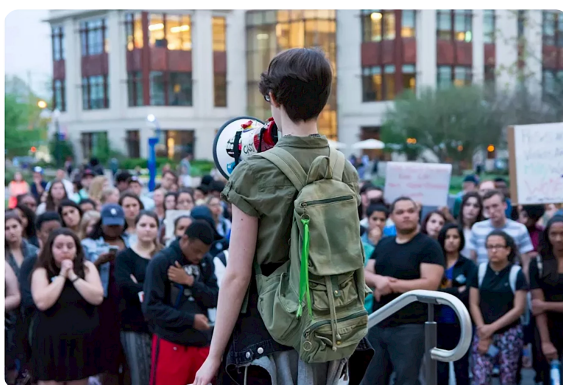


Why Equality is of Critical Importance to Re-Politicise Feminism in the twenty-first Century

Part of [Feminisms](#)

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An American University student addresses the crowd at a protest against Breitbart writer Milo Yiannopoulos on April 22. Photo: Alejandro Alvarez.

Feminism does not exist. There are at least a dozen different feminisms. Even the right and radical right wing has appropriated feminism. Within this appropriation, the feminism could become a-political. The thought that feminism is something of the left and the right. This article argues that it is crucial to understand the inherent political nature of feminism and how intersectional feminism necessarily is or at least should be connected to the principle of equality, justice and equal rights.

Feminisms and Politics

Feminism has reshaped societies around the world. Since its beginning, feminism was meant as a social movement having political tasks and achievements. In the slipstream of the events of May 1968 and their cultural, political and social consequences, feminism in general and feminism with certain specific goals of the

different waves have become hegemonic. At least now, in the general discourse, old conservative ideas that women should only take care of children and the household have disappeared. It is – again in theory – accepted that women should not only be able to join the labour market, but also get the same wage for the same job. In Europe, nobody in the mainstream seems to question the right of women to vote or to have their voices heard in public debates.

One seems to easily forget that all these 'normalities' relating to 'the better position of women' are only normalities that exist as result of feminists fighting fierce political battles. These rights were not just given but enforced. Being a feminist was always accompanied by a deeply political position. Feminism was a political battle embedded in a broader idea of creating a just society. It is no coincidence that feminism was, for a very long time, connected to socialism and to a lesser extent political liberalism. Feminism and the idea that men and women are equal and thus should enjoy equal rights were always at odds with the conservative view of the world. Feminism from a conservative viewpoint was always understood as an attack on the 'natural order' of things. Even more, it was read as an attack on the idea of the family as the cornerstone of the nation.

Appropriation and Redefinition of Feminism

That changed in the last decades of the twentieth century. Being an anti-feminist or advocating that a woman's place is at home taking care of the children was politically sensitive to say the least. Even conservatives now embrace and claim progressive values (Oudenampsen 2018). Most mainstream and even (extreme) right-wing politicians have no problem in labelling themselves as feminists, or at the very least praising the historic legacy of feminism. This embracement is solely a metapolitical strategy (Maly 2018): the acceptance of feminism comes with a redefinition of that feminism so that it furthers a classic conservative agenda. New Right embeds that feminism in a conservative political project. If we analyse this 'feministic' position in detail, we see three things happening:

(1) Feminism is being redefined. It is not connected to a battle for equality of women and all genders anymore. The whole structural dimension disappears. Feminism is then understood as a 'differential feminism' (de Benoist & Champetier 2000). This type of 'feminism' celebrates the differences between men and women, differences that are at their core biologically defined. For differential feminists, questioning gender (and other forms of) inequality is not an issue, quite the contrary: men and women need to respect the 'natural order' of the position of the sexes.

(2) Feminism in the conservative/ New Right discourse never equals an ongoing political battle to create a more equal society; it presupposes that equality is already realised. Feminism is thus understood as an anachronism: the battle is over. We have created a feminist utopia. Feminism is de-politicised.¹

1. Arikoglu, F. 2017, "Feminisme in het vizier: over antifeminisme, racisme en mannenrechten", *diggit maga-*

zine, 27 March, viewed 21 April 2018.

Feminism in this particular meaning functions as a celebration of the status quo. Being a feminist is nothing more than a celebration of 'who we are'. 'We', 'our culture' as the civilised part of the world. The 'Other' and 'their non-Western culture' as dangerous for the self-imagined gender equality in the West.

(3) Feminism in this account has become a functional diacritic to differentiate 'us' from 'them'. The idea is that their ethnicities and nations have distinct cultures and that we should preserve these cultures. Differential feminism is connected to that other highly influential idea of ethno-differentialism. We are only feminists in our battle to preserve what we have. And what we have is threatened by 'unenlightened migrants' trying to enter our society. 'Feminism' in this account serves a national, anti-migration and even racist agenda.

