

Radical feminism

Written by Camille Cottais
Translated by Caroline Feldner

1. Definition

Context of emergence

Radical feminism developed mainly during the "second wave" of feminism from the 1960s onwards in Western countries, mainly in France, England, Canada and especially the United States, under the influence of various left-wing social movements such as the civil rights movement, the student movement or the hippy movement. However, women are still considered as second-class activists within these movements, machismo and androcentrism are found in their organization (sexist behavior, assignment to administrative roles, not taking women's voices into account, etc.) and they continue to refuse the idea of an autonomous feminist fight.

Radical feminism is also constructed in opposition to liberal and Marxist feminisms, the former demanding only equal rights, while the latter confines itself to an economic analysis of women's oppression and believes that the abolition of capitalism will be enough to liberate them. Radical feminism, on the other hand, seeks to address the root causes of patriarchal oppression, not just legislative or economic changes. Unlike liberal feminism, which focused on the individual, radical feminism sees women as a collective group that has been and still is oppressed by men.

The origin of women's oppression

Radical feminism argues that men oppress women through patriarchal appropriation. Patriarchy refers to the system in which the male social group holds the economic and political power, whether in the family or within society, and has control over the female social group (over their bodies, their work, their sexuality, etc.), resulting in the total subordination of women to men.

The main cause of women's domination by men is therefore neither a lack of civil and political rights, as liberal feminists thought, nor the capitalist economic system, as Marxist feminists conceptualized, but patriarchy, meaning the power exerted by men. Radical feminists thus insist that women's oppression is of a systemic nature: patriarchy is a system of oppression, found in all societies and at all times.

How radical?

This feminist movement is called radical in that it addresses the root cause of the problem: patriarchy, the system, and not its manifestations (such as certain specific laws). Radical feminists go to the root of women's oppression, which is a structural problem and therefore requires a global change of the system. They theorize new ways to think and apprehend the relationship between men and women.

2. The big ideas of radical feminism

The appropriation of women

The appropriation of women by men within the framework of a patriarchy is manifested in the control over their bodies, including their sexuality and motherhood. Patriarchy is thus strongly expressed within the family, although it is also manifested in every area of society.

Marriage is defined by radical feminists as a patriarchal institution, as it assimilates women as men's private property (their fathers and then their husbands). It reinforces their control over women's bodies and in particular their reproductive rights. Marriage was thus conceived as a contract by which, until recently, the woman swore obedience and submission to her husband while the man made sure to fulfill her material needs. Even today, marriage can be seen as an institution perpetuating inequalities, for example through unpaid domestic work, most of which is still done by women. Radical feminists therefore demand greater freedom when it comes to love but also sex.

Radical feminists also claim the right to not have children, in contrast to a society that still pressures women achieve fulfilment solely through motherhood. Women who do not wish to bear children are therefore denigrated, labelled as being selfish or discredited, while men who do not wish to have children do not generally encounter a similar type of reaction. The reason behind this lies in the persistent myth about maternal instinct...



Source: My body my choice sign at a Stop Abortion Bans Rally in St Paul, Minnesota. May 21, 2019, Wikimedia Commons. By Lorie Shaull.

Other institutions are involved in the control over women's bodies, such as the state, through restrictive laws on abortion or contraception for example, but also traditionally the church, which has long restricted women to their maternal role and rejected the idea of non-reproductive sexuality or women's freedom to choose for their bodies. The medical field is also under attack, whether it be because of doctors refusing to perform abortions or the development of dangerous contraceptive methods by pharmaceutical companies.

Through these more or less explicit means of control by religious, medical and family institutions as well as marriage and constrained motherhood, women are objectified and dispossessed of their own bodies, their health and their sexuality.

One of the key slogans of the second-wave radical feminism was "My body belongs to me", which reflects women's desire to reclaim their bodies in a patriarchal society that dispossesses them. To control one's body is to control one's life and thus to regain power.

Patriarchy is all about violence (T.W: sexual violence)



Source: Christophe Morin. Demonstration against gender-based and sexual violence against women, in Paris, 24 November 2018.

Radical feminists believe that men wage war on women through physical or sexual violence, i.e. domestic violence, rape, but also, more controversially, through prostitution and pornography. Violence (or the threat of violence) is a way for men to control, dominate and perpetuate women's subordination. By appropriating women's bodies through violence, women are reminded of their subordinate status. Radical feminists fight against such sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, which they have helped to render more visible.

Radical feminists point out that violence is not a harmless, individual phenomenon of one man against one woman, but a collective problem, enabled and even encouraged by a patriarchal society. This is why we speak of rape a culture. This concept emphasizes the cultural aspect of sexual violence.

"The private sphere is political"

This slogan, born from the second feminist wave, insists on the political dimension of the problems created by sexism, which were previously relegated to the private sphere: these issues are not only individual and of a private nature, but affect all women because they are linked to a patriarchal society. What happens within the couple or the family is therefore political and needs to be debated in the public sphere. The body, in particular, is a political subject, hence the importance of free access to abortion and contraception and the fight against sexual violence and rape culture.

