

# **Radical Feminist Politics and the Ruckus**

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## **Introduction**

Recently, I have been attempting to address the issue of patriarchy and critiques of the lack of analysis of it in the Bring the Ruckus document. I have tried to answer questions posed to the Ruckus list such as: what does a feminist document look like in practice? How does a focus on the “cross-class alliance” that defines whiteness play out in relation to struggles against male supremacy? What kind of activism are we in the Ruckus doing concerning the fight against male supremacy? Along with these questions the lack of a critique of patriarchy in the BTR document has been brought up.

So what does the patriarchy look like? One of the most interesting and possibly definitive experiences that I have had in all of this was my perusal of the Internet. I typed in the word “patriarchy” thinking that I would find research on the topic, conferences surrounding the subject, articles, etc. Although these items were there, they were far overshadowed by the atrocities of what I can only describe as patriarchy personified. I found web-sites trashing feminist ideology, “debunking” the myths of rape and domestic violence as “feminist bullshit”, attacking the “pop-feminist” culture for trying to undermine the system that created this world of modernity and success, dead-beat dads banding together against the “feminist” views of the courts, church and religious organizations spewing the need to return to the patriarchy that created this “holy land”, and many sites refuting feminist ideology and its pseudo-scholarship. It was enough to make me sick, but more than that it made me angry.

In my search on the worldwide web, I found little to no sites that actually defined the patriarchal system. This paper is written as an attempt to make patriarchy more understandable and to explain the feminist politics that exist in the Bring the Ruckus document and ultimately to the cadre organization that we are struggling to form.

Patriarchy and the fight against it, is difficult to understand given current definitions and views on the subject- so is the concept of radical feminism. More importantly, the definitions that currently exist are lacking in substance for revolutionaries. We believe the Ruckus document is radically feminist. The BTR document is focused around the eradication of domination and recognizes the inter-relatedness of race, class and sex. Furthermore, The BTR document promotes the eradication of group oppression and recognizes that race and class oppression are as much radical feminist issues as sexism is. Yet, many interesting questions have been presented and we feel they deserve a thoughtful response.

We have discussed this topic at length and the Ruckus feels that in order to address the questions and concerns that have been presented to us concerning feminism that it is vital to do three things: 1) Redefine patriarchy for revolutionaries 2) Show how forms of domination (i.e. race, class and gender) are inter- connected and 3) Redefine radical feminist practice.

## **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy has been described as a cultural system, an economic system, and even a psychological manifestation. The Ruckus feels that Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* accurately defines it as a political system of power based on a “social contract.” She argues that society rests upon at least two separate and distinct contracts: the “original contract” and the “sexual contract”. In theory the original contract is an agreement among members of society to create a

government that will provide us with legal and civil freedom and protect us from each other and a tyrannical government. Furthermore, the original contract provides citizenship, standing, and employment. Pateman asserts that this contract is not an agreement among equals, as the theory claims. Gender plays a very important role in the contract. According to Pateman, the original contract is an agreement among men only and women do not take part in the original contract. Therefore, they lack all that is afforded by the state and law to civil individuals and are in fact are “the opposite” of the civil law. As a result, women represent all that men must master to bring civil society into being. Thus the original social contract, which creates civil freedom and equality, actually depends on a contract that establishes patriarchal right. This, Pateman argues, is the sexual contract.

The original contract is not a contract among equals. Instead it is a fraternal contract, a contract between brothers. This brotherhood is created from a devil’s pact in which men accept privileged status and women are incorporated as subordinates. Those in the brotherhood have a common interest as “citizens” in upholding the laws that secure their freedom, as well as a common interest as “men” to ensure that the law of male sex-right remains operative.

So what is male sex-right? This is the conjugal right of men over women. It is the right that men claim for themselves as a way to keep women subject to their authority. Pateman argues that civil society is divided into two spheres. The first is the public or political sphere. This is the brotherhood between men. This pact is an implicit agreement that ensures the male sex right over females. The second is the private sphere. Women are incorporated into society through the private sphere of the family, which is created out of the marriage contract. In other words, women enter civil society as subordinates, not as equals.

Patriarchy is traditionally defined as the rule of the father. But Pateman shows that patriarchy is more accurately defined as rule of the brothers. This political system of power establishes women’s subordinate social and economic position as well as dictates their activities historically. The unwritten contract among the brothers requires women to be subordinate in all matters including sexual service and unpaid domestic service in exchange for male economic “support” and “protection.” Patriarchy dictates that women are born in to subjection and that only men stand together as free and equal individuals in society.

