

The different strands of contemporary feminism essay



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South African society, as in other societies around the world, there are inequalities along many different lines;- class, race and sex. These inequalities are inherited today from society yesterday. As Marx states: Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.

However, it is not only men that make and transmit history; women are party to this as well. But the influence that men and women have over history is not equal. Wilson states that there is not one single society in history in which women have controlled the political and economic lives of men, even when queens and empresses ruled, many of their intermediaries were men (Jagger and Rothenberg, 1993; 173). Throughout history, women have been denied political, economic (and some would argue human) rights enjoyed by men.

In the United States, women were granted the right to vote in January 1918, but it wasn't until August 1920 that the Act took affect, because its passage through the U. S. Senate was blocked (Jones, 1995; 427). Members of the U. S. Senate at that time were all men.

In South Africa, black women (as well as black men) were finally granted the right to vote in 1994, after the ending of apartheid. This point concerning South Africa illustrates the intersection of race and gender, in that it wasn't just women that were denied the right to vote. The intersection of inequality will be discussed in more depth later on. However, inequality extends beyond voting rights.

The issue of voting inequality was used to demonstrate blatant legal discrimination on the basis on gender (and race) in the past. This paper will examine different strands of feminist theory and how these theories explain inequality in society, and also how they argue reformation of society will occur. Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism and black feminism will be explored to examine the fundamental arguments of these theories, and also how the impact and incorporation of ' race' / ethnicity, class and sexual difference (s) has changed feminism throughout the 1990s. The issues of ' race' / ethnicity, class and sexual difference (s) has challenged feminism into including a wider range of women, and also ensuring that feminism is relevant to a wider range of women.

Liberalism originates from the political, economic and social transformations during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century (Mandell, 1995; 5: Jagger and Rothenberg, 1993; 117). The theories that originated at this time questioned many of the traditional beliefs, such as the authority of the church and the divine right of kings to rule. Liberal theorists argued that every individual in human society has certain inherent natural rights, such as those to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness upon which the government may not intrude (Mandell, 1995; 5). Liberal feminism is a development of these liberal ideals, combined with feminist ideals.

Liberal feminists favour gender equality through equal opportunities for men and women – an extension of classic liberal's interpretation of equality (Jagger and Rothenberg, 1993; 117). Liberal feminist argue that inequality of women stems from the denial to them of human rights, and also from their learned behaviour, of a reluctance to exercise them. Therefore, gender

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equality will be achieved through reshaping individual beliefs and values, and new processes of socialisation. Legal measures to ensure equal rights are also advocated within liberal feminism. This stance of liberal feminism promotes a meritocratic society – if equality of opportunities are presented, then positions will be filled by the most suitable candidate. Liberal feminist theory, as in classical liberal theory assumes a distinction between public and private life.

Classical liberal theory argued that public life was that which government could regulate and private life was a realm that the government could not regulate. Equality through legal measure extends into many realms. The National Organization for Women (NOW) (an American organisation) produced a Bill of Rights for women, which they demanded: That equal employment be guaranteed to all women, as well as men, by insisting that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission enforces the prohibitions against sex discrimination in employment under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the same vigor as it enforces prohibitions against racial discrimination...

the right of women to control their won reproductive lives by removing from penal codes laws limiting access to contraceptive information and devices and laws governing abortion (cited in Jagger and Rothenberg, 1993; 159) Jagger and Rothenberg include NOW's Bill of Rights in the section on liberal feminism. NOW demand equality through the law in a number of different realms, from employment, to tax laws, to calling for child care facilities meeting the needs for pre-school through to adolescence to be a community resource accessible to all regardless of income. They also call for these laws <https://assignbuster.com/the-different-strands-of-contemporary-feminism-essay/>

to be policed with the same rigour that polices the implementation of prevention of racial discrimination in the workplace. Throughout the twentieth century legal reforms across the world granted women more rights in accordance to those that men received i.

. voting rights, legislation to protect equal opportunity and equal pay etc.

However, one criticism levied against liberal feminism is that reforms have not been shared equally by all women because changes have not addressed issues of socially structured inequality (Mandell, 1995; 8) It is argued that liberal feminism has not adequately recognized that inequalities of class, ' race'/ethnicity and sexuality differences(s) have been institutionalised, and if this is the case then reform requires more than simply individual action (ibid; 9)Another major criticism of liberal feminist theory is the distinction between private and public spheres. Firstly, the difference between these two realms is not clear, and there is some merging that occurs.

