

FEMINISM

Exam Strategies: Create a **dialogue between the different branches of feminism** – let them talk to each other. Do not write a literature review. Reflect about how feminism not only affects our understanding of politics, but also has implications for our *doing* of politics (anti-discrimination law). **Critically reflect** on the terms given by the prompt (e.g. doctrine of *equal rights*),

Questions to think about:

- Is feminism a united movement?
- Does the claim that gender is socially constructed help feminism?
- What weight should feminists give to the value of individual liberty?
- Do feminists fail to appreciate the value of the private sphere when they claim that it is a site of women's oppression?
- To what extent are the differences amongst women a problem of feminism?

My own position: *Feminism is not a united movement - although to have political force, it should re-focus on a common goal. Prima facie, the liberal feminist view has a lot to offer. It is a good standpoint for feminists to embrace due to its focus on equality and irrelevance of sex for opportunities, and it can respond to most radical feminist charges. But liberal feminism is fundamentally limited: By being a gender realist theory, it might treat all women the same. We need to incorporate intersectional insight and be aware of potentially and actually disadvantaged social groups (and look at dimensions of race, sexuality, class etc.). I don't think that the eroding the term "women" is helpful for the feminist cause, because it makes it very difficult to speak about feminist's goal in any meaningful way. Hence, the social construction of gender is helping some feminists but not others.*

DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

- › How could feminism be defined?
 - > A good catch-all definition for feminism might be to “**end oppression to women**”. But there are different branches of feminism which take different stances on this. There is a lively debate about what defines a woman. Perhaps “*ending patriarchal oppression*” would be a good alternative.

- › What are the **three theses of feminism** (which all feminists share in one way or another)?
 - > There is a social cleavage of gender.
 - > Patriarchy exists.
 - > There is a need for change, gender needs to be overcome.
 - Feminists differ to the extent to which this change should be brought about, how extreme it should be.

All theories share the belief that **women are oppressed or disadvantaged compared to men**, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified.

- › What is the **distinction between sex and gender**?
 - > Sex denotes certain biological traits and is given by birth, Gender however denotes ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits and is argued to be socially constructed. It entails a social categorisation of people into masculine and feminine. “*One becomes a woman*” (Beauvoir, 1949)
 - > Biological vs. **Cultural mothering/fathering** – men are encouraged to be active and women passive in their upbringing. But sex difference does not necessitate that parents shouldn't be equally involved in parenting.

- › What is **liberal feminism**?
 - > Embraces liberal thought – especially the idea of the **equal worth of human beings**, spheres of choice and freedom that the state should not interfere with – and uses it to advance feminist ideas: Liberal

- feminists are primarily concerned with **protecting and enhancing women’s personal and political autonomy**.
- > Makes use of the distinction of sex and gender and argues that inequalities between men and women cannot be justified by natural differences, thus we need to think about the importance of gender socialization.
- > What is **radical feminism**?
 - > Goes further than liberal feminism and argues the oppression is intrinsic to the aggressive, contemporary political structure, which in turn is very hard to eradicate. It can be **conceived as form of perfectionism**, which thinks that it is necessary to change people’s minds because they are “*choosing the wrong life*”.
 - > Where the liberal sees the potential for freedom, the radical feminist sees **structures of domination that are bigger than any individual**.
 - > What is standpoint theory?
 - > Arises from the worry that if a feminist is too close to western, analytical theory, she will be subject to its limitations (“*The master’s tools we never dismantle*”). Feminism should however express the standpoint from which they speak: as subjects, not objects.

FEMINISM IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- > In most of its history, Western political philosophy has ignored women
- > Historically, **liberal feminism arose in 19th century as a demand for equal rights** (Bryson 2003)
 - > But this later became problematized (see below)
- > Feminism after WW2:
 - > By 1945, women of most Western democracies had won degree of legal equality with men
 - But in the domestic sphere, they were still very unequal: Women received welfare for mother-related tasks.
 - > In 1960s, view that happiness for women could only be achieved through domesticity pervaded (Betty Friedan)
 - > In 1980s, theorists began to construct critical accounts of feminism, e.g. Okin criticizing Rawls that his theory must be extended to the family – a just future would be one without gender.