## **How forms of domination are connected**

In Feminist Theory, bell hooks argues that it is the Western notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root of violence and power between the dominant and the dominated. She argues that it is this belief system that is the foundation on which sexist ideology and other forms of oppression are based. Taking Pateman’s argument regarding patriarchal domination further, hooks claims that the social hierarchy is not only based on the subordination of women, it is white supremacist and capitalist too. This results in a society in which theoretically men are the powerful, women the powerless; capitalists the powerful, workers the powerless; white people the powerful, non-white people the powerless. Gender, class and race shape society. But in reality it is more complex than theory. Not all brothers are equally powerful and not all sisters are equally oppressed. At times, class or racial status trumps the rule of the brothers.

Angela Davis’s, *Women Race and Class* shows how the relationship between race, class and gender has played out historically. In her discussion of early feminism Davis makes a strong

point in relation to race and class. The suffrage movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became distinctly racist when it seemed that black men would receive the vote before women. The suffragettes went on a crusade. They traveled around rallying support for the feminist cause and against black suffrage. What women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not realize, according to Davis, was that even though all women were oppressed by the rule of the brothers, Black women and to a lesser extent, white working class women were bound to their men more tightly by class exploitation and racist oppression than by patriarchy. Davis and hooks also argue that patriarchy definitely needed to be challenged, but they are distinguished from them. They argue that the focus of the challenge needed to go beyond simply critiquing men in general. Instead, the challenge lies in fighting a system that is responsible for the unbearable working conditions, miserable wages, and racist and sexist discrimination. This is what hooks termed as the white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal social hierarchy.

Angelina Grimke said it best at the founding convention of the Women's Loyal League. Although her statement was made during the time of the civil war, it perfectly describes the state of the modern day system of domination:

The war is not, as the South falsely pretends, a war of races, nor of section, nor of political parties, but a war of Principles, a war upon the working classes, whether white or black...In this war, the black man was the first victim, the workingman of whatever color the next; and now all who contend for the rights of labor, for free speech, free schools, free suffrage, and a free government...are driven to do battle in defense of these or to fall with them, victims of the same violence for two centuries has held the black man a prisoner of war. While the South has waged this war against human rights, the North has stood by holding garments of those stoning liberty to death...The nation is in a death-struggle. It must either become one vast slavocracy of petty tyrants, or wholly the land of the free...

This statement not only captures the spirit of modern day struggles but also how struggles for freedom are connected.

## **What does fighting the patriarchy look in practice?**

In our attempts to redefine what feminism is from a radical perspective, it is important to recognize where forms of domination come from and recognize that these systems of domination are connected. From there we can work on political programs that open up spaces for all women as well as all others dominated in society.

Previous feminist movements have been based on exclusionary standards. They were not movements that successfully included women who suffered from more than one form of domination. The standards that formed these movements locked out working class women, Black women, Latina women, etc. While these movements typically start out as revolutionary and may achieve revolutionary ends, they frequently do not maintain a revolutionary political praxis.

A feminist document and the action that comes out of it must take into consideration the social hierarchy. As women and as feminists, it is important to recognize that we sometimes use coercive authority when we are in power positions (this can be in our families, working relationships, political relationships, race relationships, gender relationships, class relationships,

etc.). This important because if we do not recognize this as feminist activists we may encourage resistance of one form of male coercive domination — that of male domination over women—without encouraging, working on or recognizing all forms of coercive domination that challenge notions of masculinity that equate manhood or maleness with the ability to exert power over others. Sojourner Truth recognized this in her speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” This speech not only speaks to the detestable actions of male supremacists but by speaking the simple phrase “Ain’t I a woman?” no less than four times in her address of the 1851 women’s convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth speaks to the repugnant actions of women who use their own race and class in order to achieve their own ends.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century suffragettes fell into this trap. They sought to further their own cause by undermining the cause of Black liberation. The suffragettes were radical in their intent of attaining the vote, but their resistance to the establishment of rights for black men effectively destroyed the larger challenge of delivering a major blow to an entire system of domination. Angela Davis argues they did not see the potential of a mass movement in which all forms of domination were fought. Instead they saw only to the end of their white skin. They refused see the revolutionary effects of ending the domination of black folks in society and became dominators themselves when they felt it would serve their own feminist efforts. Their achievements were based not a revolutionary political basis, but on standard set in their white bourgeois society which excluded working women and women of color.

