
where we stand:

CLASS MATTERS

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Routledge 2000

Feminism and Class Power

Revolutionary feminist thinking has always raised the issue of classism among women. From the onset, there has been a struggle within feminist movement between the reformist model of liberation, which basically demands equal rights for women within the existing class struggle, and more radical and/or revolutionary models, which call for fundamental change in the existing structure so that models of mutuality and equality can replace old paradigms. Just as militant black liberation struggle calling for an end to classism was made to appear unnecessary, once black folks gained greater access to jobs, revolutionary feminism was dismissed by mainstream reformist feminism when women, primarily well-educated white women with class privilege, began to achieve equal access to class power with their male counterparts.

When contemporary feminist movement first began, it received mass media attention solely because of the presence of privileged class women rebelling against their class and patriarchal hierarchy within that class. As a consequence, the issues that received public attention were not those most relevant to working women or masses of women. A small group of elite privileged

class white women were the group Betty Friedan wrote about when she identified “the problem that has no name,” a phrase used to euphemistically describe the dis-satisfaction individuals felt about being confined and subordinated in the home as housewives. Their issue was informed by both the politics of gender and class because while they were complaining about the dangers of confinement in the home, a huge majority of women in the nation were in the workforce. And many of these working women, who put in long hours for low wages while still doing all the work in the domestic household, would have seen the right to stay home as “freedom.”

It was not gender discrimination or sexist oppression that had kept privileged women from working outside the home; it was the fact that the work open to them would have been the same low-paid unskilled labor open to all working women. This elite group of highly educated females stayed at home rather than do the type of work large numbers of middle-income and working-class women were doing. Occasionally, a few of these women wanted to work outside the home and did so, performing tasks way below their educational skills, oftentimes facing resistance from their husbands. It was this resistance that turned the issue of their working outside the home into an issue of gender discrimination and made opposing patriarchy the political platform for change rather than class struggle.

From the onset, reformist white women with class privilege were well aware that the power and freedom they wanted was the freedom they perceived men of their class enjoying. Their resistance to patriarchal male domination in the domestic household provided them with a connection they could use to unite across class with other women who were weary of male domination. Women who were lesbians, of all races and classes, were at the forefront of the radicalization of contemporary female resistance to patriarchy in part because this group had by their sexual preference already placed themselves outside the domain of heterosexist privilege and

protection, both in the home and in the workplace. No matter their class, they were social outcasts, the objects of patriarchal abuse and scorn. Concurrently, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, they were not relying on men to support them economically. They needed and wanted equal pay for equal work. Much revolutionary and/or radical feminist thought was produced by lesbians who had a longer personal history of challenging patriarchal conceptions of women's roles.

Lesbian feminist theorists were among the first to raise the issue of class in collective and consciousness-raising groups expressing their viewpoints in an accessible language. Well-educated leftist straight women writing about class often remained trapped in academic jargon that kept them from sharing their message with the female masses. In the early seventies, anthologies like *Class and Feminism*, edited by Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron, published essays written by women from diverse class backgrounds who were confronting the issue of classism in their feminist collective. Each essay emphasized the fact that class was not simply a question of money. In "The Last Straw," Rita Mae Brown (who was not a famous writer at the time) clearly stated: "Class is much more than Marx's definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act." Those women who entered feminist groups made up of diverse classes were the first to see that the vision of a united sisterhood where all females joined to fight patriarchy could not emerge until the issue of class was confronted.

Of course once class was placed on the agenda, women had to face the intersections of class and race. And when they did, it was evident that black women were clearly at the bottom of this society's economic totem pole. Initially, well-educated white women from working-class backgrounds were more

visible than black females of all classes in feminist movement. They were a minority within the movement but they were the voice of experience. They knew better than their privileged-class white sisters the costs of resisting race, class, and gender domination. They knew what it was like to move from the bottom up. Between them and their privileged-class comrades there was a conflict over appropriate behavior. Describing how these different class experiences were expressed in their essay "Revolution Begins at Home," Coletta Reid and Charlotte Bunch stated: "Often, middle and especially upper middle class women for whom things have come easily develop a privileged passivity. Someone with privilege can conveniently think that it's not necessary to fight or discipline herself to get anything. Everything will work out. Because she has made it by following nice middle class rules of life, she doesn't like for people to be pushy, dogmatic, hostile or intolerant." Within radical feminist movement, women from privileged-class backgrounds learned the concrete politics of class struggle confronting challenges made by less-privileged women but also learning from them assertiveness skills and constructive ways to cope with conflict.