LIBERAL THEORY AND FEMINISM

PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE

- > What is the liberal private-public distinction about?
 - > **Public**: sphere of individual rights, contractarian agreements
 - > **Private**: includes special bonds of attachment, tradition, social bonds, affection; seen as personal, intimate and crucially **gender-neutral** (which implicitly assumes there is symmetry of power) – the state should stay out of this. Politics was sought to be protected from contamination from the private.
 - **Liberalism faces the charge of endorsing and enforcing this dichotomy** – one which crucially contributes to the continuous oppression of women (MacKinnon) Why is this? A core element of liberal thought is that there are **spheres of life in which the state should not intervene**.
- > Social contract – which tells the story of how a new civil society and a new form of political right is created – implies a **sexual contract** of women subordinated to men, i.e. a contract which establishes men’s political right over women (Pateman 1988).
- > This links into the public-private distinction: The social contract is treated as an account of the creation of the public sphere whilst the **private sphere is not seen as politically relevant**. “*The dichotomy between the public and the private ... is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about.* (Pateman)

- > **Feminists argue that greater social, political and economic power of men has structured this “private” sphere to the disadvantage of women and children**, rendering them vulnerable, and often leaving women economically dependent on men and subject to a highly inequitable division of labour in the family (Held 2006)
- > Pateman (1988) argues that the public realm cannot be fully understood without the private sphere: “*Civil freedom depends on patriarchal right.*”
- > Radical feminists demand the erosion of any distinction between the personal and political (Elshtain 1981): **The personal is political**. Elshtain argues that women have been silenced from public speech “*because politics is in part an elaborate defense against the tug of the private, against the lure of the familial, against evocations of female power.*” But those people who were silenced to say are not people with nothing to say but are people without a public voice and space in which to say it.
 - As alternatives for ordering the basic notions public and private, Elshtain **demands that the private world be integrated fully within, or subsumed by, an overarching public arena** and insists that the public realm by “privatized” with politics controlled by the standards, ideals and purposes emerging from a particular vision of the private sphere.
- > What is a **liberal feminist critique of Rawls**?
 - > Okin 1989: Counter to Pateman, Okin believes that the original position can be used as a tool for feminist criticism. Rawls ignores gender biases – he **takes it for granted that the contractors in the OP are heads of families, whereby he assumes a continuity of interests within the family**. This overlooks the political relevance of sex and gender.
 - > Solution: Reformulate the OP such that the relevant parties are individuals who behind the veil of ignorance do not know their sex in the future society – people will **abstract away from gender bias**. So Rawls’s Theory of Justice can still be used as a tool for feminist thought: If the **veil of ignorance hides the parties from their sex**, it becomes a powerful concept for challenging the gender structure. Why is this important? “*Family is the school of justice*”: it is **where girls learn to be girls and boys to be boys**, where gender stereotypes are entrenched and where the conception of the good and a sense of justice are shaped. For Okin, **justice demands that family structures are to be revised** – envisions a just future without gender, where sex becomes irrelevant in social practices.
 - > Obj.:
 - Should feminism do away with gender hierarchy or with gender as a whole? After all, gender can be a useful social identity, not necessarily a mark of oppression. The transgender movement positively identifies with the gender that is the opposite to the one ascribed by sex.
 - Theory remains an **ideal one** and doesn’t involve real-world experiences of injustices

THE DIFFERENCE APPROACH

- > The difference approach to sexual discrimination **views as discriminatory unequal treatment that cannot be justified by reference to some sexual difference** (Kymlicka 1990). It accepts that there are legitimate instances of differential treatment of the sexes (e.g. segregated washrooms), but these are not discriminatory as long as there is a genuine sexual difference that justifies the differential treatment
 - > Seems intuitively appealing to have a “sex-blind” society, and indeed, it is **the standard interpretation of sex equality law in most Western countries**. “moral thrust” is to “*grant women access to what men have access to*” (MacKinnon 1987)
 - > Objection: Social institutions are designed in a certain way, designed by men. So the difference approach sees sex equality in terms of the ability of women to compete under gender-neutral rules for the roles that men have defined (Kymlicka 1990)
 - Example: Jobs which require that the person, gender neutral, is not someone who is the primary caretaker of a preschool child. Even though this is not making reference to gender, i.e. is gender neutral, there is NO sexual equality

been treated as ends in themselves, and too often as means to an end (Nussbaum 1999). Also, one's own wellbeing very much depends on one's family and society.

