

“I Am Not a Feminist, But . . .”: How Feminism Became the F-Word

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IF *PMLA* INVITES US TO REFLECT ON THE STATE OF FEMINIST THEORY TODAY, IT MUST BE BECAUSE THERE IS A PROBLEM. IS FEMINIST THEORY thought to be in trouble because feminism is languishing? Or because there is a problem with theory? Or—as it seems to me—both? *Theory* is a word usually used about work done in the poststructuralist tradition. (Luce Irigaray and Michel Foucault are “theory”; Simone de Beauvoir and Ludwig Wittgenstein are not.) The poststructuralist paradigm is now exhausted. We are living through an era of “crisis,” as Thomas Kuhn would call it, an era in which the old is dying and the new has not yet been born (74–75). The fundamental assumptions of feminist theory in its various current guises (queer theory, postcolonial feminist theory, transnational feminist theory, psychoanalytic feminist theory, and so on) are still informed by some version of poststructuralism. No wonder, then, that so much feminist work today produces only tediously predictable lines of argument.

This is not a problem for feminist theory alone. The feeling of exhaustion, of domination by a theoretical *doxa* that no longer has anything new to say, is just as prevalent in nonfeminist theory. For more meaningful work to emerge, we shall have to move beyond the old paradigm. Theorists, whether they are feminists or not, need to rethink their most fundamental assumptions about language and meaning, the relation between language and power, language and human community, the body and the soul (or whatever we want to call the inner life).

Feminist theory is sustained by feminism. Today, however, the future of feminism is in doubt. Since the mid-1990s, I have noticed that most of my students no longer make feminism their central political and personal project. At Duke I occasionally teach an undergraduate seminar called Feminist Classics. In the first session, I ask the students whether they consider themselves to be feminists. The answer is usually no. When I ask them if they are in favor of freedom, equality, and justice for women, the answer is always yes. “Doesn’t this mean that you are feminists after all?” I ask. The answer is usually, “Oh, well, if *that’s* all you mean by feminism, then we are

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feminists. But we would never *call* ourselves feminists." When I ask why they wouldn't, a long, involved discussion slowly reveals that on my liberal, privileged American campus, young women who would never put up with legal or institutional injustice believe that if they were to call themselves feminists, other people would think that they must be strident, domineering, aggressive, and intolerant and—worst of all—that they must hate men.¹

Of course, some young women gladly call themselves feminists today. What I find unsettling is that there are so few of them at a time when at least some feminist views are shared by most women and men. After all, women who sign up for a course called *Feminist Classics* are not usually against feminism, yet they are determined to keep the dreaded F-word at arm's length. We are witnessing the emergence of a whole new generation of women who are careful to preface every gender-related claim that just might come across as unconventional with "I am not a feminist, but. . ."

Conservative Extremists

What has caused the stunning disconnect between the idea of freedom, justice, and equality for women and the word *feminism*? One reason is certainly the success of the conservative campaign against feminism in the 1990s, when some extremely harsh things were said by conservatives with high media profiles. In 1992 Pat Robertson infamously declared, "The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."² The same year, Rush Limbaugh did his bit for patriarchy by popularizing the term "feminazis":

I prefer to call the most obnoxious feminists what they really are: feminazis. [A friend of mine] coined the term to describe any female

who is intolerant of any point of view that challenges militant feminism. I often use it to describe women who are obsessed with perpetuating a modern-day holocaust: abortion. . . .

A feminazi is a woman to whom the most important thing in life is seeing to it that as many abortions as possible are performed. Their unspoken reasoning is quite simple. Abortion is the single greatest avenue for militant women to exercise their quest for power and advance their belief that men aren't necessary. (193)

Some of Robertson's and Limbaugh's extreme claims have disappeared from view. The reference to witchcraft has had no shelf life. Robertson's accusations of socialism and anti-capitalism have not lived on either, not because socialism has become more acceptable in the United States but because capitalism has enjoyed virtually unchallenged global rule since 1989. The antiabortion rhetoric has not changed much since 1992: such language remains as divisive as ever. The truly distressing part is that the rest of this demagoguery has become part of the mainstream of American culture.

