

Feminist History and Feminism and the Future

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ABSTRACT

Feminist activists and scholars can benefit from understanding and drawing from the history of feminist thought and action. In all disciplines, scholars recognize the value of understanding history. We can draw from both the successes and the failures of history. One possible exception is feminist action and thought. The ahistorical approach each new generation of feminists seem to take to action and theory is regrettable. It mirrors the absence of women's struggles and accomplishments in traditional history books. It ignores the leadership and courage of past feminists from whom we can learn. It prevents feminist scholars from adopting a common purpose that will allow feminism to finally address the criticisms that it is not an inclusive movement, but instead, one riddled with classism and racism. Finally, the outright refusal to consider old ideas conceals the promise of "old" ideas concerning human flourishing and progress.

Keywords: Feminist History, Human Flourishing, Sexist Oppression, Public And Private, Feminist Definition

INTRODUCTION

In 1931 Mary Ritter Beard published *On Understanding Women*, in which she argues that what we now call "first wave feminism" fell victim to the account of history men had been telling for thousands of years. While arguing for legal equality, first wave feminists accepted that women did not play critical roles in the shaping of societies throughout history. Historically, women were relegated to the domestic sphere, while men created the public sphere of social and political action. However, Ritter Beard argues, despite being dropped from the history books, "[w]omen have always been alive to everything that was going on in the world. They always will be."¹ Ritter Beard makes the case that historians and feminists ignored the contributions of women throughout history. She imagines a scholar in the twenty-fifth century looking at the history books men wrote. That scholar would assume that all women ever did was bear children. They contributed nothing to science, government, ethics, and philosophy. However, she argues that there were always women who found loopholes in the spoken and unspoken rules that said they did not belong. Even if there were not numerous women who contributed against the odds at all times, numerous texts now attest to her insight that there were always some women making a difference.²

Arguably, in all contemporary "waves" of feminism, we have tried to take an ahistorical approach. The ideas of first and second wave feminists, even some third wave feminists, are

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“outdated” or “bad.” Feminists of the past fell into essentialist traps, defined “gender” too narrowly, and failed to think in an intersectional manner. So, with each new wave, we start afresh. We behave as historians historically behaved, and write out the feminists who have worked before us. As Jessa Crispin argues, with feminism being increasingly popular on social media and among famous singers and actors, it has become:

“important to state publicly, as many current feminist writers have, that at certain points feminism ‘went too far.’ All those scary women like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, Shulamith Firestone and Germaine Greer – who are condemned by this younger generation of feminists much more often than they are read – become scapegoats as their work is willfully misunderstood and misrepresented in an attempt to convince readers and potential feminists of the universal feminists’ reasonableness. You can, they insist, still be a feminist and shave your legs, fuck men, consume misogynistic culture. Look, we’re doing it, we call ourselves feminists, you can too.”³

This ahistorical approach is a mistake. It leaves feminism still unable to address its most damning criticism: namely, that it is not really an inclusive movement. In addition, it perpetuates the false notion that women, particularly young women, do not have historical examples of great women from whom they can learn. It also hinders planning for the future of feminism. Our refusal to learn from our past leaves the movement fractured, unable to move the dial significantly on issues of both local and global importance such as women and poverty, inequitable distribution of family planning knowledge and technology, sexual assault, and many other issues.

There are many ways scholars wrote women out of history. For example, as Virginia Held argues, many philosophers identified reason with maleness and justified this in terms of the distinction between the public and the private.⁴ The claim was that in public realm, men use reason to transcend their animal nature and consequently create human history through government, law, philosophy, and art. “Man” even overcomes his human mortality in creating human history in all of these areas. Reason, historically, has always been associated with morality. Women, however, were relegated to the private realm, where their creative act was to reproduce. Reproduction was thought of as biological, governed by instinct and nature. Most historical philosophers did not think of women as capable of transcending their animal natures through their roles in the private realm because female creativity is simply a function of what they, by their natures, do. Consequently, women were not thought of as transcending their animal natures and thus, what guides them is not morality, but their physicality.⁵

Ritter Beard argues that because first wave feminists accepted the version of history male

historians told, in their early twentieth century efforts to enter the halls of the academy and the professions they took on the attitude of discipleship. Believing there were no or few women in history from whom they could learn how to shape civilization, they learned the ropes in the traditional ways of men. She laments that women took on the “mantle of discipleship” without thinking about whether there are better roles or jobs they could do, better ways that they could contribute. Knowing only the history of men, they did not understand what women had and could accomplish.⁶ In 1932 she wondered what the value of women getting Ph.D.s really is if all they do is engage in their professions as men do, rather than use it for higher purposes:

“If the formal education which they have won the right to enjoy does not turn to ashes in their hands, women must help socialize it, to render it of permanent value by stretching it beyond the privileged and the idle services of a class, to make it of deeper consequence than was the Renaissance, to make it a reflection of the world spirit and an agent of humanitarian evolution. ... They must examine their latest privilege in the light of common needs and see what it has to contribute to the total improvement of mankind. Otherwise it is but a laborious and casual way of filling up gaps in employment, a sheer amusement, or a mistaken choice of equipment for the harsh necessities of economic life. ... From the man’s world hints begin to come of new planning, of fresh intellectual and economic excursions. What is coming from the woman’s?”⁷

Feminists today ignore feminist history to their peril. There is much to learn about the future from the past. For example, Andrea Dworkin who argues that the fear that women have walking outside at night is an attack on the most basic kind of freedom. She quotes Hannah Arendt, who said:

“of all the specific liberties which may come into our minds when we hear the word ‘freedom,’ freedom of movement is historically the oldest and also the most elementary. Being able to depart for where we will is the prototypal gesture of being free, as limitation of freedom of movement has from time immemorial been the precondition for enslavement. Freedom of movement is also the indispensable condition for action, and it is in action that men primarily experience freedom in the world.”⁸

In making her “take back the night” case, Dworkin argues that because the vast majority of people who are sexually assaulted are women and girls and because this entails that on average men experience more freedom of movement and action than women, the ability of women to walk freely at night without fear of assault is what needs to change first. She argues that if we are going to begin to solve the problem of sexual assault, freedom of movement has to come before any other kind of freedom, because it is a pre-condition of any other kind of freedom. Freedom of speech does not help people if they are not free to move around or if they fear moving around. She argues

that when women struggle for freedom it is not safe for them to go out after dark. She argues that women do not need to be grateful that they can go to school, to work, during the day. Instead women need to be strong enough to stand up and fight to take back the night.⁹ What difference does it make if Dworkin also argues for many positions that we now find distasteful or that went “too far”? Virtually every philosopher will agree that Plato went too far with his theory of forms, developing a theory that amounts to an ontological swamp. Those same philosophers will argue that we can nevertheless learn much from him. This is true also of the feminists who went “too far.” Dworkin is right about freedom of movement. Most women are afraid if they are alone outside at night or when they come home to a dark empty house because they know they have less freedom of movement than men.

As is widely known, feminism has often been accused of benefiting primarily white middle class women. Consequently, some think of it as a classist and racist movement. bell hooks argues that the problem with feminism is that feminists have been unable to agree about what feminism is and how it should be defined. She argues that without a definition to which we can agree, feminists do not have the foundation they need to theorize, which is important to achieving feminist goals. As a result of the lack of agreement, ‘feminism’ has come to mean “anything goes.”¹⁰ She says, “what is meant by ‘anything goes’ is usually that any woman who wants social equality with men regardless of her political perspective (she can be a conservative right winger or a nationalist communist) can label herself feminist.”¹¹

She argues that ‘feminism’ is broadly defined as the women’s lib movement, which is “a movement that aims to make women the social equals of men.”¹² Singer Katy Perry famously said:

“One time, I said I wasn’t a feminist because I didn’t know what the word meant,” the 32-year-old singer revealed. “I was raised with this idea that it was just these angry women that were, like, not shaving their pits and burning their bras. And the reality is that if you look up the word ‘feminist’ in the dictionary, it really just says someone that wants equality for women. That’s it.”¹³

hooks thinks the “equality” definition is this broad definition that we find in the media, in magazines, popular literature, and so on. However, she identifies many problems with this definition. One problem is that men are not equal to each other, which raises the question: which men do women want to be equal to? Another issue concerns the concept of equality – what does it mean? If we look at the actual outcome of the past two hundred years of feminism, it is not too much of a challenge to show that what it has actually meant is that white middle class women

should be as educated as white middle class men and be economically stable (although never as stable as white middle class men) while at the same time remaining sexually subordinate (and being very sexually active).

hooks points out that white middle class women often embrace the definition that feminism is “a movement that aims to make women the social equals of men.”

Poor women, she argues, would not define feminism in the same way, because they know that women are oppressed in degrees, depending on class and race. They also know that many men in the poorer classes are exploited and oppressed. Since men in their class are also exploited and oppressed, they do not desire equality with them. A movement that defines feminism as having the goal of making women the social equals of men will likely affect middle class women in a positive way, as it has, but may not do much more than this.

hooks thinks that many women do not call themselves feminists or admit allegiance to feminist causes because they do not know what it would mean – they do not know what feminism means. Others distance themselves because the feminist movement has, in practice, been one aimed at the liberation of white women – they fear associating with a potentially racist movement. Homophobia keeps away some people who worry that the feminist movement is primarily a lesbian movement. Others are worried because the word ‘feminism’ is too political – too radical. Yet others worry about negative connotations more generally.

