

Feminism, postmodernism and women's oppression

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How far we have come in a year and a half. A Woman's Place UK has gone from protecting the rights we have, to now fighting for those we still lack.

Among our demands are women's right to same-sex spaces, and to self-organisation. They are vital in themselves, but also as means of destroying women's oppression by men - an oppression that is based on our biological sex, and which socialises us in gendered ways. Working collectively to change this, is what feminism is all about. And as feminists, we have a long and proud tradition to draw on, which I want to talk about tonight.

But *feminism*, like the definition of woman, is an object of suspicion for the opponents of women's sex-based rights. I want to talk briefly about where this hostility comes from, drawing on what's been taught in UK and US universities over the past thirty years. Some of what I say may sound esoteric, but two, almost three generations of students have been educated to see the world a certain way. They are now the teachers, journalists, civil servants and politicians seeking to negotiate the current debate over women's rights. We need to understand how their education has influenced their worldview, if we are to set the record straight.

Postmodernism

Suspicion of feminism owes much to postmodernism, which began to prevail in British and US universities after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Dressed up as radical, it is really the acceptable face of neoliberalism. Many students were and are taught that people cannot break out of the confines of capitalism – though this is a strange form of capitalism, in which language, rather than money, makes the world go round. People cannot change the world, but *individually* they can alter their relationship to it, through their self-description and performance of gender. No reality exists other than self-description.

By this logic, feminists *brought women's oppression into being by naming it*. Feminism prevented people being 'queer' and gender fluid by insisting on the category 'woman'.

Over the past thirty years, students have studied collective movements less, and individuals' identities, emotions and desires more. While individual choice is celebrated, the very notion of collectivity is deemed oppressive. Revealingly in our neoliberal times, socialist, labour and feminist movements have been most strongly attacked. The leaders of feminist movements

were, it is claimed, attempting to dominate those they purported to represent. The world was and is a collection of self-interested individuals seeking to dominate others or avoid domination themselves. In the words of that great postmodern theorist Margaret Thatcher, there is no such thing as society.

We're now seeing the rise of scholarship on transgender people in the past, and museum and gallery celebrations of 'queerness'. These university courses and exhibitions aren't replacing the older focus on white privileged men, but rather taking over the limited space that we'd fought to create for women's history. Often these 'queer' histories involve appropriating lesbian history, as the transwashing of lesbians' contribution to Stonewall's establishment shows. This is a glaring example of why we need single-sex, feminist spaces and organisations, to record and learn from women's achievements.

The attempt to reclaim transgender ancestors is deeply ahistorical. Transgender ideology argues that biological sex does not exist; and that gender is a personal identity brought into being by self-description. These claims do not speak to the experiences of people in the past. Before the late 20th century, gender and sexuality were widely understood as determined by one's biological sex. That's why some lesbians understood their sexuality as a biological 'inversion'.

That biological sex does not determine gender was revealed by *feminists*, not postmodernists, in the 1970s and 1980s. They showed that the very *existence* of gender is due to historically specific, unequal relationships between men and women. Male oppression of women predates capitalism, but in capitalist societies certainly, women's biological role as actual and potential mothers - and therefore as reproducers of labour power - explains their oppression as a sex. Gender and sex are connected by the exercise of male power over women. Social and cultural gender roles helped to control women.

Who holds power?

This analysis of power - who holds it, how and why - is often lacking in university teaching. Power is presented as diffuse and operated through language. Feminists can therefore hold as much power as white male capitalists. But gender was not and is not an identity, freely chosen. Gender norms are meant to keep people in their place. The minority of people who lived as members of the opposite sex in the past, did not make this choice freely. Very often, they were lesbians or gay men who faced social opprobrium or worse if they did not conceal either their sexuality or their sex. Others did so for equally material reasons. One of the most famous cases is Lillias Barker, a woman born in late 19th century Britain who lived much of her adult life as a man, was jailed for marrying another woman, and became a freak show on Blackpool pier. On

one of the rare occasions that Barker was allowed to speak for herself away from court and salacious press reports, she explained that she had begun living as a man because it was easier for men to earn a living than for women to do so. This reasoning, which reflected women's lack of economic power, is usually ignored by scholars. Instead of studying why women had so little power, Barker is celebrated as 'queer'. But if a woman can only be economically independent, behave as she likes or love who she wants by living as a man, this tells us she lives in a society where gendered roles are very rigid. If we find ourselves in a society where many women apparently want to live as men – as is true among teenagers today – an appropriate response is not to embrace, but to challenge those gender roles - and, even more important, to smash the structures of oppression that underpin them.

Feminist history reveals that women can do just this. They do so through solidarity, understanding that united we stand, divided we fall.

Feminists in the 19th century

The notion that feminism *creates* male oppression of women, by naming it, ignores that feminist movements don't come out of nowhere - they are provoked by sexism. Take late 19th century Britain. As men's education, employment and suffrage rights increased, feminists responded to the exclusion of women from these. They also reacted to new threats to women's few freedoms. A scare over male syphilis in the army led to the forcible inspection of *women* - not men - for venereal disease. Women suspected of being prostitutes could simply be pulled off the streets and subjected to invasive examination. The government also debated legalising brothels. Feminists recognised that prostitution exists for men's interests, not women's. They campaigned against brothels, *and* for women's right to walk freely on the street without arrest or assault.

