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Critical Feminist Theory

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The phrase *critical feminist theory* evokes multiple theories and meanings. In some usages, the term *critical* modifies *feminist theory*, suggesting that all feminist theory criticizes the misogynistic view of women that characterizes society. Feminist theory, viewed in this light, is a critical theory representing the radical notion that women are people. Other uses of the term *critical feminist theory* suggest that feminist theory has not gone far enough to counter women's societal subordination. In this view, critical feminist theory encompasses many "modified" feminist theories, indicating a multiplicity of theories critical of feminism itself. These theories push feminist theory to recognize a deeper radicalism.

Types of Feminist Theories

Feminist theory and critical feminist theories share many central assumptions. All feminist theories make gender a central focus of inquiry, asking "the woman question." The "woman question" identifies and challenges the omission of women and their needs from the analysis of any societal issue. These theories examine power relationships, making the political visible. The notion that "the personal is political" challenges the public and private dichotomy that characterizes liberal thought.

The notion that "the personal is political" also embraces narrative. A key methodology to all forms of [p. 349 ↓] feminist theory is consciousness-raising, whereby women share their personal stories, weaving a pattern that illuminates a broader picture of societal treatment of women. Feminist theories recognize that identity is relational, constructed through interactions and responses with both individuals and groups. However, critical feminist theories extend beyond the feminist critique in several directions. These critical feminist theories include dominance theory, relational or cultural feminism, pragmatic feminism, socialist feminism, postmodern feminism, critical race feminism, and lesbian feminism.

Scholars often contrast critical feminist theories with liberal feminism or formal equality. Feminist theorists who have been proponents of formal equality have argued that different treatment of women and men supported the subordination of women. Often justified as reflecting the natural order or protection for women, this differential treatment

protected women out of opportunities for full participation in society. Therefore, formal equality advocates objected to any form of differential treatment based on sex. In the legal realm, they were successful in persuading courts and legislatures to eliminate a series of sex-based rules, based on gender stereotypes, which lawmakers had enacted for administrative convenience. Critics of formal equality have argued that women who acted most like men were the primary beneficiaries of this strategy. Formal equality advocates defend the advances made for all women gained by overturning these sex-based classifications.

Critical Feminist Theories

Dominance Feminist Theory

Dominance theory views society as a place where men use and abuse women. In this power imbalance between men and women, men are the dominant actors. Dominance theory recognizes that men remain the measure with which women are compared. Thus, whether women are the same as men or different from men, men remain the yardstick. Catharine MacKinnon's work, from the identification of workplace harassment to the description of forced sex and the subordination promoted by pornography, best exemplifies this theory.

Relational or Cultural Feminism

Relational or cultural feminists believe that women are different from men in important ways that one should celebrate. This theory criticizes other feminist theories that emphasize power or women gaining power, if that power means losing the important qualities of connection and the ability to be relational. Sometimes termed *different-voice* feminism, this strand of critical feminism relies heavily on Carol Gilligan's research suggesting that women and men make moral choices through different reasoning processes.

Pragmatic Feminism

Pragmatic feminism merges pragmatism with feminism. It seeks workable solutions to concrete problems, elevating the practical answer over the sanctity of an abstract theory. Pragmatic feminists, such as Margaret Radin, identify the double bind, dilemmas leading to losing choices for subordinated subjects. Pragmatic feminists confront the dilemma by asking which choice will least impede empowerment.

Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminism emphasizes the integral connection between gender and class as being at the core of the oppression of women. Agreeing with Marxist analysis that argues historic change will result from class struggle, socialist feminists highlight the mutual dependence of capitalist class structure and male supremacy. This feminist class analysis examines distinctions among women in the political economy and women's shared experience as women. The work of socialist feminists such as Heidi Hartmann focuses on women's economic issues, including comparable worth, family and medical leave, child care, welfare reform, and health care.

Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern feminism engages the postmodern critique of objective reasoning and describes the inconsistencies in terms posed in opposition to each other, such as male or female, equality or difference, and public or private. Postmodern feminists such as Jane [p. 350 ↓] Flax and Carol Smart emphasize deconstructive discourse. Reason, knowledge, and self are neither neutral nor universal. Postmodern feminism insists on examining the gendered formations underlying these concepts.

Critical Race Feminism

Critical race feminism objects to the implicit assumption in much feminism that women are essentially the same and that they share whiteness in that sameness. Focusing critical inquiry on women of color ensures that scholars will not forget those most marginalized in society. Alice Walker's call to use the term *womanism* underlines the critique that feminism has been associated with whiteness. From a global perspective, critical race feminism both examines the marginalization of women of color and theorizes solutions to that invisibility.

Lesbian Feminism

Lesbian feminism critiques compulsory heterosexuality as a key underpinning of women's subordination. In her seminal article on "compulsory heterosexuality," Adrienne Rich challenged women to consider the lesbian possibility. Making the link between heterosexism and women's subordination, lesbian feminists ask women to consider what sexual orientation they would choose absent the overwhelming societal forces that dictate heterosexuality. They also urge feminist theorists who consider the impact of societal policies and practices on women to remember to include lesbians whenever they use the word women.

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See also

- [Critical Race Feminist Theory](#)
- [Deconstruction](#)
- [Discrimination, Sociology of](#)
- [Equality](#)
- [Feminist Legal Studies](#)
- [Gender](#)
- [Marxism](#)

- [Narrative](#)
- [Postmodernism](#)

Further Readings

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