- › **Radical feminist critique:** Liberalism lacks a concrete engagement with the realities of power in different social situations. There are groups which are actually or potentially disadvantaged and making them legally equal would be to neglect that difference. Developing political principles must begin from the **historical and social conditions** in which we exist (Young 1989).
 - › Resp.: Liberal philosophers have mostly been rejecting the purely formal notion of equality - formulation as capabilities refocuses the aim to not simply distributing resources around, but also to see that they work in promoting the capacity of people to choose a life that they want. (Nussbaum 1999). **If equality of opportunity means anything, it is that individuals have the right to demand different prerequisites depending on one's social standing or circumstances** in society.
 - However, it has to be admitted that the reluctance of liberal reluctance to interfere with the family runs deep and is very concerning - it fails to take into account competition for scarce resources (like time), divergent interests, differences in power etc. **BUT this is not a failure intrinsic to the liberal theory itself**, rather, it is a "*failure of liberal thinkers to follow their own thought through to its socially radical conclusion*".

STANDPOINT THEORY

- › What are different approaches within standpoint theory?
 - › **Difference feminism:** is critical of liberal equality feminists, because women must NOT be “like men” in order to be valued. Fear that the value of womanhood can be too easily erased. Justice instead requires that feminine values are properly rewarded.
 - **Ethics of Care** (Gilligan 1982, Held 2006): Posits that there are two ways of thinking about justice: One is abstract and involves universal duties – this is gendered. Another way, involving care, is more concrete and involves personal duties and bonds – it is **relational and particular**. Every person starts out as a child dependent on those providing us care and we remain interdependent throughout our lives (Held 2014). **Justice should be re-theorized so that strict impartiality does not rule out the special forms of care**, like compassion and emotionality.
 - Features include i) Central focus is on the moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility, e.g. caring for one's child. It “*stresses the moral force of the responsibility to respond to the needs of the dependent.*” ii) values emotion rather than rejects it, iii) **calls into question the universalistic and abstract rules of the dominant moral theories** – instead, respect the claims of particular others with whom we share actual relationships.
 - Criticizes the liberal individualist conception of the person, for we are not abstract, rational selves, or “mushrooms sprung from nowhere”, but rather interdependent human beings, which all depend on care at one point in their lives (mostly in early childhood and youth or when they are older)
 - **Kymlicka (1990)** believes that **the core of the care-justice debate is within moral concepts:** Whilst justice is about rights and fairness, care is about attending to responsibilities and relationships.
 - Critique: Reason vs. emotion dichotomy is posited to starkly?
 - › **Radical feminism:** Whilst liberal feminists say that the law be sex blind, radical feminists say that the **status quo already embodies asymmetries of power**. Liberals need to realize that the present has been constructed from a male perspective. Since males are the dominant social group, reality is constructed from that – patriarchy is a system of male domination and female submission.
 - One form of radical feminism: Gender is created by the sexual objectification of women – so the theory of gender is actually a **theory of sexuality** (MacKinnon 1987). The mechanism to

reinforce this in a society with equal legal treatment is violent, subordinating and dehumanising pornography which conditions male desire to focus on sexual submissiveness.

- > **Poststructuralist feminism:** More in the continental tradition. Gender is purely performative (Butler 1990) – there are no natural roots to different behaviour. Resistance to social construction becomes possible when it is shown in acts that gender is not natural, see Transgender movement.
 - **The reality which we ‘know’ is mediated through language and experience.** As such, meaning is unstable and dependent on culture and power structures (Bryson 2003)
 - But this could make it very difficult to talk about women in any meaningful way (see below)

