

Acknowledging the History of Deleterious Forms of Feminism: Why TERF Ideology is Nothing New

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Many feminists' first impulse may be to deny that trans-exclusionary feminism counts as feminism due to it working against the goal of liberation from sexism. In this essay, I will argue that trans-exclusionary radical feminism, also known as TERFism, does count as a form of feminism. This matter, as Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur point out, is more than a conversation about semantics (321). Addressing the full nuance of this issue will help aid in organizing against the rapid spread of this harmful anti-trans ideology. When TERFs are denied the status of feminists it reveals many feminists' inability to grasp the ambivalence surrounding feminism. There is also the problem of historical revisionism that must be addressed when excluding not only TERFs but other forms of feminism that have historically been used to cause harm.

In her essay "Feminist Politics: Where We Stand" bell hooks asserts that the definition of feminism has been muddled by patriarchal media and that reclaiming a coherent definition can help further the feminist goal of abolishing sexist oppression. The definition that hooks herself writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* is "simply put feminism is a movement to end sexism" (qtd. in "Feminist Politics"). This definition works to identify the central problem of sexist oppression and highlights that it can be perpetuated by anyone of any age or gender (hooks). As hooks chronicles the various stages of the feminist movement, she observes that the media has chosen to put a spotlight on "reformist feminists," who primarily consist of privileged white women. Women with multiple intersecting marginalized identities realized that reform was futile and instead championed revolutionary feminism only to be cast aside and have their voices erased from the mainstream (hooks). hooks attributes this to the fact that reformist feminism does not pose a significant threat to societal hierarchies, instead opting to use reform to allow certain women to gain power by moving up these hierarchies rather than outright dismantling them the way revolutionary feminists strive to do. The last feminism she describes is lifestyle feminism, which, unlike the former iterations of feminism, she immediately discredits (hooks). Lifestyle feminism as hooks describes, inherently robs the feminist movement of its political teeth, and individualizes feminism to the extent that any choice a woman makes can be considered feminist.

In debates surrounding what constitutes an appropriate way to categorize what counts as feminism and what does not, the ambiguity surrounding TERFs has been a particularly contentious issue. This is due to contradictions that manifest when deciding the definition of feminism, which hooks attempts to remedy in the previous essay mentioned. In their article "Introduction: TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and

Postfascist Feminisms,” authors Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur address this problem and assert that “There is no stability of meaning that might be attributed to the term feminist politics” (320). They argue that “...in our specific moment, eschewing celebratory narratives of feminism as an incontrovertible political good—as we urgently rethink the boundaries between what we normally imagine as “feminist” and “anti- feminist” movements—is a *conditio sine qua non* for any kind of antifascist trans feminist political and critical intervention” (Bassi and LaFleur 313). In the case of TERFs, the authors stress that it is paramount that TERFs are included as a form of feminism to ensure that they are not deemed an easily “dismissible brand of reactionary politics” (316). Bassi and LaFleur foreground the ambivalence of feminism in both its current and historical capacity to perpetuate harm (320). It is this ambivalence that provides the room to properly conceptualize and understand the harm that not only trans-exclusionary forms of feminism pose, but also other more widely accepted varieties of feminism (Bassi and LaFleur 317). They also remind us of the danger of historical revisionism that arises when one denies these formerly mentioned harms that are perpetuated by feminism (Bassi and LaFleur 321).

The ambivalence of feminism must be addressed to properly account for the nuance of this issue. For example, lifestyle feminism and neoliberalism both apply a hyper-individualization that isolates societal problems from their systemic roots, which highlights the ambivalence surrounding feminism. In the case of lifestyle feminism, which hooks overtly rejects, she observes that it has individualized feminism to the extent that it is entirely depoliticized as any action a woman makes can be considered feminist. Neoliberalism also has the tendency to individualize societal issues, and as the authors point out, “one of the hallmarks of what we might call this style of neoliberal economics is precisely its emphasis on flexibility, which manifests at times as an incredibly absorptive capacity, a tendency to take the shape of the political container it fills” (Bassi and LaFleur 322, 323). This flexibility allows neoliberalism to use feminism in service of furthering the goal of accruing capital, which is demonstrated in the example the authors provide in which neoliberalism can “...present a company that exclusively employs independent contractors to undermine decades-old labor organizing by taxi drivers as the only safe transportation option for trans people” (Bassi and LaFleur 323). This solution bears some similarities with lifestyle feminism because it also presents a depoliticized solution to systemically rooted issues. It also facilitates the oppression of the drivers which when compared with the way lifestyle feminism would consider any decision a woman makes—including ones that would oppress others—as still categorically feminist, further illustrates the contradictory ways that feminism can manifest. There is also an abundance of historical examples that also demonstrate

how feminism “...has been so successfully wielded in the service of racism, capital and labor exploitation, and imperialism, to name just a few of its harms—and, of course, transphobia and transmisogyny” (Bassi and LaFleur 323).

In calling for a reclamation of feminism to restart the movement from the very beginning, hooks

potentially commits historical revisionism. This is not to say that her definition of feminism is wrong, but rather that feminism has been historically used in ways that perpetuate harm and that this must be acknowledged as feminism continues to progress. There is a multitude of examples of this, as Bassi and LaFleur remind us:

that the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848 identified a set of priorities for women that were almost entirely unresponsive to the condition of Black and Native women does not mean it was not a feminist effort. White supremacist feminisms—think of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger, and other self-avowed feminists who advocated for racial eugenics, among other ideas—are feminisms. (321)

Understanding the way that feminism has historically caused harm is also a key factor that can help prepare us to spot and retaliate against the more pernicious iterations of feminism in the present day (Bassi and LaFleur 313). This would include acknowledging that feminisms that exclude trans people are indeed feminisms and “demand careful historicization, analysis, and contextualization as a recent (but not in any way new) formation of feminism that has gained terrifying traction on a global scale over the last fifty or so years” (Bassi and LaFleur 321).

As Bassi and LaFleur's article mentions, there has been a recent uptick in the spread of TERF rhetoric and that “[i]n spite of its own self-image as embattled against the feminist global traffic of meaning about gender and the body, the gender-critical movement has nonetheless managed to translate, popularize, and fundamentally reframe within public debate long-standing intellectual conversations about “sex” and “gender” as epistemological categories” (318). This is why committing to fully understanding the ambivalence that characterizes feminism and rejecting historical revisionism is crucial to properly retaliate against this problem.

Works Cited

- Bassi, Serena, and Greta LaFleur. "Introduction: TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2022, pp. 311-333.
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