Robertson begins, cleverly, by splitting feminism off from its historical roots, namely the demand for equal rights for women. This move trades on the fact that in 1992 feminists had succeeded in gaining more rights for women than ever before. Because equal rights have become generally accepted, Robertson implies, that demand can no longer define feminism. Instead, feminists are presented as irrational extremists who want far more than equal rights: they hate the family, detest their husbands (if they have any), and go on to become lesbians. (Robertson takes for granted that the idea of becoming a lesbian will be distasteful to right-thinking Americans.) By calling feminists child killers, he reinforces the theme of the destruction of the family and casts feminists as demonic destroyers, the polar opposites of the angelic Christian mothers who love their husbands and cherish their children. Feminists, the message is, are full of hate.

Limbaugh's infamous neologism foregrounds abortion: feminists are nazis, gleefully fueling the holocaust of unborn children. But this is not all there is to it. The claim is, after all, that a "feminazi" is "any female who is intolerant of any point of view that challenges militant feminism." If we wonder what "militant feminism" is, we learn, at the end of the quotation, that "militant women" are characterized by their "quest for power" and their "belief that men aren't necessary."

However objectionable they may be, Robertson's and Limbaugh's vociferous rantings outline three fundamental ideas about feminism that have become virtual commonplaces across the political spectrum today: (1) feminists hate men and consider all women innocent victims of evil male power; (2) feminists are particularly dogmatic, inflexible, intolerant, and incapable of questioning their own assumptions; and (3) since every sensible person is in favor of equality and justice for women, feminists are a bunch of fanatics, a lunatic fringe, an extremist, power-hungry minority whose ideas do not merit serious assessment.

Disenchanted Feminists

If such ideas had been promoted only by extreme conservatives, they would never have gained widespread acceptance. In the 1990s, however, similar ideas were also voiced by liberals and even the left. Notably, a whole range of feminists and ex-feminists, or self-styled feminists wanting to remake feminism in their own image, set up the same clichés as straw targets, the better to claim their own difference from them. In the 1990s an array of books promoted various "new" or "reformed" kinds of feminism—"equity feminism," "power feminism," "tough cookie feminism"—and they all appeared to assume that it was necessary to start by attacking feminism in general.³

Let us begin with the ideas that feminists hate men and that they take an uncritical view of women. In the 1990s many would-

be reformers of feminism spent a lot of time distancing themselves from such ideas, thus reinforcing the thought that most feminists were in fact given to simplistic and melodramatic thinking. "[M]en are not guilty simply because they are men and women are not beyond reproach simply because they are women," Katie Roiphe complained in 1994 (xvii).⁴ In the same year, one of America's leading feminist bashers, Christina Hoff Sommers, went so far as to claim that feminists hate men so much that they also hate all the women who refuse to hate men: "no group of women can wage war on men without at the same time denigrating the women who respect those men" (256). "Gender feminists," as Sommers calls them, constantly "condescend to, patronize, and pity the benighted females who, because they have been 'socialized' in the sex/gender system, cannot help wanting the wrong things in life. Their disdain for the hapless victims of patriarchy is rarely acknowledged" (258).

In *Sacred Cows* (1999), the British columnist Rosalind Coward, once a well-known feminist theorist, proclaimed that she could no longer consider herself a feminist, since she no longer shared the "fundamental feminist convictions that women can never be powerful in relationship to men, and conversely, that men can never occupy a position of vulnerability" (6). In America the conservative Cathy Young declared almost the same thing in a 1999 book symptomatically called *Ceasefire! Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality*: "By focusing on women's private grievances, feminism not only promotes a kind of collective feminine narcissism . . . but links itself to the myth of female moral superiority and the demonization of men" (6). Even an otherwise stalwart feminist such as Susan Faludi was seduced by the idea: "Blaming a cabal of men has taken feminism about as far as it can go," she wrote in *Stiffed*, her 1999 book about the plight of men in America (605).

Then there is the charge that feminists are a bunch of fanatics, incapable of questioning their own assumptions, intolerant of criticism, hell-bent on suppressing opposition—in short, the Savonarolas of contemporary gender politics. This too was taken up by women with competing projects, not least by Camille Paglia, who in 1992 claimed that “feminism is in deep trouble, that it is now overrun by Moonies or cultists who are desperate for a religion and who, in their claims of absolute truth, are ready to suppress free thought and free speech” (*Sex* 304).