When feminists do attempt to define feminism, the classism of feminism emerges. Definitions of feminism usually fall squarely in the liberal framework and emphasize freedom and self-determination. For example, hooks discusses Barbara Berg’s definition from *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism*, where she defines feminism as a “broad movement embracing numerous phases of women’s emancipation.” Berg continues to explain:

It is the freedom to decide her own destiny; freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman’s right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that woman’s essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationships of her life.¹⁴

While there may be much of value in Berg’s expansion of her definition of feminism, hooks argues that it nevertheless romanticizes individual freedom as opposed to political action, and feminist political action is needed if feminism is going to improve the conditions of everyone’s

lives, not just particular groups.

hooks proposes that feminism can finally address its old problem of racism and classism if feminism is defined as “the struggle to end sexist oppression.”¹⁵ We need a definition like this because it is now well-known that when we focus on equality of opportunity, we find that we have done little to affect the societal roots of sexism.

hooks argues that the slogan: ‘the personal is political’ encouraged women to think about their own struggles and experiences with sexism in the context of their social situations. However, she thinks that a consequence of thinking about these experiences is that women failed to think deeply about the political and social reality and how it affects women more generally. It is important that we give our experiences a voice, but it is not enough to find our own voices. hooks argues that “[w]hen women internalized the idea that describing their own woe was synonymous with developing a critical political consciousness, the progress of feminist movement was stalled.”¹⁶ She argues that we need to move beyond our own experiences and think about the political reality of all women – we need to think outside of ourselves. Personal experiences are important, but without theory, they are just personal experiences. There is no clear way of dealing with those experiences or doing something about them if there is a lack of political theoretical understanding.

What is needed is a definition of feminism that illustrates the diversity in the lives of women, not one that ignores it. Feminists also have to move beyond the view that ‘men are the enemy’ or ‘men are the problem,’ and look to women themselves, as well as men, to see how we all participate in the perpetuation of sexism. Feminism involves a political commitment, which is much more serious than simply labeling oneself as a feminist. Feminism is a choice we make, and making that choice means involving oneself in a political struggle. hooks encourages a conceptual and lived shift, from saying of oneself “I am a feminist” to “I advocate feminism.”¹⁷ Such a shift will allow us to move away from identity and lifestyle politics to politics understood more broadly. It will also allow us to move away from notions of social equality and towards more theory, from which we can understand social and political realities. Finally, it will help us recognize the diversity of women’s lives, and hence the diversity of issues that theory and politics needs to be able to deal with.¹⁸

Suppose that within feminist circles we had adopted hooks’ definition of feminism as a

movement to end sexist oppression. Suppose that instead of thinking of feminism as an identity we can take on, it was an active, organized movement comprised of men and women who advocated in the political sphere to end sexist oppression. Kimberle Crenshaw might still have done us the great service of explaining why we need the concept of intersectionality.¹⁹ However, had we learned from the past, had we come together around an inclusive purpose, it is possible that by today, feminism could have done much more than it has to overcome the long-standing objection of classism and racism, beginning with Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech. It is critical that if feminism is to have a future that lifts us all up, it address the elephant in the room and deal with the charges of classism and racism in ways that genuinely impact people's lives. It is not enough for academic feminists to claim that they practice intersectionality when in reality feminism still largely benefits one group of women. With each generation of feminists convinced that their observations, experiences, and theories are superior to those of the past, we fail to do what we do in every other area of study and action: take from the past what is still valuable, from which we can learn and to whom we should give credit.

Women can learn from female role models throughout history. The ahistorical stance we take in feminist thought and scholarship deprives us of the mentors who came before us and from learning. Think, for example, of the remarkable achievements of Clemence Royer. A self-taught feminist, scholar and lecturer, she was the first person to translate into French Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*. She was so outspoken and commanding that French linguist called her "almost a man of genius."²⁰ How did she accomplish so much in a society that said she should not be able to do more than preside over the private sphere, or, if she was poor, do menial labor while also presiding over the private sphere? We can learn about leadership, perseverance, and success from women like Clemence Royer, whose early feminism and scientific drive paved the way for women in science today.

Julia Annas provides an account of how we can revive the notion of human nature in terms of human flourishing. This is not a rigid, essentialist notion of human nature. She argues that if we can understand what human beings need in order to flourish, we can create the conditions that will aid them so that they can flourish.²¹ We can adopt her account to approach feminists in history who overcame the odds, the feminist warriors throughout the various waves of feminism, and the many years before.

