responsibility between women and men as much as possible by, first, getting men to take equal responsibility in the raising of children and, secondly, if technologically possible, to get men to take equal responsibility in getting pregnant and bearing children ... which, believe it or not, is probably technologically possible even as we speak. (It’s already been done with male mice which have had fertilized ova implanted into their abdominal cavities and have had the baby mice delivered by cesarean section at term.)

Shalumith Firestone – *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970)

Adrienne Rich – *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976)

Mary O’Brien – *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981)

**RADICAL GENDER-SYSTEM FEMINISM:** Class divisions are not necessarily linked to the discrimination and oppression women face, nor is the solution primarily one of reproduction and child rearing practices as some (earlier) Radical Feminists had argued. These problems are the result of the fact that all contemporary societies are shot through and through with a patriarchal (or even “phallo-centric”) gender-system that is not only in legal, economic, social, and political institutions but in the minds of most people in these societies, including most women. To overcome women’s oppression and discrimination this gender system must be completely abolished in all realms, including the realm of ideology. People must be enculturated into non-patriarchal attitudes, values, and ways of thinking. Gender roles ought to be abolished. Most Radical Feminists are opposed to the “institution” of romantic love and many are opposed to women dressing in a feminine or “sexy” fashion or using makeup for these purposes. In some more severe forms this leads to Political Correctness concerning people’s speech as well as a call for the complete abolition of all forms of pornography and perhaps also erotica (even including the public display of classical artworks depicting female nudes). In its most extreme forms it leads to Feminist Separatism and Lesbian Feminist Separatism, as mentioned below. However, not all Feminists are even in favor of abolishing all kinds of pornography. In fact, FACT (Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce) is firmly against this on freedom of expression grounds.

Catherine MacKinnon – *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and the Law* (1977)

*Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989)

Linda J. Nicholson – *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory I the Age of the Family* (1980)

Sandra Lee Bartkey – *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (1990)

**RADICAL SEPERATIST FEMINISM:** To solve the problems of women’s discrimination and oppression women must, so far as it is possible, secede from male-dominated society by forming their own social, economic and even political institutions. According to Marilyn Frye, women should separate “from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined, male-dominated and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege – this separation being initiated or maintained at will, *by women.*” However, both heterosexual and lesbian women are invited to participate in this process. (Apparently, straight women need not be discouraged from having private relationships with men in all cases.)

Marilyn Frye – *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (1983)

*Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism, 1976-1992* (1992)

Adrienne Rich – “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980)

RADICAL LESBIAN SEPERATIST FEMINISM: This position endorses all of the Radical Feminist Separatist position but adds that women should also secede from the “institution of heterosexuality.” If women want to have intimate sexual partners they should choose other women and shun men. In some of her writings, Andrea Dworkin even claims that any sexual activity between persons of the opposite sex which involves penetration should be classified as rape (whether or not it is consensual).

Mary Daly – *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973)

*Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978)

Andrea Dworkin – *Woman Hating* (1974)

*Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics* (1981)

*Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (1984)

*Letters from a War Zone* (1988)

*Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1989)

Ti-Grace Atkinson – *Amazon Odyssey* (1974)

Jill Johnston – *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (1974)

Charlotte Bunch – “Lesbians in Revolt” in *Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement* (1975)

Sarah Lucia Hoaglund – *Lesbian Ethics* (1988)

THE “FEMINIST WARS”: In the 1990s a “war” erupted between Feminists and Anti-Feminists in general and also between some Radical Feminist theorists and certain Liberal (and Communitarian) Feminist theorists. In an well-known, long-running debate between the Communitarian philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers and a number of Radical Feminists, for example, Sommers maintained that women could wear make up, dress in a feminine or “sexy” fashion, and even accept the “institution” of romantic love and still be Feminists while her opponents denied this claim. One locus of the debate was actually over whether or not a Feminist could fail to be appalled by Reg Butler carrying a protesting Scarlet O’Hara up the staircase in “Gone with the Wind,” the Radical Feminists holding that it must be condemned as a prelude to rape and Sommers holding that it may have only been a prelude to rough but consensual sex.

Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991)

Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism?*(1994)

PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINIST THEORY: Utilizes Freudian and Post-Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory to argue that destructive gender roles result from certain wide-spread parenting practices or sexual taboos. Some argue for dual parenting (by both male and female care-givers) as the key to overcoming these destructive gender roles. Others argue that the incest taboo and even the taboo concerning adults having sexual contact with children ought to be done away with! However, there is no universal agreed upon doctrines within this school.