The complaint that feminists are a bunch of dogmatic Stalinists is particularly useful for people with books to promote. If the author insists that she is writing against an “establishment” ferociously opposed to her views, even tired old thoughts can be presented as new and radical. Perhaps that is why Roiphe’s *The Morning After* also denounced feminism for promoting “[t]he lethal belief that we should not publicly think or analyze or question our assumptions” (xxi).⁵ According to Roiphe, the feminist thought police had even taken over the media: “On issues like sexual harassment and date rape, there has been one accepted position in the mainstream media recycled and given back to us again and again in slightly different forms,” she complained (xxii). By contrast, her own book is presented as a courageous act of dissent from such all-pervasive dogmatism.⁶

If Roiphe thought of herself as a *dissenter*, Young, who grew up in the Soviet Union, called herself a *dissident* (10). Alluding to the courageous resistance of the anti-Stalinist dissidents of Eastern Europe—the Solzhenitsyns and Sakharovs of the cold-war era—the word casts the feminist basher as a lone voice speaking up against the gender gulags constructed by the feminist central committee that runs the country, once perhaps the land of the free but now delivered up to the “radical feminist establishment.”⁷ Given such conspiracy theories, it is sobering to discover that these dissidents seem to have suffered no persecution by

the feminist politburo, nor have their books ever been burned on feminazi bonfires.

The most insidious form of feminist bashing subtly promotes the idea that feminists are a lunatic fringe, divorced from the preoccupations of ordinary women. Whereas conservatives will say this openly, in the books by feminists and ex-feminists from the 1990s the same work is done through a series of vague, disparaging references to what “some” or “many” feminists do or think. Such formulations have now become ubiquitous, not least in liberal newspapers and magazines.

Reviewing Faludi’s *Stiffed* in 1999, Michiko Kakutani casually remarked, “[This book] eschews the reductive assumptions purveyed by many feminists” (B8). Here the word doing the dirty ideological work is “many.” “Some,” “most,” “much,” “often,” “certain,” and so on work in the same way. “A dogged stupidity pervades much feminist writing about sexuality,” Daphne Patai claimed in *Heterophobia* (178). A young British feminist basher, Natasha Walter, piled up the modifiers: “the theme that has *often* been given *most* attention by *recent* feminists is the theme of hostility [toward heterosexuality]. The rejection of heterosexual romance came to dominate *certain* feminist arguments” (110; my italics). Such formulations enable the speaker to avoid having to name the “some,” the “many,” and the “certain” feminists who are said to espouse them. (This has the added advantage of sidestepping the pesky question of evidence.) No need, either, to ask whether *any* feminists have ever maintained the “reductive assumptions” manufactured for the purpose of presenting the writer as the soul of reason.

The subtle little sideswipes against “some” or “many” or “certain” feminists gain ideological power precisely from their vagueness, which acts like a blank screen for readers to project their worst fears on, thus enabling the feminist basher to trade on every negative stereotype of feminism in the cultural imagination. The seemingly mild-mannered references

in fact mobilize a set of unspoken, fantasmatic pictures. “Some feminists are reductive.” “Many feminists hate men.” Now it’s up to us to imagine exactly what the reductive man haters do and where they are. In this insidious way, bra-burning lesbians on horseback, castrating bitches eating men for breakfast, or whining victim-feminists crying date rape and sexual harassment without the slightest provocation can easily become the secret backdrop of the apparently innocuous references to “some” or “many” or “certain” feminists.⁸

A Future for Feminist Theory?

I have tried to show that in the 1990s a wave of books and essays by malcontent feminists and ex-feminists, or women with various ideas of how to change feminism, furthered the conservative feminist-bashing agenda. Some did it consciously; others simply played into anti-feminist hands. The result is the situation we see today: *feminism* has been turned into the unspeakable F-word, not just among students but in the media too. It is no coincidence that the stream of more or less popular books trying to reform feminism has ceased to flow. Nor have I read much about feminism in newspapers and magazines lately: it is as if the issue is so dead that it is no longer worth mentioning. Instead I see an ever-escalating number of articles on how hard it is for women to combine work and motherhood and how young women today feel free to forget the “strident” or “dogmatic” feminism of their mothers’ generation. Women who in the 1970s might have turned to a feminist analysis of their situation now turn to self-help books, some of which in fact hand out a fair amount of basic, sensible feminist advice but—of course—without ever using the F-word. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the very word *feminism* has become toxic in large parts of American culture.

