Notes on Radical Feminism

Radical: from Latin radic-, radix root
1. of, relating to, or proceeding from a root
2. of, or relating to the origin: fundamental
3. marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional: extreme

Rosemarie Tong points out that the basic feature of radical feminism is the insistence that the sex/gender system is the fundamental cause of women’s oppression. Sexism is the originary form of oppression and patriarchy, male control of the public and private realm, and must be eliminated if we hope to end sexism. Radical feminists argue that men’s oppression of women leads logically to other systems of human domination. Man’s domination of woman is so intricately woven into virtually all facets of our lives that it thoroughly pervades our sense of what it is to be a woman or to be a man. The systematic oppression of women will require not only legal, political, and economic changes; it will also require a radical reconstruction of sexuality. Radical feminists do not agree with previous political theories in seeing procreation and sexuality as private or personal. They are deeply political in being fundamentally organized by male power, and they argue that the relegation of these issues to the personal realm fulfills the ideological purpose of trivializing them and delegitimizing women’s struggles to change those practices. Radical feminists might critique Wollstonecraft for assuming that women’s oppression could be eradicated simply by reforming political or economic institutions; rather, feminists must transform the entire gender system.

Wollstonecraft and many other early liberal feminists suggested that female subordination had to do with socialization and argued that we need to educate women and provide them with the same opportunities that men have. Radical feminists argue that this will not get at the root of women’s subordination. We need something more radical. Where Wollstonecraft concentrates on education as creating false distinctions between male and female, radical feminists will focus rather on the sex/gender system and its various facets, especially reproduction and biological sex roles. It won’t be enough to simply provide a different education and more opportunities for women if we don’t change this more fundamental fact about male and female sexuality.

The sexual division of labor established originally in procreation is extended into every area of life. An individual’s sex is the single, most influential factor in determining her social position, her life experiences, her physical and psychological constitution, her interests and her values. Importantly, this is an aspect of women’s lives that Wollstonecraft largely leaves unanalyzed. Consider her remarks on motherhood. Wollstonecraft argues that the care of children in their infancy “is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature” (271). She suggests that there is a natural affection which makes women good wives and mothers. She refers as well to those “ennobling duties” which require exertion and discharge. She refers to the “indispensable duty of a mother” and the “duties of her station.” And when she refers to the duties of men and women, she usually refers to their “respective duties.”
…the society is not properly organized which does not compel men and women to discharge their respective duties, by making it the only way to acquire that countenance from their fellow-creatures, which every human being wishes some way to attain. (258)

And nature plays a role in these duties and affections: “Nature has wisely attached affections to duties, to sweeten toil, and to give that vigour to the exertions of reason which only the heart can give.” So it seems that nature has designed women to feel some affection for their duties as wife and mother. And when women neglect to discharge the duty of a mother, she sins against herself by neglecting to cultivate an affection that would equally tend to make her useful and happy. So there seems to be some kind of natural duty to motherhood in women. There is a natural affection between mother and child, Wollstonecraft suggests, but it is weak and needs to be strengthened through habit:

Natural affection, as it is termed, I believe to be a very faint tie, affections must grow out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy; and what sympathy does a mother exercise who sends her babe to a nurse, and only takes it from a nurse to send it to a school? (272)

What does the claim that sexism is the original –ism mean? Tong suggests that there are five ways we might interpret it:

1. Women were, historically, the first oppressed group.
2. Women’s oppression is the most widespread, existing in virtually every known society.
3. Women’s oppression is the deepest in that it is the hardest form of oppression to eradicate and cannot be removed by other social changes such as the abolition of class society.
4. Women’s oppression causes the most suffering to its victims, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, although the suffering may often go unrecognized because of the sexist prejudices of both the oppressors and the victims.
5. Women’s oppression…provides a conceptual model for understanding all other forms of oppression.