Over the last decade in many countries, the feminist accomplishments and this New Right appropriation were so profound that today, even among feminists, there is no consensus on what priorities feminists should have. The so-called 'silent majority' understands the success of the feminist battle as the full accomplishment of the goals the first and second wave of feminists had set for themselves. In contemporary society, people seem to think women and men have equal rights and we have feminism to thank for that. Feminism in this thinking has become something of the past. Something that has shaped who 'we' are, that has shaped our society in the Western world.

This proliferation of feminism shows three things: (1) that feminism in its current and historical form is hegemonic. Positioning oneself as a feminist – or at least a defender of the equality of women and men – is necessary to enter the mainstream. (2) That feminism is what one calls an empty signifier. That many different ideologies give meaning to the concept and this creates a de-politicisation of feminism. (3) As a result of the success of previous feminist waves and the metapolitical battle of the New Right (Maly 2018), classic progressive political feminism has a hard time to position itself.

The Antifeminist Threat and The Need to Re-Politicise Feminism

From the extreme left to the extreme right, no political actor questions the accomplishments of feminism. Their evaluation and their strategies to deal with that radical feminist success are of course very different. The New Right and conservative political actors embraced feminism to redefine it. This battle was very successful as it aligned with the dominant societal shift towards a neoliberal and nationalist consensus. This redefinition not only resulted in the de-politicisation of mainstream feminism, creating a status quo; it also opened the gates for a more radical and explicit antifeminism.

If we zoom in on the so-called Alt-Right – the radical fractions of the movement behind Donald Trump, or have a look at radical identitarian movements in Europe like Generation Identity, or online niches like the so-called 'manosphere', we see the explicit re-emergence of the conservative ideology and biological binary conception

of men and women and their 'ideal roles' in society. Milo Yiannopoulos is selling the book *Dangerous* (Yiannopoulos 2017) with a campaign that explicitly furthers the idea that 'Feminism is cancer'.

In this discourse, female-identifying people and more specifically 'malicious' so-called 'third wave' radical feminists need to be told that their 'women's liberation triumphs' resulted in the marginalisation of men and the interpretation of 'masculinity'. This discourse has created beta-males who are oppressed by women. With the antifeminism of Yiannopoulos, the widespread misogynistic voice of the male supremacist manosphere now has a (controversial) representative in the mainstream. Compared to the male-identifying people in this manosphere, Yiannopoulos is quite moderate. There, niche women are seen as cruel species, and inhuman advice like "killing a woman in self defense [sic] is more preferable than just injuring her. She can't spin up a bunch of lies about the situation that everyone will believe just because she's a woman" is circulating in these well-populated niches.² The construction of an enemy-image is used to justify exclusion/ discrimination and even murder. Nowadays, some of the sexist and racist core ideas of New Right and mainstream feminism are so normalised that an anti-inclusive movement is increasing.

2. Tomassi, R. 2018, "The Dangers of the Blue Pill", viewed 21 April 2018.

As an answer to these developments, we need re-politicised inclusive feminism which occupies structures that depart from the principles of equality. Radical feminism can't be individualist, or focus on the celebration of difference(s). After all, every feminist battle has a structural component. Therefore, we should realise that we can never reach radical feminist goals without fighting structural battles and redefining the structures of society. Radical feminism strives for equal access to sources of work, education, health care, work-life balance, safety, politics, political representation and advocates a fundamental economic redistribution (Fraser 2013): it will not work without redefining our current society in general and the economic structure in which it operated. We need a society that works for the people – all the people – and not for profits (Davis 1983).

This structural battle for equality is undoubtedly the precondition to realise true equality and justice. This means that socially critical feminists should not only fight for proportional representation (in paid workplaces or in universities) and tackle down the binary division of 'men' and 'women', together with all the people who don't fit in these boxes – this radical feminism requires the fundamental redistribution of economic sources. It should fight for equality and justice. That in itself is an intersectional battle that recognises overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination that all sexes/ genders face, based not just on gender but on ethnicity, sexuality, economic background, age and ability.

In relation to asylum and migration intersectional feminisms, we should make alliances with other rights' activists. Because of the rise of right-wing identitarian movements in Europe that (try to) make social inequality invisible and due to the attacks on inclusive feminism, more than ever we need intersectional feminism that is committed to the inclusion of all women and girls: migrant women, black women, refugee women, Muslim women, etc. This requires a collective battle against structural oppression. This contains solidarity between all human rights activists and especially feminist activists who don't necessarily share the same practices but fight

for the same goals: equal rights, justice and democracy.

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