

SHORT BIOS OF SELECTED FEMINIST THINKERS

By Elaine Heller

Feminism concerns the equality of women. I will concentrate on three themes; the struggle for suffrage, economic equality and, most importantly, the struggle for sexual equality.

Sexism in our thinking is still with us. As we proceed with our readings we shall try to become more aware of it.

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)

We shall start with the Suffrage Movement as it was given impetus by the Abolition Movement. One of the most influential speakers in this period was Sojourner Truth when she thrilled her audience with her description of male hypocrisy in her “Ain’t I a Woman” Speech first delivered in 1851.

“Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages and lifted ober ditches and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place!” And raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, “And ain’t I a woman? I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barn and no man could head me. And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it and bear de lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne 13 children and seen ‘em ‘mos all sold off to slavery, and when I cried with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus could hear me. And ain’t I a woman?” (Source: Wikipedia)

Male hypocrisy still underlies much of the discrimination against women today.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902)

The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 was the first organized women’s rights and women’s suffrage movement conference in the United States. The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments produced at the Convention was principally authored by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It was issued in similar form to the Declaration of Independence and has been credited with initiating the entire movement. Stanton documents all the powers of tyranny exercised by men over women. She was interested in the total socio-economic picture but she stressed the lack of the franchise and the total absence of economic and political rights as well as the lack of the powers of divorce.

Many of the members felt that all this would cause antagonisms which would stymie the suffrage movement but they were really shocked by The Women’s Bible. This was written by Stanton and a committee of 26 members, published in two parts in 1895 and 1898. Stanton wanted to challenge the control that religious orthodoxy had on women; she felt that more than anything else this resulted in the subservience of women by men. Even though the churches claimed that they believed that women were equal to men, this was not so in reality, as was evident in the Bible which was saturated with the influence of patriarchal thinking. She analyzed every page of the Bible to track all this down and to replace it with interpretations that probably represented what actually happened and were fairer to the actual role of women.

The Women's Bible became a best seller for many years but it angered many of the suffragists effectively ending Stanton's influence in the suffrage movement. Although Stanton devoted herself to the Suffrage Movement her heritage has been slightly muddled by her opposing legal protection and voting rights for Afro-American men while women, both black and white, were denied these rights. However, nobody can gainsay her tremendous contributions to the suffrage and women's rights movements.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman analyzed the importance of economics in causing women's subjugation by men. Women must have a way of developing economic independence or else they will remain sex slaves to their husbands, there is no independent value to her work, and her economic profit comes through sex attraction, not only through transient trade but through marriage.

In both cases, [in transient sex and "perhaps even more in marriage because of its perfect acceptance of the situation"], the female gets her food from the male by virtue of her sex-relationship to him. (Gilman 1898 *Women and Economics*, p. 64)

In marriage the husband will say that "we are equal contributors", but at the first quarrel he will say that he makes the money, therefore he has the power and she is powerless.

In order for women to obtain freedom and equality with men they must have direct economic power in society and not just be a consumer fed by her husband and valued solely for her sexual charms.

Emma Goldman (1869-1940)

Emma Goldman, the great anarchist, was active in the birth control movement several years before Margaret Sanger began her campaign. In 1916, she was arrested for giving instruction on the use of contraceptives. She went back to give the same lecture when she was released.

Emma was an anarchist and an idealist; she was interested in the total freedom of the individual as she saw it. She felt women were especially enslaved. She didn't think much of the suffrage movement; women should have the right to vote and should be able to enter the professions as they had been doing, but they were entitled to parenthood and, most importantly, to a free and fulfilling love life. She was against marriage; women had the right to numerous love affairs as long as they were guided by true and profound feelings. She was horrified by the many marriages she saw which continued dead and meaningless relationships.

Margaret Sanger (1879-1940)

Emma Goldman had talked about women's need for contraception (before 1914) but it was Margaret Sanger who took this issue as her own for a lifetime of effort. Her goal was to effect changes not in middle class life but in working class life. The middle class had some knowledge of contraception, imperfect as it was, i.e., condoms, douching, pessaries and coitus

interruptus. She aimed to make contraceptive knowledge available to working class women whose lives were a horror because of repeated pregnancies and the danger of crude attempted abortions.

She made speeches, issued newsletters, sent contraceptives through the mail, and started the first birth control clinic in 1916 in Brownsville. She was jailed several times but attracted world-wide publicity. She was responsible for getting birth control to a medical level of acceptability.

Publicly she supported only traditional marriage but in her personal life she was involved in many sexual affairs; this too was a source of inspiration for many women. In this she walked a similar path to Emma Goldman, believing a woman has a right to her own body. And she was also involved in some socialist type movements, although this remained in the background.

Sanger felt that if a woman did not gain a right to her own body she could never obtain economic independence, she would always be enslaved by a patriarchal society.

Karen Horney (1885-1952)

It is hard to be aware of the full extent of Freud's paternalistic thinking. According to his theories, women are not complete people, they are incomplete males. Karen Horney is recognized as the first great psychoanalytic feminist, and she made great inroads in trying to deal with this. She was shunned by the Freudian analysts, as she still is, and has not received the recognition she should have. However, with the start of the second wave of feminism in 1967, she has come into prominence and her theories are used in the training of many analysts.

She started out as a strict Freudian but she developed her own opposing theories; it was not biology but culture that was the deciding force. She rejected Freud's model of women as defective and forever limited; her critique of both psychoanalytic theory and women's psychology is tied to her recognition of a male-dominant society and culture. She found it impossible to distinguish what is essentially feminine from culturally induced behavior stemming from a patriarchal society.

She was quite concerned with penis envy and came to the conclusion that it was not the penis women envied but the power that went with it. She disagreed with Freud's other related theories like castration, feminine masochism, the Oedipus Complex, etc. There are anatomical-physiological factors that may predispose women to masochism, like inferior physical strength, menstruation, childbirth, and the female role in intercourse. Biological factors are secondary and reinforcing rather than determinative. How women experience their physiology is profoundly affected by culture.

Kate Millett (1934 -)

The 60's was an exciting period for the feminist movement, but progress was very slow in the areas of contraception and professional advancement; we still seemed to be a patriarchal society. Many feminists were dissatisfied. It seemed to be a middle class movement a la Betty Friedan. Black and Latino women as well as lesbians seemed to be passed by. But the storm was

unleashed; the second feminist movement started in the 70's and was mostly credited to Kate Millett and her revolution-producing book, *Sexual Politics*.

Sexual Politics was a critique of patriarchy in Western society and literature. She argued that sex-based oppression was both political and cultural and that it was necessary to undo the traditional family. Millett provides a full discussion of the influence of Freud's thinking on a paternalistic culture. She believed that Freud played a major part in the counterrevolution (1930-1960) against the first wave of feminism, even though his theories of the unconscious and infantile sexuality were major positive contributions. His understanding of the female personality was limited; it was based upon penis envy. The female, according to this concept, is negative; she is the result of the fact that she is not a male, and lacks a penis; forget about the patriarchal society, which engulfs her; biology has doomed her! Women's desire to have a child and achieve professional success is just a substitute for the penis which they really long for. In the 70's, competing theories gave psychoanalysis competition but it still remains a vital part of our culture.

Millett ends her book on a cautious note of optimism. She believes in what can be accomplished by human growth and re-education. There is a lot that has to be done; women still do not have economic equality, and sexual rights like abortion and on-demand contraception seem to be increasingly embattled. And women are still far from economic and political equality with men.

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Sojourner Truth (1851) “Ain’t I A Woman?” (Source: Wikipedia)