- > **Intersectional feminism:** This differs from other approaches mentioned above, because the others all share the metaphysical assumption of “**gender realism**” – that women as a group are assumed to share some characteristics, some criterion that defines their gender and the possession of which makes them “women”.
 - But this view is criticized by intersectional feminism: Sexual submissiveness (as MacKinnon says) cannot be the defining criterion since it varies depending on your race and class.
 - White, middle-class women have too narrow of a perspective and focus on class stereotypes. Domesticity cannot be the main driver of sexual oppression as black women have had jobs for a long time. **Gender and racial subordination must be seen together** (hooks 1981). Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women’s rights because they did not see “womanhood” as an important aspect of their identity – rather, they faced the brutal reality of racism. “Black women” was not a separate group in itself, but was often treated with one or the other (either white women or black men)
 - “*although the women’s movement motivated hundreds of women to write on the woman question, it failed to generate in depth critical analyses of the **black female experience***”.
 - We need to see the struggle against racism and the struggle against sexism as natural intertwined.
 - **White women’s experience of discrimination does not match the black women’s experience.** “*The assumption that feminism identifies and seeks to change the common position of women became increasingly untenable.*” (Young 2011)
 - E.g. black women during period of slavery were raped whereas white women were seen as pure and virtuous.
 - Does this mean the end of specifically feminist discourse?
 - Young (2011): Does not think it does because “*I still experience, as do many other women, the affinity for other women which we have called sisterhood, even across differences*” – still, it has compelled her to **move out of a focus specifically on women’s oppression and trying to understand the social position of other oppressed groups.**

- > Basic idea of structural injustice from Young:
 - > “*structural injustice exists when social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities.*”
 - This framework is deployed to characterise many instances of oppression and marginalisation, e.g. women, sweatshop workers, the homeless, temporary migrants...
 - It avoids the language of individual blame, which might lead to more acceptance of reconciliation

- Feminists should understand woman as open-ended and a term in process – “*it is open to intervention and resignification*” (Butler 1999)
- Feminists should not try to define a “woman” at all, and this should not constitute the foundation of feminist politics. Rather, they should focus on providing an account of how power functions and shapes our understandings of womanhood
- Finlayson (2018) says that perhaps it is best to stand down from the whole “what are women” question – women are those who occupy a particular position in society relative to men.
 - Obj.: But then it becomes very hard to construct a unified movement.

FEMINISM AND THE DIVERSITY OF WOMEN

- › The goal of feminism may be characterized as **ending the oppression of women** (hooks 2000)¹
 - > But women are oppressed not only by sexism but in many other ways, e.g. by classism, homophobia, racism, ageism, ableism etc. – so would the goal of feminism then be to end all oppression that affects women? This would be a very expansive definition of feminism.
 - > hooks 1989: “*I believe women and men must share a common understanding – a basic knowledge of what feminism is – if it is ever to be a powerful mass-based political movement (...) I suggest that defining feminism broadly as “a movement to end sexism and oppression” would enable us to have a common political goal*”
 - This approach implies that even though feminism’s objective is to end sexism, because of its relation to other forms of oppression, this will require efforts to **end other forms of oppression** as well.
- › What makes a particular form of oppression sexist?
 - > Not just that it harms women, but that **someone is subject to this form of oppression specifically because she is, or appears to be, a woman**. E.g. racial oppression harms women but racial oppression by itself doesn’t harm them because they are women, it harms them because they are members of particular race.
 - > The strategies put forward to explicate sexist oppression are problematic (see critique of gender realism)
 - One Explanation: Only consider as paradigms those who are oppressed “only” as women, motivation behind this is that more complex cases bringing in additional forms of oppression will obscure what is distinctive of sexist oppression
 - The **ideal of impartiality** suggests that all moral situations should be treated according to the same rules – but **by claiming to provide a standpoint which all subjects can adopt, it denies the difference between subjects** (Young 2011). Particular experiences of privileged groups will then appear to be universal.
 - Hence, this would have us focus only on white, wealthy, young, able-bodied, heterosexual women to determine what oppression is! And this is of course implausible.

¹ We could define oppression as Young does: As a situation when one or more of the following conditions is met: i) Exploitation - benefits of their work or energy go to others without those others reciprocally benefiting them; ii) Marginalization - excluded from participation in major social activities, such as workplace; iii) Powerlessness - live and work under authority of others; iv) Cultural imperialism; v) Violence and harassment

Hence: Need to understand that **women differ on various dimensions** and that some are more potentially or actually disadvantaged than others – these dimensions include, but are not limited to: race, class, sexuality (Young 1989). *"We cannot develop political principles by starting with the assumption of a completely just society, however, but must begin from within the general historical and social conditions in which we exist"*

- Social justice needs to explicitly acknowledge and attend to these differences in order to undermine oppression.

*"It is still compatible with pluralist methods to seek out patterns in women's social positions and structural explanations within and across social contexts, but in doing so we must be **highly sensitive to historical and cultural variation**"* (McAfee 2018)

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