

De-essentializing Anarchist Feminism: Lessons from the Transfeminist Movement

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Transfeminism developed out of a critique of the mainstream and radical feminist movements. The feminist movement has a history of internal hierarchies. There are many examples of women of color, working class women, lesbians, and others speaking out against the tendency of the white, affluent-dominated women's movement to silence them and overlook their needs. But generally, instead of acknowledging the issues these marginalized voices raised, the mainstream feminist movement has prioritized struggling for rights primarily in the interests of white affluent women. While the feminist milieu as a whole has not resolved these hierarchal tendencies, various groups have continued to speak up regarding their own marginalization—in particular, transgender women. The process of developing a broader understanding of systems of oppression and how they interact has advanced feminism and is key to building on the theory of anarchist feminism. But first, we might take a quick look at the development of feminism—particularly during what is often referred to as its “Second Wave.”

Generally, the historical narratives of feminism that suggest that we might look at feminism in “waves” point to the Second Wave as a turbulent period with many competing visions. I'll use that perspective here, though I also realize that the narrative is problematic in a number of ways, particularly its Western and US bias and I want to acknowledge that.¹ I'm from the United States, which is the context in which I organize and live. This particular narrative is useful here for noting some larger tendencies within feminism—particularly where I'm from, though again, I want to acknowledge that this process, while descriptive, engages in some of the kinds of exclusions I am criticizing in this chapter.

I also want to acknowledge that this is a story for drawing out some necessary and important divisions, but any categorization can be problematic (and how could a transfeminism not recognize and acknowledge this problem?). There have been theories of liberal, radical, Marxist, and socialist feminism that do NOT fit this particular narrative. I want to stress, however, that I find it useful in describing theoretical pasts and presents in order to draw out a radically different feminist and anarchist future.

¹ See e.g. Aili Mari Tripp, “The Evolution of Transnational Feminisms: Consensus, Conflict, and New Dynamics,” in *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*, ed. Myra Marx and Aili Mari Tripp (New York City: New York University Press, 2006), 51–75.

During the late 60s through the early 80s, new forms of feminism began to emerge. Many feminists seemed to gravitate to four competing theories with very different explanations for the oppression of women and their theories had consequences for feminist practices of inclusion and exclusion.

Like their historical predecessors of the “First Wave” who were mainly concerned with voting rights, liberal feminists saw no need for a revolutionary break with existing society. Rather, their focus was on breaking the “glass ceiling,” getting more women into positions of political and economic power. Liberal feminists assumed that the existing institutional arrangements were fundamentally unproblematic. Their task was to see to women’s equality accommodated under capitalism.

Another theory, sometimes referred to as radical feminism, argued for abandoning the “male Left,” as it was seen as hopelessly reductionist. Indeed, many women coming out of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements complained of pervasive sexism within the movements because they were relegated to secretarial tasks and experienced sexual pressure from male leaders as well as a generalized alienation from Left politics. According to many radical feminists of the time, this was due to the primacy of the system of patriarchy—or men’s systematic and institutionalized domination of women. To these feminists, the battle against patriarchy was the primary struggle to create a free society, as gender was our most entrenched and oldest hierarchy.² This made a neatly defined “sisterhood” important to their politics.

Marxist feminists, on the other hand, tended to locate women’s oppression within the economic sphere. The fight against capitalism was seen as the “primary” battle, as “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.” Further, Marxist feminists tended to believe that the economic “base” of society had a determining effect on its cultural “super-structures.” Thus, the only way to achieve equality between women and men would be to smash capitalism—as new, egalitarian economic arrangements would give rise to new, egalitarian super-structures. Such was the determining nature of the economic base. This argument was mapped out quite eloquently by Marx’s companion, Engels.³

Out of the conversations between Marxist feminism and radical feminism another approach emerged called “dual systems theory.”⁴ A product of what came to be dubbed socialist feminism, dual systems theory argued that feminists needed to develop “a theoretical account which gives as much weight to the system of patriarchy as to the system of capitalism.”⁵ While this approach did much to resolve some of the arguments about which fight should be “primary” (i.e. the struggle against capitalism or the struggle against patriarchy), it still left much to be desired. For example, black feminists argued that this perspective left out a structural analysis of race.⁶ Further, where was oppression based on sexuality, ability, age, etc. in this analysis? Were all of these

² See especially Shulamit Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970).

³ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family Private Property and the State*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/> (accessed March 20, 2012).

⁴ See e.g. Heidi Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981); and Iris Young, “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory,” in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981).

⁵ Iris Young, “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage,” 44.