In reformist circles, however, privileged white women often made it clear to the women who did not share their class status and/or color that this was their movement, that they were in charge, and their needs would determine the agenda. Reformist feminist issues centered on gaining social equality with privileged men within the existing social structure. These concerns neatly coincided with white supremacist capitalist patriarchal fears that white power would diminish if nonwhite people gained equal access to economic power and privilege. Supporting what in effect became white power reformist feminism enabled the mainstream white male patriarchy to bolster its power while simultaneously undermining the radical politics of feminism. Revolutionary white feminist thinkers expressed outrage at co-optation in the alternative press. In her collection of essays *The Coming of Black Genocide*, Mary Barfoot boldly states: "There are

white women, hurt and angry, who believed that the seventies women's movement meant sisterhood, and who feel betrayed by escalator women. By women who went back home to the patriarchy. But the women's movement never left the father Dick's side.... There was no war. And there was no liberation. We got a share of genocide profits and we love it. We are Sisters of Patriarchy, and true supporters of national and class oppression.... Patriarchy in its highest form is Euro-imperialism on a world scale. If we're Dick's sister and want what he has gotten, then in the end we support that system that he got it all from." Reformist white women were not alone in their betrayal of more radical feminist concerns.

Many upwardly mobile women of color who had ambivalent attitudes toward feminism jumped on the bandwagon to reap benefits (job promotion, status as leaders, etc.) garnered by struggles for gender justice. Like their white peers they used feminism to enhance their class status and power. The class-based academization of American feminism created the context for its deradicalization and for the takeover of gender studies by opportunistic women and men who were simply not interested in radically changing society. Ironically, focus on race and racism was one of the new directions in feminist thought that deflected attention away from issues of class. While many feminist white women slowly became more willing to talk about race and confess racism in the eighties, they did not speak about their classism, their fear, condescension, and outright hatred of the poor and working class. By the nineties, white women had managed to incorporate race comfortably into existing gender studies without linking this academic work to any organized feminist movement challenging white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

As privileged women gained greater access to economic power with privileged class men, feminist discussions of class were no longer commonplace. Instead, women were encouraged to see the economic gains of affluent females as a positive sign for all women. In actuality, these gains rarely

changed the lot of poor and working-class women. And since privileged class men did not become caretakers in the domestic household, the freedom of privileged class women of all races required the sustained subordination of working-class women. When privileged women left the home to work, someone had to stay in the home and do the dirty work.

There was simply no way for women with class privilege who wanted to garner economic power and status while simultaneously holding on to their feminist credentials to confront the issue of class. Since patriarchal men of all classes had not joined feminist revolution and changed their consciousness and behavior in order for privileged-class women, most of them white, to fully reap the benefits of equal access to men of their class, they had to accept and condone continued economic exploitation and subordination on the basis of gender for working-class and poor women. For example: It had not been politically correct, when feminist movement began, to exploit another woman—more often than not an immigrant woman of color (paying low wages, unreasonable working hours)—to tend your children and clean your house so that you might become “liberated” and work outside the home. As the movement progressed and women gained greater class power, these practices became acceptable.

In the nineties, collusion with the existing social structure was the price of so-called liberation. At the end of the day, most privileged class white women and their upwardly mobile peers of other races wanted class privilege and social equality with men of their class more than freedom for themselves and their exploited and oppressed sisters. This collusion helped destabilize feminist movement. It substantiated the critique of reformist feminism, which argued that white men supported equal rights for women in the workplace as a way of bolstering the waning class power of upper- and middle-class white families (which was the direct consequence of economic depression). Concurrently, it directly undermined affirmative action gains made by civil rights struggle on behalf of black

people as white women quickly became the primary beneficiaries.

When women acquired greater class status and class power without conducting themselves in ways different from males, feminist politics were undermined. Lots of women felt betrayed. Middle- and lower-middle-class women who were suddenly compelled by the ethos of feminism to enter the workforce did not feel “liberated” once they faced the hard truth that working outside the home did not mean work in the home would be shared. No-fault divorce proved to be more economically beneficial to men than women. Spouses in longtime marriages who had been supported economically by privileged and or working-class husbands while they worked without wages inside the home suffered economically as divorce became more common. These women felt betrayed both by the conventional sexism, which had sanctioned their stay-at-home housewife role, and by the feminism, which insisted work was liberating without making it clear that there would be few job opportunities available to older women of any class who had spent most of their adult lives unemployed.