¹ Laura Delcamps, "La culture du viol dans le cinéma en Europe", 18.09.2020, The Institute of Gender in Geopolitics, url : <https://igg-geo.org/?p=2016>

Radical feminists also focus on domestic violence, i.e. violence within the couple. Domestic violence should be seen as a systemic societal problem and not a private problem such as a "family drama" or an "honour killing" as it is often presented in the media. These issues are collective and therefore also require a collective solution.

What is considered to belong to the private sphere (sexuality, love, motherhood, marital relations, abortion, contraception, violence, etc.) must therefore be considered a public and systemic problem. Public policies can therefore improve the situation, as did the 1967 Neuwirth law authorizing abortion or the 1975 law which legalized voluntary interruption of pregnancy in France.

The objectification of women

From a radical feminist's standpoint, sexual violence, but also the cultural industry, sexist advertising, prostitution and pornography all contribute to the objectification of women. They accuse pornography, for example, of objectifying and humiliating women by representing sexualities that are considered degrading, patriarchal and that reproduce male-female power relations. With regard to prostitution, they consider, among other things, that it trivializes rape in return for payment and that prostitutes are sexually exploited.

These criticisms of prostitution and pornography as forms of exploitation give rise to debate within feminist movements and are for instance rejected by pro-sex feminists. The latter speak of sex work and not prostitution, in order to emphasize that it is a job like any other and results from their own choice.

3. The solutions put forward by radical feminism

The main objective of radical feminists is the abolition of patriarchy. Radical feminists place particular emphasis on the theme of the body, and on the reappropriation of the body by women, as well as on the freedom of choice. They demand sexual and reproductive freedom, which includes free access to abortion and contraception. Women must be able to choose what to do with their bodies, which includes the freedom to have non-reproductive or non-heterosexual sex. Isn't their criticism of prostitution and pornography paradoxical?

Radical feminists have argued that women have a legitimate right to be angry. This anger can be expressed through various forms of activism and strategies: the creation of shelters for abused women, health centers, demands for sex education to raise awareness of consent, demonstrations

against pornography, against beauty contests, for abortion, etc.

Radical feminists' ways of resisting can also be more extreme: refusing to have a child, refusing to marry, or even refusing to have any relations with men (separatism). In the same spirit, they also defend non-mixed activism between women or between lesbians. Many also reject traditional gender roles and patriarchal beauty norms, such as wearing of make-up, bras, dresses or skirts, which radical feminists believe reinforces the objectification of women.

Radical feminists call for structural changes, as women's oppression is systemic, i.e. it is produced and reproduced by the very functioning of society and is found in all its institutions. Radical feminism generally defends so-called "positive discrimination" measures such as parity or quotas.

4. Strengths and weaknesses of radical feminism

Strengths

Radical feminism is very analytical, as it seeks to understand and dismantle the roots of women's oppression. It has been responsible for many of the advances made during what has been called the second feminist wave, particularly when it comes to women's relationship with their own bodies and violence against women. Thanks to the struggles and activism of radical feminists, sexual violence such as rape and domestic violence are now considered crimes in most Western countries. Society has now become aware that these are not isolated cases of violent men but rather a societal and gender-related phenomenon.

Weaknesses

The radical feminist is less inclusive than, for example, the liberal feminist, who was in line with the dominant values of society, because of his radicality and his profound questioning of patriarchal and heterosexual society. Of course, one can also think that this radicality was (and still is) necessary to bring about real changes in society.

Radical feminism has also sometimes been criticized for its lack of intersectionality, seeing women as a homogeneous group, collectively oppressed by men, without taking into account the different experiences of oppression suffered by racialized women, women with disabilities, women in prison, migrant women etc.

The great paradox of radical feminism, however, lies in their criticism of prostitution. They often conflate chosen and suffered prostitution, considering all sex workers as oppressed and without recognizing that a good number of them precisely use prostitution to reappropriate their own bodies or even to play on male domination. The critique of prostitution by radical feminists has contributed to the further stigmatization of sex workers, contradicting their message of 'My body, my choice' and their opposition to conservative and moralistic views of sexuality. Wouldn't criticizing sex work be part of these reactionary attempts to normalize and moralize sexuality? Shouldn't we be happy to see a woman choose to do what she wants with her body, including selling it?

Finally, radical feminism has also given rise to a controversial and transphobic sub-movement: the Trans Radical Exclusionary Feminists (TERFs) who exclude trans women from their struggles and from feminist, particularly genderless, circles. TERFs claim that trans women are men infiltrated to undermine feminism, and therefore trans women are not women. They link womanhood to having a vagina, to biology, as opposed to simply feeling like a woman.

5. Conclusion

By theorizing the concept of patriarchy, radical feminism has shown that the oppression of women is a social construct and even a real social system, based on patriarchal culture, sexist socialization, misogynistic norms, control over women's bodies, the use of force and violence.

While radical feminism may have lacked an intersectional analysis, particularly when it comes to transgender women or sex workers, and thus excluded some women from its fight, radical feminism has been and continues to be very influential, and has given rise to many intersectional sub-movements such as the queer feminism of Monique Wittig or Judith Butler.

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