⁶ See Gloria Joseph, “The Incompatible Menage à Trois: Marxism, Feminism, and Racism,” in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981).

things reducible to capitalist patriarchy? And importantly, for this chapter, where were the experiences of trans folks—particularly trans women? Given this historical lack, feminism required a specifically trans feminism.

Transfeminism builds on the work that came out of the multiracial feminist movement, and in particular, the work of Black feminists. Frequently, when confronted with allegations of racism, classism, or homophobia, the women's movement dismisses these issues as divisive or "secondary" (as spelled out in the narrative above). The more prominent voices promoted (and still promote) the idea of a homogenous "universal female experience," which, as it is based on commonality between women, theoretically promotes a sense of sisterhood. In reality, it means pruning the definition of "woman" and trying to fit all women into a mold reflecting the dominant demographic of the women's movement: white, affluent, heterosexual, and non-disabled. This "policing" of identity, whether conscious or not, reinforces systems of oppression and exploitation. When women who do not fit this mold have challenged it, they have frequently been accused of being divisive and disloyal to the sisterhood. The hierarchy of womanhood created by the women's movement reflects, in many ways, the dominant culture of racism, capitalism, and heteronormativity.⁷

Mirroring this history, mainstream feminist organizing frequently tries to find the common ground shared by women, and therefore focuses on what the most vocal members decide are "women's issues"—as if the female experience existed in a vacuum outside of other forms of oppression and exploitation. However, using an intersectional approach to analyzing and organizing around oppression, as advocated by multiracial feminism and transfeminism, we can discuss these differences rather than dismiss them.⁸ The multiracial feminist movement developed this approach, which argues that one cannot address the position of women without also addressing their class, race, sexuality, ability, and all other aspects of their identity and experiences. Forces of oppression and exploitation do not exist separately. They are intimately related and reinforce each other, and so trying to address them singly (i.e. "sexism" divorced from racism, capitalism, etc) does not lead to a clear understanding of the patriarchal system. This is in accordance with the anarchist view that we must fight all forms of hierarchy, oppression, and exploitation simultaneously; abolishing capitalism and the state does not ensure that white supremacy and patriarchy will somehow magically disappear.⁹

Tied to this assumption of a "universal female experience" is the idea that if a woman surrounds herself with those that embody that "universal" woman, then she is safe from patriarchy and oppression. The concept of "women's safe spaces" (being women-only) date back to the early lesbian feminist movement, which was largely comprised of white women who were more affluent, and prioritized addressing sexism over other forms of oppression. This notion that an all-women space is inherently safe not only discounts the intimate violence that can occur between women, but also ignores or de-prioritizes the other types of violence that women can experience—racism, poverty, incarceration, and other forms of state, economic, and social brutality.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For an anarchist analysis of intersectionality, see J. Rogue and Deric Shannon, "Refusing to Wait: Anarchism and Intersectionality," http://theanarchistlibrary.org/HTML/Deric_Shannon_and_J._Rogue_Refusing_to_Wait_Anarchism_and_Intersectionality.html (accessed March 23, 2012).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See especially debates around the Michigan Women's Music Festival on this issue.

Written after the work of, and influenced by, transfeminist pioneers like Sandy Stone, Sylvia Rivera, and her Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), the Transfeminist Manifesto states: “Transfeminism believes that we construct our own gender identities based on what feels genuine, comfortable and sincere to us as we live and relate to others within given social and cultural constraint.”¹¹ The notion that gender is a social construct is a key concept in transfeminism, and is also essential (no pun intended) to an anarchist approach to feminism. Transfeminism also criticizes the idea of a “universal female experience” and argues against the biologically essentialist view that one’s gender is defined by one’s genitalia. Other feminisms have embraced the essentialist argument, seeing the idea of “women’s unity” as being built off a sameness, some kind of core “woman-ness.” This definition of woman is generally reliant on what is between a person’s legs. Yet what specifically about the definition of woman is intrinsic to two X chromosomes? If it is defined as being in possession of a womb, does that mean women who have had hysterectomies are somehow less of a woman? Reducing gender to biology relegates the definition of “woman” to the role of child-bearer. That seems rather antithetical to feminism. Gender roles have long been under scrutiny in radical communities. The idea that women are born to be mothers, are more sensitive and peaceful, are predisposed to wearing the color pink, and all the other stereotypes out there are socially constructed, not biological. If the (repressive) gender role does not define what a woman is, and if a doctor marking “F” on a birth certificate do not define gender either,¹² the next logical step is to recognize that gender can only be defined by the individual, for themselves—or perhaps we need as many genders as there are people, or even further, that gender should be abolished. While these ideas may cause some to panic, that does not make them any less legitimate with regards to peoples’ identities, or experiences, or the kinds of difficult political projects we might have ahead of us. Trying to simplify complex issues, or fighting to maintain a hold on how gender was taught to us, does not help us understand patriarchy and how it functions. Instead, it does revolutionary feminisms a disservice.