There are a number of complicated and complex issues that radical feminists attend to:

- How the very concept of femininity as well as women’s reproductive and sexual roles limit women’s development as full human persons
- The role of stereotypically feminine traits: should they be eliminated? Valorized? Are masculine traits to be valued or eliminated?
- The issue of androgyny
- What is the sex/gender system? According to Gayle Rubin: “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity.” How is the sex/gender system oppressive? How do our assumptions about what’s “natural” serve to oppress women?
Commentators on radical feminism note that within this diverse feminist movement one can discern two strains, radical libertarian thought and radical cultural thought.

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<th>Radical Libertarian Feminists</th>
<th>Radical Cultural Feminists</th>
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<td><strong>Sex Roles:</strong> Radical libertarian feminists reject the assumption that there is or should be a necessary connection between one’s sex and one’s gender. Gender is separable from sex and patriarchal society uses rigid gender roles to keep women passive and men active.</td>
<td><strong>Sex Roles:</strong> Radical cultural feminists don’t entirely reject the connection between being female and certain feminine traits. What they object to is the negative value given to stereotypically feminine traits.</td>
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<td><strong>Response to sex roles:</strong> Given that sex roles are neither “natural” nor biologically determined, radical libertarian feminists defend androgyny: women and men should be able to develop whatever combination of feminine and masculine traits best reflects their individually unique personalities.</td>
<td><strong>Response to sex roles:</strong> Rather than developing androgyny as a model radical cultural feminists argue for a transvaluation of feminine values. Women should emphasize the values and virtues culturally associated with women and de-emphasize the values and virtues culturally associated with men.</td>
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<td><strong>Reproduction:</strong> Women should substitute artificial for natural modes of reproduction. The less women are involved in the reproductive process the more time and energy they will have to engage in society’s productive processes.</td>
<td><strong>Reproduction:</strong> It is in women’s best interests to procreate naturally. The ultimate source of women’s power rests in their power to gestate new life.</td>
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<td><strong>Motherhood:</strong> makes strong arguments against biological motherhood because it places unreasonable demands upon women’s bodies and energies.</td>
<td><strong>Motherhood:</strong> No woman should, in an act of unreflective defiance against patriarchy, deprive herself of the satisfaction that comes from not only bearing a child but also playing a major role in his or her personal development.</td>
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<td><strong>Sexuality:</strong> Heterosexual as well as other sexual practices are characterized by repression. The norms of patriarchal bourgeois sexuality repress the sexual</td>
<td><strong>Sexuality:</strong> Heterosexual sexual relations generally are characterized by an ideology of sexual objectification that supports male sexual violence against women. Male</td>
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Sexual desires and pleasures of everyone by stigmatizing sexual minorities, thereby keeping the majority pure and under control. As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives us pleasure and satisfaction.

Sexuality is intrinsically flawed. As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by developing a concern with our own sexual priorities, which differ from men’s—that is, more concern with intimacy and less with performance.

Pornography: Our sexphobic society provides few images of healthy assertive sexuality. Women are inclined to have fairly negative ideas about sex. Feminists should take the lead in rejecting negative views of human sexuality. Radical libertarian feminists challenge the idea that sex must be connected with love in order to be “good.” Women could and should use pornography to arouse long-repressed sexual passions and to generate pleasure-giving sexual fantasies. Feminists should engage in an entirely open-minded and non-defensive examination of pornography.

Pornography: Sexuality and gender are the products of the same oppressive social forces. Women are sexually objectified in a patriarchal culture. Whereas men exist for themselves, women exist for men. Men are subjects; women are objects. Virtually all forms of pornography fail to express the kind of intimacy that creates love between people who care about each other.

Some textual selections

**Shulamith Firestone: The Dialectic of Sex**

Sex class is so deep as to be invisible. Or it may appear as a superficial inequality, one that can be solved by merely a few reforms, or perhaps by the full integration of women into the labour force. But the reaction of the common man, woman, and child - 'That? Why you can't change that! You must be out of your mind!' - is the closest to the truth. We are talking about something every bit as deep as that. This gut reaction - the assumption that, even when they don't know it, feminists are talking about changing a fundamental biological condition - is an honest one. That so profound a change cannot be easily fitted into traditional categories of thought, e.g., 'political', is not because these categories do not apply but because they are not big enough: radical feminism bursts through them. If there were another word more all-embracing than revolution - we would use it.

