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Feminism

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In Western societies, feminism remains a predominantly modern set of ideas and practices both derived from and opposed to the Enlightenment. Born of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century liberalism as well as nineteenth-century radicalism, feminism comprises counterhegemonic ideas about gender as well as practices aimed at undermining its hierarchical role in human affairs (cf. Grant 1993). By and large, feminism revolves around Simone de Beauvoir's ([1949] 1961) idea that women are made, not born. Rosi Braidotti (1993) has further modernized that idea by emphasizing the “distance between Woman and real women” (p. 8), that is, the gap between the idea of “woman” and the actualities of women’s experiences and lives. Luce Irigaray (1985) has also further modernized Beauvoir's observation: “Becoming a woman really does not seem to be an easy business” (p. 66). Such becoming entails learning ideas and practices not necessarily conducive to a woman’s well-being. Thus, feminism commonly involves disidentification with some of the core values and standard practices in society (Braidotti 1993:2).

Joan Wallach Scott (1996) characterizes feminism as “a site where differences conflict and coalesce, where common interests are articulated and contested, where identities achieve temporary stability—where politics and history are made” (p. 13). Thereby, she implies the ideas and practices anchoring virtually all varieties of feminism. First, feminism grapples with the commonalities and differences among women as well as between women and men. Second, it raises questions about and takes positions on consciousness, values, and desires among girls and women. Third, it addresses issues of power, domination, and hierarchy in connection with girls' and women's identities, opportunities, and outcomes, both as individuals and as members of groups respectively subordinated to boys and men. Finally, feminism is always interwoven with politics and history. Its most widely known practices are public and political, and its challenges to historical patterns are part and parcel of its public identity.

Like feminist theory anchored in academe, feminism consistently involves “the challenge of social change” (Phelan 1994:31). As such, feminism has spawned social movements spanning the globe from the mid-nineteenth century onward. In the United States, for instance, a women's movement began in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. That first wave of North American feminism ended with the passage of the Nineteenth
Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which formalized women’s right to vote. With the publication of Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, in 1949, and Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963, the theoretical and rhetorical grounds were laid for the *second wave* of modern Western feminism. The women’s movement, which had largely languished between 1920 and 1960, was revitalized during the 1960s. In the United States, the establishment of the National Organization for Women (NOW), which Freidan helped to found, was pivotal in that revitalization.

By now, with the passage in most Western societies of substantial legislation further formalizing women’s rights, a *third wave* of feminism has emerged. Originating most discernibly in the early 1980s, this last feminist wave of the twentieth century has as its hallmark an emphasis on diversity. Feminists of color as well as young white feminists, who were also active in the first and second waves, have spearheaded this third wave. In the process, they have laid the foundations for more multicultural—indeed global—feminisms during the twenty-first century.

Regardless of which wave of feminism is under consideration, feminism consistently manifests itself as a multitempered set of ideas and practices. Commonly observable in liberal, radical, cultural, and postmodernist varieties, feminism comprises multiple strands of thought and multiple strategies for achieving social change and cultural transformation.

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*See also*

Further Readings and References