Having encountered a lack of understanding of trans issues in radical circles, I feel it important to note that not all transgender people choose to physically transition, and that each person’s decision to do so or not is their own. The decision is highly personal and generally irrelevant to theoretical conceptions of gender. There are many reasons to physically change one’s body, from getting a haircut to taking hormones. One reason might be to feel more at ease in a world with strict definitions of male and female. Another is to look in the mirror and see on the outside (the popular understanding of) the gender one feels on the inside. Surely, for some, it is the belief that gender is defined by the physical construction of one’s genitalia. Too often, however, radicals who are unfamiliar with trans politics and ideas react strongly to individuals’ choices with regard to their bodies—rather missing the point altogether. But rather than to draw from speculation as to the motivations for the personal decisions of trans people (as if they were not vast and varied), it is more productive to note the challenge to the idea that biology is destiny.¹³ Surely everyone would benefit from breaking down the binary gender system and deconstructing gender roles—that is the work of revolutionaries, not fretting over what other people “should” or “shouldn’t” do to their bodies.

¹¹ Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” <http://eminism.org/readings/pdf-rdg/tfmanifesto.pdf> (accessed March 24, 2012).

¹² In light of the intersex movement, we may need to analyze the social construction of biological sex, as well.

¹³ See Kate Bornstein, *My Gender Workbook* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1998).

Thus far, gender and feminist theory that includes trans experiences exists almost solely in academia. There are very few working class intellectuals in the field, and the academic language used is not particularly accessible to the average person.¹⁴ This is unfortunate, since the issues that transfeminism addresses affect all people. Capitalism, racism, the state, patriarchy, and the medical field mediate the way everyone experiences gender. There is a significant amount of coercion employed by these institutions to police human experiences, which applies to everyone, trans and non-trans (some prefer the term “cis”) alike. Capitalism and the state play a very direct role in the experiences of trans people. Access to hormones and surgery, if desired, cost a significant amount of money, and people are often forced to jump through bureaucratic hoops in order to acquire them. Trans people are disproportionately likely to be poor. However, within the radical queer and transfeminist communities, while there may be discussions of class, they are generally framed around identity—arguing for “anti-classist” politics, but not necessarily anti-capitalist.¹⁵

The concepts espoused by transfeminism help us understand gender, but there is a need for the theory to break out of academia and to develop praxis among the working class and social movements generally. This is not to say that there are no examples of transfeminist organizing, but rather that there needs to be an incorporation of transfeminist principles into broad based movements. Even gay and lesbian movements have a history of leaving trans people behind—for example, the fight for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which does not protect gender identity. Again we saw a hierarchy of importance; the mainstream gay and lesbian movement often compromises (throwing trans folks under the bus), rather than employing an inclusive strategy for liberation. There is frequently a sense of a “scarcity of liberation” within reformist social movements, the feeling that the possibilities for freedom are so limited that we must fight against other marginalized groups for a piece of the pie. This is in direct opposition to the concept of intersectionality, since it often requires people to betray one aspect of their identity in order to politically prioritize another. How can a person be expected to engage in a fight against gender oppression if it ignores or contributes to their racial oppression? Where does one aspect of their identity and experiences end and another begin?

Anarchism offers a possible society in which liberation is anything but scarce. It provides a theoretical framework that calls for an end to all hierarchies, and, as Martha Ackelsberg suggests, “It offers a perspective on the nature and process of social revolutionary transformation (e.g. the insistence that means must be consistent with ends, and that economic issues are critical, but not the only source of hierarchal power relations) that can be extremely valuable to/for women’s emancipation.”¹⁶

Anarchists need to be developing working class theory that includes an awareness of the diversity of the working class. The anarchist movement can benefit from the development of a working class, anarchist approach to gender issues that incorporates the lessons of transfeminism and intersectionality. It is not so much a matter of asking anarchists to become active in the transfeminist movement as it is a need for anarchists to take a page from the *Mujeres Libres*

¹⁴ For some notable examples, see the work of Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, Lesli Feinberg, and Riki Ann Wilchins, among many others.

¹⁵ Although this is certainly not a monolithic tendency, as many rowdy queers do indeed want an end to capitalism and call for it explicitly.

¹⁶ See “Lessons from the Free Women of Spain”—Geert Dhondt interviews Martha Ackelsberg in *Upping the Ante*.

and integrate the principles of (trans)feminism into our organizing within the working class and social movements. Continuing to develop contemporary anarchist theory of gender rooted in the working class requires a real and integrated understanding of transfeminism.

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