These feminists are sometimes represented as simply restricting working-class women's freedom to undertake sex work. More generally, there is a branch of scholarship, and transactivism, which views legislation and the state as problematic. By naming something, you essentialise it. So legalising homosexuality, as occurred in Britain in 1967, forced 'queer' men to become homosexuals. Try telling a gay man who came of age before 1967 that he was lucky. There are, of course, transideologues and transactivists who are in favour of legislation, where this would further their own right to self-identification. This is not a consistent or coherent ideology. But the antipathy towards the state and legislation is played out, for example, in the demand that birth certificates should not carry a person's sex, because in doing so they force people into essentialist categories that oppress them. If that was true, we'd expect to find that there was no oppression of women as a sex before 1837, when birth certificates were introduced in the UK. Alas, a quick read of Mary Wollstonecraft, who died thirty years earlier, shows that sadly, sexism already existed.

Woman is a lived experience

Many of these nineteenth-century feminists were also active in campaigns for the vote, for women's trade union representation and for women's education. Many also worked alongside male comrades in the labour movement, and against imperialism. Differences of opinion existed between feminists. Class and race inequalities that exist in wider society were and are reflected in social and political movements, and we should work harder to overcome this. It was certainly a movement dominated by white middle-class women, but connections were made with, for example, Indian feminists campaigning for freedom from imperial rule alongside women's political citizenship. Despite their differences, thousands of women in Britain and across the world found common cause in fighting their oppression. They were able to unite because they understood that 'woman' is not a monolithic 'identity', defined by an internal essence, but a lived experience, from birth, characterised by women's oppression by men.

Alongside these political campaigns, many women established single-sex spaces in which they could be safe from male exploitation, and could collectively create the opportunities that men denied them. They established girls' schools and women's colleges, nurseries, maternity clinics - the first in Britain were pioneered by women in the co-op and labour movement - artistic and cultural ventures, and nurtured women's same-sex relationships. When you are excluded from the centres of power and oppressed by those who control them, it makes sense to organise autonomously. Exclusion per se is not unfair - we need to understand context, and power. Women's exclusion of men is not exclusion by a dominant class, as statistics on domestic violence, the sex pay gap and women's woeful political representation show. That's why we need single-sex spaces and the right to self-organise.

Individual choice?

In contrast to this history of self-organisation, transactivism, like neoliberalism, simply offers us individual choice. We can change our selves but nothing else. Not only is this woefully unambitious and nihilistic, but the doctrine of choice adds to women's oppression. For it is WOMEN who now shoulder the burden of 'choosing' social care for their dependents in the absence of a robust welfare state- and the unpaid labour of care when no provider is available. It is WOMEN who are now spending more time in active parenting than they did in the 1970s - despite also doing far more hours of paid work - because they are expected to 'choose' their child's school, friends and extracurricular activities in order to give them a head start in the great marketplace of life. And if that seems divorced from transideology, let's reflect on the pressure that mothers face from those who claim that a 'good' parent will unquestioningly support their child's 'choice' to transition. Of course, once you've lost your breasts and become infertile, 'gender' may not feel so fluid after all. *Mothers* will be there to pick up the pieces when the transactivists and their 'allies' have walked away.

Historically, many feminists have fought for the right to act outside gendered norms, and in accordance with your sexuality. But they understood that individual choices over how to

behave or describe yourself do not overcome oppression. Feminist movements have. To those who claim feminism achieved nothing more than the dominance of a few white, middle-class women, I say: go tell that to the women who organised against imperial rule in Latin America and Asia. Tell that to those black women who fought for sex as well as race equality in the US and South Africa. Tell it to the Grunwick strikers of the 1970s, those South Asian women who enacted one of Britain's longest-running industrial disputes and showed that it is possible to forge solidarity across the divisions of sex and race, while respecting the right of women to self-organise. And, frankly, tell it to those white, middle-class women who fought for our right to walk the streets, have an education, and the vote.

We will win

Feminist movements are as varied in tactics as they are in membership. Many friends of mine are frustrated that they can't be more involved in today's women's movement, often fearing that the hostility that feminists face will harm their livelihood or families. The past shows us that we need militant action and those who can speak out publicly. But feminism also relies on those who use their work to change hearts and minds; those who write trade union resolutions and articles, and those who give care – hugely undervalued in capitalism and patriarchy - to those in the firing line. And when we look back at the suffrage movement's awe-inspiring rallies, in halls like this one, we know that every single woman there made a difference.

I suspect that over the past year we have all had moments of despair - but our past shows that such moments can bring forth glorious movements and lasting change. Five years ago, I would not have dreamed that I would stand together tonight with hundreds of feminists, confident that we are just the tip of a growing, international movement for women's rights. And by owning our history we have something that feminists in the past did not possess. They rarely knew much about the feminist campaigns that preceded them - that history wasn't present in schools, universities, libraries or museums. But we do. We know that those feminists who went before us were reviled, as we are. But we also know that they won important victories. The struggle continues, and here, today, on May 20th 2019, we are also making history. Standing in sisterhood with those who went before us, we can say with confidence: we too shall fight - and we will win.