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Review: Feminism Is For Everybody

**Feminism Is For Everybody by bell hooks, South End
Press, 2000**

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bell hooks is one of the most prominent and well respected feminist academics and authors in the United States. She is often the subject of study by college students and academics, as well as a frequent guest on talk shows and other mass media. Her work in feminist theory has been groundbreaking, yet it is often limited to academic, literary, and other elite circles. *Feminism Is For Everybody* is hooks' attempt to create a quick, simple primer on feminist history, theory, and politics to the masses who receive a misinformed, misunderstood, and maligned version of feminist movement. To that end, she has written an easy to read, concise book which documents her experiences as a feminist activist and academic.

As an anarchist with some exposure to hooks' writings, I have a great deal of respect for her. This was once again reinforced by the content of *Feminism Is For Everybody*. Whether hooks identifies herself as an anarchist or not, much of what I found in the book seemed to reflect an anarchist analysis of social movements,

interpersonal interaction, and domination. The book begins with a brief statement of feminist political positions, then discusses some history of the movement. It is here where I first found hooks' critique of the movement to mirror some anarchist concepts. She discusses the change in the movement from personal, decentralized consciousness raising groups where women established close relationships with one another and began to feel personally empowered by their participation to the establishment of large, centralized organizations working for the benefit of middle class white women under the banner of women's rights or liberation. It is clear that hooks holds a preference for the decentralized model of organization the movement had during the era of the consciousness raising groups. Implicit is the belief that these groups could form a larger movement that could challenge sexism and patriarchy while still allowing space for women to be themselves without having to adopt a party line which may not benefit them directly. This appears to me to be not unlike the affinity group structure preferred by so many anarchists today.

The critique of the changes in feminist movement structure lead to a critique of classism and racism within feminist movement. hooks views the formation of large women's organizations as the beginning of a stage where the movement took on the role of empowering white, middle class women at the expense of women of color and working class women. While the early fight for women's equality in the workplace was a necessity because women were entering the workforce in greater numbers, the ultimate result was the inclusion of privileged women into a white supremacist, patriarchal hierarchy. hooks questions the motivations of middle class women who benefitted financially from the movement's success in fighting workplace discrimination. She points out that despite their professional success, many working class women still struggle in the capitalist system that benefits a small number of middle class feminists. She is also quick to point out that many middle class feminists benefit financially from the exploitation of working

class women who, in theory, are their sisters in feminist struggle. Clearly, this is not the notion of equality that many feminists strive for.

It is also interesting to note that the beneficiaries of feminist movement have by far been white women. Much of hooks' critique of the success of the movement has been its co-optation by white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism. The women who have benefitted the most from its success have been white women because it is easier to incorporate them into the white supremacist notion of mainstream American than women of color. As with class privilege, hooks sharply critiques white women who have empowered themselves at the expense of women of color. Once again, the movement is set back by the co-optation of some of its members.

hooks presents feminist struggle as the struggle against domination. Whether it is patriarchal violence in the home (committed by both men and women) as a tool of control of romantic partners or children, the imposition of sexual morality upon others, the limitation of women's ability to control their own bodies (in terms of both general health care and reproductive rights), or the imposition of class and race based exploitation; hooks presents all of these features of modern society as stemming from sexist notions of domination. While there are some anarchists who would disagree with this analysis of the origins of inequality and domination, it is hard to argue against the notion that these forms of domination do not constitute a serious threat to the freedom of individuals, especially women. I believe that regardless of whether hooks identifies herself as an anarchist or not that much of what she states in *Feminism Is For Everybody* is consistent with an anarchist perspective.

I do, however, have some minor criticisms of *Feminism Is For Everybody*. While I understand the fact that hooks is attempting to write a basic primer on feminism for people who are unfamiliar with its basic principles and ideas, it's unfortunate that most of the secondary material in the book comes from herself. As she points

out, there is a wide variety of feminist literature out there and the book could have been a great showcase for other works that people new to feminist ideas could look into for further insight. Also, although I understand that it stems from her own cultural biases, the section on feminist spirituality seemed somewhat unnecessary. Despite the fact that it points out feminist critique of male dominated religion, as an unabashed atheist I find myself in the camp of people who view the appropriation of religion as distracting and self-serving. However, I can appreciate an individual's desire to reach spiritual enlightenment, so I was not too turned off by the portion of the book dedicated to spirituality.

Feminism Is For Everybody is highly recommended for people who are either new to feminist thought or want to gain a slightly better understanding of its basic principle. It is also a good introduction to bell hooks' writing and ideas. From my perspective, her notion of feminism is one that could easily be incorporated into an anarchist politics because it is focused on issues of domination which go beyond sex and gender. hooks presents a critique of all forms of domination stemming from a feminist understanding of gender and sexual inequality that must be incorporated into anarchist critiques of social relations between individuals, social structures, and the state.