Annas argues that when we talk about questions concerning the quality of life, we need to consider that in the societies we create, there are almost always double standards for men and women, and almost always, the different standards create what we would call an injustice for women. She points out that when a society is very traditional it tends to display strong divisions between the lives and opportunities of women and the lives and opportunities of men. In more liberal societies the divisions are weaker. However, the divisions occur in both sorts of societies. In liberal societies, we are at times so used to living with the different standards or norms that we do not notice them. When we consider more traditional societies, they stand out more starkly.²²

Consider, for example, societies with laws prohibiting girls from an education. We see immediately that there is an injustice. Annas's question is this: what is the source of the injustice? She does not think that the source of the injustice is that the girls and women in that society experience frustrated desires. They may or they may not. She argues, further, that rights talk will not give us the source of the injustice, because rights talk raises all kinds of questions. Which rights? Who should have them? What is autonomy? Is the society willing to think of rights in the ways that we do? We could find the source of the injustice by looking at the distribution of goods, which would be unequal in such a society – men would possess more money, more goods, more education, and more rights than women do. However, there are problems with this approach, too, in that someone could simply reply by saying that the reason for the unequal distribution of goods is due to the unequal needs of people, which come from the two norms.²³

Annas argues that we can learn from looking backwards at our own more traditional societies, our past versions of our society today, as well as looking at current traditional societies. She argues that the different norms are unjust because some people are deprived of the opportunity to live “a flourishing human life.”²⁴ When we see what people in more traditional societies actually do, we see that women are restricted in their activities in ways that have nothing to do with what they are capable of in reality. Think, for example, about fact that for most of our Western history, all women were deprived of the ability to vote and to participate in open and free ways in our democratic processes. Or we could consider the inability of African American men to vote until the 15th amendment. The injustices lay in the failure of our ancestors to acknowledge that the laws prohibiting people from voting in no way resulted from relevant differences between people. Instinctively and after great struggle, we eventually realized that all people can benefit from political participation. Annas argues that this kind of appeal to taking a backward look is a study

of how human beings have historically made progress for the human condition. It does not insist on sameness in all aspects of our lives. It can reveal to us both our commonalities and our differences. When we notice injustice for women resulting from the two norms for women in, for example, societies that deprive them of education or political participation, we realize on reflection that the two norms would always be an injustice, whoever they prevented from living a flourishing life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ahistorical approach within feminist scholarship and activism is troubling. It has a slight smell of privilege. Who can afford to forget from whence they came? If it is not the privileged stance of each new generation of feminists, it is at least dismissive. The backward looking approach Annas describes can be effective in feminist thought, political action, and scholarship. It can help us see not just the accomplishments of feminists who broke with tradition to forge a new reality for women and men; it can also help us understand how we can do the same. It acknowledges the history of feminist women who had the courage to reject what society said they could and could not do. It can help us understand better where our ideas have come from, how they need to be reconsidered and reshaped, and it can give rise to completely new knowledge. It may even give us the conceptual space we need to adopt a definition of feminism such as the one hooks argues for, which could eventually lead to the end of sexist oppression. Finally, in discovering the many ways that human beings flourish, perhaps those who advocate for feminism will take up Ritter Beard's challenge to use their educations to be "agent[s] of humanitarian evolution".

NOTES

¹ Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 368.

² Consider, for example, Mary Ellen Waithe's four volume *A History of Women Philosophers*, which dates back as far as six hundred BCE to female philosopher Themistoclea, an early Pythagorean philosopher.

³ Jessa Crispin, *Why I am not a Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto* (Brooklyn, New York: First Melville House Printing, 2017), 26-27.

⁴ Janet A Kourany, ed., *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 94.

⁵ Janet A Kourany, ed., *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 94.

- ⁶ Schneir, ed., *Essential Historical Writings*, 364.
- ⁷ Ann J. Lane, *Making Women's History: The Essential Mary Ritter Beard* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2000), 151.
- ⁸ Andrea Dworkin, *Letters from a War Zone* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 16.
- ⁹ Dworkin, *Letters*, 13-16
- ¹⁰ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 23.
- ¹¹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 24.
- ¹² bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 23.
- ¹³ <https://sports.yahoo.com/katy-perry-talks-becoming-feminist-020000364.html>
- ¹⁴ As quoted in hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 23.
- ¹⁵ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 25.
- ¹⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 25.
- ¹⁷ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 31.
- ¹⁸ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 17-31.
- ¹⁹ Anne Philips, ed., *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314-343.
- ²⁰ Joy Harvey, *Almost a Man of Genius: Clemence Royer, Feminism, and Nineteenth-Century Science* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 1.
- ²¹ Martha Nussbaum and Amartrya Sen, *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 279-276.
- ²² Martha Nussbaum, *Quality*, 279-281.
- ²³ Martha Nussbaum, *Quality*, 284.
- ²⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Quality*, 284.