The complaints of the feminist-bashing women of the 1990s conjure up an image of the feminist as an emotionally unresponsive,

rejecting, cold, domineering, and powerful mother figure. My students take the strident, aggressive, man-hating feminist to be an image of what they would turn into if they were to become feminists. What they all see, I fear, is a woman who cannot hope to be loved, not so much because she is assumed to be unattractive (although there is that too) as because she doesn’t seem to know what love is.

This image of feminists and feminism is horrifying and reveals a dire state of affairs. Clearly academic feminism—feminist criticism and feminist theory—has done nothing to improve the general cultural image of feminism over the past fifteen years or so. This may not be surprising: in America the divide between academia and the general culture is particularly deep and difficult to cross. Yet if we—academic feminists—do not take up the challenge, can we be sure that others will?

If feminism is to have a future, feminist theory—feminist thought, feminist writing—must be able to show that feminism has wise and useful things to say to women who struggle to cope with everyday problems. We need to show that good feminist writing can make more sense than self-help books when it comes to understanding love and relationships, for example. We need to show that a feminist analysis of women’s lives can make a real difference to those who take it seriously. That is exactly what Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* did in 1949. A magnificent example of what feminist theory can be at its best, *The Second Sex* ranges with style and wit from history and philosophy through sex, sexuality, and motherhood to clothing and makeup. Beauvoir’s book is at once profoundly philosophical and profoundly personal, and because it takes the ordinary and the everyday as the starting point for serious thought, it speaks to ordinary readers as well as to professional philosophers.⁹

Beauvoir’s insights remain fundamental to contemporary feminism. But she analyzed the world she lived in. We need to analyze our own world. A *Second Sex* for our time would have

to have a genuinely global range, illuminate everyday life, be readable by academics and nonacademics alike, yet still develop genuinely new ideas about what women's oppression today consists in, so that it can point the way toward (further) liberation in every field of life. It would have to take culture, literature, and the arts as seriously as it does history, philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis, economics, politics, and religion. It would have to deal with personal development, work, education, love, relationships, old age, and death, while fully taking account of all the changes in women's situation since 1949. Given the amount of research on women that has been done over the past fifty years, it may no longer be possible for any one person to do all this. Perhaps we should hope for a handful of books to take the place of *The Second Sex* rather than just one.

Beauvoir was committed to political and individual freedom and to serious philosophical exploration of women's everyday life. To me, these remain exemplary commitments for a feminist, and poststructuralism has not been overly friendly toward them. In 1949, moreover, Beauvoir was a member of an inspiring new intellectual movement. As she was writing *The Second Sex*, she felt the excitement of deploying new and powerful ideas to generate insights in every field. Women coming to intellectual maturity at the tail end of poststructuralism have to struggle free of the legacy of an intellectual tradition that has been fully explored. We won't get a fresh and freshly convincing analysis of women's situation until we find new theoretical paradigms. Perhaps the new feminist voices we all need to hear are getting ready to speak right now.

NOTES

1. Feminist Classics always has men in it too. They usually have different reasons for not wanting to call themselves feminists, which I shall not discuss here.

2. Schwartz and Cooper. This quotation quickly turned up on T-shirts. Today it is all over the Internet. (When I Googled the exact wording of the whole quotation, I got almost ten thousand hits.) Feminist bashing is of course not new. Perhaps it all began over two hundred years ago when Horace Walpole called Mary Wollstonecraft a "hyena in petticoats" (Janes 299).

3. "Equity feminism" is Christina Hoff Sommer's creation, "power feminism" comes from Naomi Wolf, "tough cookie feminism" is one of Camille Paglia's many creative formulations for her inimitable brand of thought (*Vamps and Tramps* xii).

4. The original book was published in 1993. My quotations come from the paperback, which was published in 1994, with a new introduction.

5. Not surprisingly, in her next book Paglia praised *The Morning After* as evidence of her own growing influence (*Vamps and Tramps* xvi).

6. "Intolerance of dissent" is the refrain of Roiphe's introduction to the paperback edition, published in 1994 (xiii-xxiii).

7. On the back cover of Young's *Ceasefire!*, Sommers thoughtfully provides an enemy, proclaiming the book a "brilliantly reasoned indictment of the radical feminist establishment." Sommers, incidentally, is the only other feminist singled out for praise alongside Roiphe by Camille Paglia (*Vamps and Tramps* xvi).

8. The phrase "lesbians on horseback" comes from Stephanie Theobald (85), who has it from the British columnist Julie Burchill.

9. These are themes I explore in *Sex, Gender and the Body*.

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