Until a certain level of evolution had been reached and technology had achieved its present sophistication, to question fundamental biological conditions was insanity. Why should a woman give up her precious seat in the cattle car for a bloody struggle she could not hope to win? But, for the first time in some countries, the preconditions for feminist revolution exist - indeed, the situation is beginning to demand such a revolution. The first women are fleeing the massacre, and sharing and tottering, are beginning to find each other. Their first move is a careful joint observation, to resensitise a fractured
consciousness. This is painful: no matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the problem always goes deeper. It is everywhere. The division yin and yang pervades all culture, history, economics, nature itself; modern Western versions of sex discrimination are only the most recent layer. To so heighten one's sensitivity to sexism presents problems far worse than the black militant's new awareness of racism: feminists have to question, not just all of Western culture, but the organisation of culture itself, and further, even the very organisation of nature. Many women give up in despair: if that's how deep it goes they don't want to know. Others continue strengthening and enlarging the movement, their painful sensitivity to female oppression existing for a purpose: eventually to eliminate it.

Kate Millett: “Sexual Politics”

A sexual revolution would require…an end of traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos, particularly those that threaten patriarchal monogamous marriage….The goal of revolution would be a permissive single standard of sexual freedom, and one uncorrupted by the crass and exploitive economic bases of traditional alliances.

Primarily, however, a sexual revolution would being the institution of patriarchy or an end, abolishing both the ideology of male supremacy and the traditional socialization by which it is upheld in matters of status, role, and temperament. This would produce an integration of the separate sexual subcultures, an assimilation of both sides of previously segregated human experience. A related event here would be the re-examination of the traits categorizes as “masculine” and “feminine,” with a reassessment of their human desirability: the violence encouraged as virile, the excessive passivity defined as “feminine” proving useless in either sex; the efficiency and intellectuality of the “masculine” temperament, the tenderness and consideration associated with the “feminine” recommending themselves as appropriate to both sexes.

Valerie Solana: “Society for Cutting up Men (SCUM) Manifesto”
http://www.womynkind.org/scum.htm

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.

It is now technically feasible to reproduce without the aid of males (or, for that matter, females) and to produce only females. We must begin immediately to do so. Retaining the male has not even the dubious purpose of reproduction. The male is a biological accident: the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene, that is, it has an incomplete set of chromosomes. In other words, the male is an incomplete female, a walking abortion, aborted at the gene stage. To be male is to be deficient, emotionally limited; maleness is a deficiency disease and males are emotional cripples.

The male is completely egocentric, trapped inside himself, incapable of empathizing or identifying with others, or love, friendship, affection of tenderness. He is a completely isolated unit, incapable of rapport with anyone. His responses are entirely visceral, not cerebral; his intelligence is a mere tool in the services of his drives and
needs; he is incapable of mental passion, mental interaction; he can't relate to anything other than his own physical sensations. He is a half-dead, unresponsive lump, incapable of giving or receiving pleasure or happiness; consequently, he is at best an utter bore, an inoffensive blob, since only those capable of absorption in others can be charming. He is trapped in a twilight zone halfway between humans and apes, and is far worse off than the apes because, unlike the apes, he is capable of a large array of negative feelings -- hate, jealousy, contempt, disgust, guilt, shame, doubt -- and moreover, he is aware of what he is and what he isn't.

Charlotte Bunch: “Lesbians in Revolt”
http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/furies/

The Lesbian, woman-identified woman, commits herself to women not only as an alternative to oppressive male/female relationships but primarily because she loves women. Whether consciously or not, by her actions, the Lesbian has recognized that giving support and love to men over women perpetuates the system that oppresses her. If women do not make a commitment to each other, which includes sexual love, we deny ourselves the love and value traditionally given to men. We accept our second class status. When women do give primary energies to other women, then it is possible to concentrate fully on building a movement for our liberation.

Woman-identified Lesbianism is, then, more than a sexual preference, it is a political choice. It is political because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance. Since the Lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system.