The second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s also fell into this trap. A look at various Redstockings writings in *Feminist Revolution* shows that the original focus of women’s struggles were inclusive of women of color as well as working class women. This movement was, according to Kathie Sarachild, founded on a “radical commitment to solving the problems of women” and “were able to devise a strategy for launching a mass movement to fight for women’s liberation.” In doing so, Sarachild continues this argument by arguing “Black women...played a significant and prominent role in the leadership and history from the beginning.” In fact the very phrase ‘women’s liberation’ came from women activists in the radical civil rights organization Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. Beyond having women of color in the movement, there was a call for recognition of the role of institutionalized white supremacy in women’s domination. Gloria Martin made this point in *Women, Organize Your Own Fighting Forces!* when she called for a “full scale all out war with the power structure”. But her impassioned call for “freedom for all people...without the deadly soul destroying virus of supremacy” was shattered. Kathie Sarachild argues that the refusal of the liberal left to “recognize the women’s liberation movement as radical — as anti-capitalist, and anti-racist, as well as anti- male supremacist” was a liberal attack on the radical feminist movement.

Sadly feminist movements have not understood that race and other forms of oppression that women face are frequently battles that they choose to fight because they feel more affinity to them. Example: Why were there few black women in the second wave of the feminist movement? Why can black women be found in large numbers in the civil rights movement around the same time? Why didn’t they make the shift in battles along gender lines? Look at this practically- what kind of commonality does a black woman who lives in the Deep South feel with a white women from the north? There is no bond created by gender- instead there is a boundary created by color.

In order to have a sustainable feminist movement today it is vital to focus on the eradication of the politic of domination not the achievement of equality. Feminism can no longer be seen as lifestyle choice but it must be seen as a political commitment. Focusing on this political commit-

ment and resistance to domination will engage us in revolutionary praxis and avoid the typical pitfall of resorting to narrow, stereotyped perspectives of feminism. 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist politics sees anti-racist work as totally compatible with working to end sexist oppression rather than two movements competing for first place. It does not focus on “man as the enemy,” which does not lead to the development of a political consciousness and an in-depth analysis of women’s social status. It does not focus exclusively around women’s relationship to male supremacy and the ideology of sexism. Instead it sees that race and class oppression are recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism. 21<sup>st</sup> century radical feminists will challenge the prevailing notion of power as domination and attempt to transform its meaning because we realize it is our acceptance of the current value system of the culture that will lead us to passively absorb sexism. Engaging fights against white supremacy not only furthers the movements of racially oppressed groups; it furthers the radical feminist movement.

So what does a radically feminist and revolutionary group do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? 1) Create a group based on a revolutionary praxis and maintain that praxis 2) engage in revolutionary action 3) create a structure that is radically feminist 4) be aware that race is a key factor for women who live with racism 5) recognize the system of domination as white, capitalist and masculine in nature just as hooks and Davis have. Most importantly, a radically feminist organization must not limit itself to actions that only fight the patriarchal system of domination but that 6) must engage in struggles that fight the entire system of supremacy. We feel that the key to doing this is not to cast aside feminist struggles, but instead to focus on the weak point in the system of domination, which is white supremacy.

So what can we do now as far as action? According to Angela Davis, two very prominent women abolitionists, the Grimke sisters, may have had the right idea over a hundred years ago. She states that these women realized that “the abolition of slavery was the most pressing political necessity of the times, they urged women to join in that struggle with the understanding that their own oppression was nurtured and perpetuated by the continued existence of the slave system.” It seems that the same is true today. In the modern day system where white privilege still reigns, it would seem that white supremacy is the most pressing necessity of the times. Now is the time for feminist revolutionaries to understand that our own oppression is nurtured and blunted by the existence of the modern day system of domination. Any work that actively challenges the white system of privilege will strike a blow to the entire system of domination. Thus, attacks on white supremacy possess radically feminist potential even if they don’t address “typical” feminist issues. Feminist action has historically focused exclusively on women’s liberation. In doing so the focus has been largely on issues such as clinic defense, child care and health issues. These issues are vital issues but we seek to expand feminist politics beyond them. The essence of this is not anti-woman but instead is strategic in nature. Furthermore, it is radically feminist for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Traci Harris is a member of Bring the Ruckus.

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