As many black women and other women of color saw white women from privileged classes benefiting economically more than any other group from reformist feminist gains in the workforce, it simply reaffirmed that feminism was a white woman thing. To the men of those groups, it gave added credence to their insistence that women’s lib had been from the onset a way to keep the working black man/man of color in his place. These sexist men were not interested in joining with radical and/or revolutionary feminist thinkers to overthrow reformist feminist control of the movement and put in place more progressive strategies.

Radical and/or revolutionary feminism has continued to put forth a vision of feminist movement that critiques and challenges classism. Unlike shallow reformist feminist insistence that work is liberatory, the visionary paradigm for social change

insists that education for critical consciousness is the first step in the process of feminist transformation. Hence women, men, and children can be advocates of feminist politics whether they work or not. Then intervention within all arenas of the existing structures is the next step. That intervention may take the form of reform or radical change. For example: Radical and/or revolutionary feminists who created feminist theory but lacked doctorates recognized that our work would be completely ignored if we did not enter more fully into the existing patriarchal academic system. For some of us, that meant working to get Ph.D.'s even though we were not that interested in academic careers. To succeed within that system we had to develop strategies enabling us to do our work without compromising our feminist politics and values. This was not an easy task, yet we accomplished it. Some of us from working-class backgrounds changed our class status and entered the ranks of class privilege. We understood economic self-sufficiency to be a crucial goal of feminist movement. However, we also believed, a belief now affirmed by experience, that it was possible for us to gain class power without betraying our solidarity toward those without class privilege. One way that we achieved this end was by living simply, sharing our resources, and refusing to engage in hedonistic consumerism and the politics of greed. Our goals were not to become wealthy but to become economically self-sufficient. Our experiences counter the assumption that women could only gain economically by colluding with the existing capitalist patriarchy.

Unfortunately, the work of radical and/or revolutionary feminist thinkers, female and male, rarely receives widespread attention. When it does, it is often discredited by conservative factions posing as feminists. A basic definition of feminism is that it is a movement to end sexism and sexist exploitation and oppression. One cannot be feminist and conservative; it is a fundamental contradiction. Of course, conservative and liberal pro-patriarchy women protecting their class interests have

effectively used mass media to blur the issues and make it seem that feminism can be all things to all people. Since reformist feminist thinkers who make it into the mainstream have a stake in obscuring radical theory and practice, they collude with the forces of conservative patriarchy to make it appear feminist movement no longer matters, that we are in a “postfeminist” stage and that freedom is an impossibility. This position makes gaining goodies within the existing class structure the only hope. Ironically, anti-feminist public policy is steadily undermining the rights gained by feminist struggle so women who have gained class privilege by colluding with white supremacist capitalist patriarchy will lose in the long run.

The only genuine hope of feminist liberation lies with a vision of social change that takes into consideration the ways interlocking systems of classism, racism, and sexism work to keep women exploited and oppressed. Western women have gained class power and greater gender inequality because a global white supremacist patriarchy enslaves and/or subordinates masses of Third World women. In this country the combined forces of a booming prison industry and workfare-oriented welfare in conjunction with conservative immigration politics create the conditions for indentured slavery to be condoned. Ending welfare will create a new underclass of women and children to be abused and exploited by the existing structures of domination, making it more evident that the “freedom” of women with class privilege depends on the enslavement of subordinated groups.

Given the changing realities of class in our nation, widening gaps between the rich and poor, the continued feminization of poverty, we desperately need a mass-based radical feminist movement that can build on the strength of the past, including the positive gains generated by reform, while showing new direction and offering meaningful interrogation of existing feminist thinking and action that was simply wrongminded. Significantly, a visionary movement would root its work first

and foremost in the concrete conditions of working-class and poor women. That means creating a movement wherein education for critical consciousness begins where people are. There is still time for us to put in place low-income housing that women can own. Were working-class and poor women given the opportunity to own their housing through progressive workfare/welfare, this would be a step toward freedom. The creation of housing co-ops with feminist principles is another step that could make feminist struggle relevant to the masses. These are just a few examples of work that needs to be done.

Despite the ways reformist thinkers manipulated class issues to undermine feminist politics, it remains the only movement for social justice in our society that focuses in a primary way on the concerns of women and children. If women are to play a meaningful role in struggles to end racism and classism, they need to begin with feminist consciousness. To abandon feminist movement is another gesture of collusion. Radical/revolutionary feminist politics bring a message of hope as well as strategies to empower women and men of all classes. Feminism is for everybody.