Juliet Mitchell – *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974)

Nancy Chodorow – *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978)

Dorothy Dinnerstein – *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and the Human Malaise* (1977)

Judith Butler – “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse” (1990)

FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE: A return to feminine ethics and an endorsement of essential psychological differences between men and women. It is claimed that, statistically speaking, women are more empathetic and caring than men and that this type of ethical perspective rather

than being undervalued (as it currently is in most societies) ought to be properly valued and utilized. Women are often in a better position than men to make certain kinds of ethical judgments and even public policy decisions.

Carol Gilligan – *In Another Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982)

Nell Harding – *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984)

Sara Ruddick – *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989)

Rita C. Manning – *Speaking from the Heart: A Feminist Perspective on Ethics* (1992)

CONTINENTAL FEMINIST THEORY: Primarily existentialist and post-structuralist/post-modernist approaches to feminist theory. One would have to study these theories to understand how they are supposed to apply to women's discrimination and oppression. Beauvoir's view seems to have a lot to do with the "objectification" by "the other," i.e. taken to be an object rather than a subject as a woman is often taken under the male "gaze" which regards her as a sexual object. From (the admittedly) little I know of the post-structuralist/post-modernist tradition, I would say that it tends to take human nature as a blank slate and gender roles and identities (and other personality characteristics) to be completely socially/culturally constructed. This makes sense of Monique Wittig's claim that "one is not born a woman": being a woman (or girl) is a socially constructed identity; thus, if a biologically female human is not socialized into this (contingent) gender role then that female is not a "girl" or "woman." This tradition also seems to take most (if not all) social and political problems to be matters of language use and ideology and, thus, their solutions to lay in changing language use and ideology (as opposed to what others might describe as the real material social, economic, and political structures that oppress women (and others).

Simone de Beauvoir – *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (tr. 1967) (Existentialist)

*The Second Sex* (tr. 1974)

Julia Kristeva – "Women's Time" (1981) (Post-modernist)

Helene Cixous – "Sorties" (1971) (Post-modernist)

Monique Wittig – "One is Not Born a Woman" (1979) (Post-modernist)

Luce Irigaray – *The Sex which is Not One* (1985) (Post-modernist)

Chris Weedon – *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) (Post-modernist)

MULTI-CULTURAL FEMINISM: Both class divisions and gender divisions are important in explaining the discrimination against and oppression of women but an equally important third factor is race and ethnicity. All must be taken into consideration for an adequate account of all women's oppression and recommendations concerning how to overcome it.

Angela Davis – *Women, Culture and Politics* (1990)

Alice Walker – *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1973)

*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984)

bell hooks – *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981)

*Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989)

Audre Lorde – *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984)

Elizabeth V. Spelman – *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988)

THIRD WORLD/COSMOPOLITAN FEMINISM:

This school accepts all that Multi-cultural Feminism claims but adds that a fourth important factor is the problems and perspectives of women in the developing world, which are very important since they may be significantly different from those of women in the economically more developed world.

Vandana Shiva – *Close to Home: Women Reconnect Ecology, Health and Development Worldwide*  
Charlotte Bunch – “Prospects for Global Feminism” (in *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action, Essays 1968-1988*) (1987)  
Barbara Ehrenrich & Annette Fuentes – *Women in the Global Factory* (1984)

### ECO-FEMINISM:

Claims that there is some kind of essential connection between women’s oppression and the exploitation of nature and, thus, between the feminist and environmental movements. For some, such as Warren and Plumwood, this connection seems to be primarily conceptual and, thus, the solution lies in changing people’s consciousnesses. For others, such as Merchant and Shiva, the connection seems to be more empirical: women’s oppression leads to environmentally unsound practices and policies. In order to treat the environment properly we must treat women properly; in particular, we must empower women so that they have power over decisions concerning their bodies, their reproductive lives, their social existence, their livelihood or living situation, and the local (and even broader) economic, social, and political circumstances they must live within and contend with.

Carolyn Merchant – *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Liveable World* (1982)  
*The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Evolution* (1983)  
Karen Warren – “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections” (1990)  
“The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism” (1990)  
Val Plumwood – “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism” (1991)  
Susan Griffin – *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*  
Vandana Shiva – *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989)  
Victoria Davion – “How Feminist is Ecofeminism?” (1994)