Secondly, maintaining the distinction between private and public, maintains dualistic thinking about gender roles. Mandell states that " men are more likely to be associated with the rational, instrumental ... scientific and public domain while women are associated with the irrational, sacred, emotional and private world" (ibid; 9) He is the bourgeoisie and the wife represents the proletariat.

" (Donovan, 2000; 79) Marxist feminism is a combination of Marxist class analysis and of feminism. However, Donovan (2000) argues that there is " inherent methodological weakness in taking a theory developed for one set of circumstances and transposing it to another" (Donovan, 2000; 79).

Donovan continues that Marx and Engels concentrated primarily on men and masculine circumstance when they developed their theories and consequently the legitimacy of these concepts when applied to women may be seen as intrinsically suspect. *ibid*; 79).

Engels published *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and argued in this that women's subordination was linked to the rise of private property. In previous society, i. e. those that were pre-patriarchal, property was held communally, society was matriarchal where families were traced through the mother. However, as society developed and became more organised from hunter/gatherer societies to economic farming, it gave rise to property becoming privately owned. Society became patriarchal in order for men to ensure the passage of wealth through future generations, the benefactors of this passage being their own biological offspring.

According to Donovan, during the transition of society, the male benefited as 'all the surplus fell to him'. Donovan continues: "The woman's domestic labor began to count for less in comparison to all the wealth he was accumulating. The later was everything the former the unimportant extra." (Donovan, 2000; 88) As the male took command of the house, a consequence of the economic shift in power, the role of women changed.

Woman was degraded and reduced to servitude and she became an instrument for the production of his children (*ibid*; 88), and in this sense she became a tool for male use. Engels calls this "the world historical defeat of the female sex" (Engels, 1884; cited in Ritzer, 1987; 329). Donovan concludes by arguing that the family unit was transformed into a

monogamous-male-dominated nuclear unit, within which arose the first class struggle in history. There are criticisms regarding Engel's work on the family, and his explanations of the nuclear family. Elliot (1988) lists four main criticisms.

Firstly, anthropological research has demonstrated that nuclear families existed in early hunter/ gatherer societies, which negates Engel's claim that the nuclear family developed with the rise of private property. Secondly, Elliot cites Morgan (1975; 136-40) that Engel's account of the development of the family is of dubious historical accuracy. Thirdly, Elliot states that "socialist revolutions have not led to the abolition of the family, nor even to any significant change in its form" (1988; 63). Finally, Elliot asserts that Engel's thesis is not helpful in understanding the persistent nature of the monogamous nuclear family under capitalism (Elliot; 1988; 62-3). Hartmann (1981) contends that there is no such thing as 'pure capitalism' nor 'pure patriarchy' but rather these coexist, for example patriarchal capitalism, or patriarchal feudalism or matriarchal horticultural societies etc (Elliot, 1986; 110).

This approach then requires a struggle for women's liberation from subordination on two fronts, against both capitalist relations and also against patriarchal relations. Hartmann contends that men occupied a privileged position in pre-industrial society, and consequently as industrial capitalism developed, women's position was already weaker than the position on men continued to remain weaker (ibid; 111). Hartmann argues that capitalism and patriarchy reinforce one another, and women's subordination is not simply a consequence of capitalism, rather it is the result of class and sex

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struggles in which because women were in a weaker position at the onset of industrialisation had little chance to change their position (ibid.). Marxist feminists would argue that class inequality and oppression is the primary form of exploitation, and after that is the oppression of women. This is very different from radical feminist arguments, which are discussed in the next section.

Marxist feminists acknowledge that there will be differences of experience for women depending on their class. This difference will impact on the unity of women as one homogenous group, for example, upper-class wealthy women will share more experiences with upper class wealthy men than with poor welfare women (Ritzer, 1987; 330). Criticisms were levied against Marxist feminism that it ignored differences around race and sexuality (Zalewski, 2000; 20). Zalewski uses an historical example, in that in 1984 a group of black feminists took over editorial control of the socialist journal *Feminist Review*, and made the claim that “[feminism is a] tradition [which is] white, Eurocentric and Western, and has sought to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism in current political practice” (ibid,; 20). One criticism levied against Marxist feminism is that structures of inequality within society are more complex than simply limited to the intersection of class and gender. Sexuality, ‘race’/ ethnicity, disability and HIV status can be added to form a matrix of inequality which is vastly different that the convergence of two strands namely class and gender.