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Trawsnewid Addysg, Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education, Transforming Lives



ECAY6006 The Politics of Activism

Theme 3: Ideology and Activism

Part 3: Ideological Challenges to the 'Mainstream' – Feminism

Feminism

Origins of Feminism

- Feminist theory has its roots in the broader feminist movement, which seeks to address and challenge the inequalities faced by women.
- The origins of feminist theory can be traced back to several key periods and figures:
- **First-Wave Feminism** (19th and early 20th centuries): This period focused on legal issues, primarily women's suffrage.
- **Second-Wave Feminism** (1960s-1980s): This wave expanded the focus to a wider range of issues, including sexuality, family, and workplace rights.
- **Third-Wave Feminism** (1990s-present): This wave emphasizes diversity and intersectionality, recognizing that women's experiences are shaped by race, class, sexuality, and other factors.

First Wave Feminism

- Key figures include:
- Mary Wollstonecraft, whose 1792 work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* argued for women's education and equality.
- Writing at the time of the American and French Revolutions, she was one of the first writers to argue that women should have the same rights as men
- Sojourner Truth: An African American abolitionist and women's rights activist, her famous speech *Ain't I a Woman?* delivered in 1851, highlighted the intersection of race and gender.
- Susan B. Anthony: was a prominent U.S. **suffragist** and abolitionist. She played a crucial role in the women's suffrage movement and co-founded the National Woman Suffrage Association in the U.S.A.
- Emmeline Pankhurst: A British political activist and leader of the **suffragette** movement, she founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903, which used militant tactics to fight for women's suffrage in the UK. (Pankhurst, 1911)

Suffragist / Suffragette

- The terms "suffragist" and "suffragette" both refer to individuals who advocated for women's right to vote, but they have distinct connotations and historical contexts:
- **Suffragists:** This term generally refers to members of the broader women's suffrage movement who employed peaceful, lawful methods to advocate for voting rights. They worked through petitions, lobbying, and public speaking to achieve their goals. Key organizations included the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in the UK, led by Millicent Fawcett.
- **Suffragettes:** This term specifically refers to members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903. Suffragettes were known for their militant tactics, including protests, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience. The term "suffragette" was initially used derogatorily by the press but was embraced by the WSPU members.

Second Wave Feminism

- Influential works from this period include;
- Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in which she argues that that women have historically been treated as the "Other" in a male-dominated society
- She also calls for women's liberation through economic independence, education, and the rejection of traditional gender roles.
- Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1964) in which she argues that the widespread unhappiness of women in the 1950s and 1960s was due to the societal expectation that they find fulfilment primarily through homemaking, marriage, and motherhood
- She also argued that these stereotypes were promoted by the growth of mass media (film, TV, newspapers etc.)

Second Wave Feminism

- Germain Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) argues that the traditional suburban, consumerist, nuclear family represses women sexually, rendering them "eunuchs" in a metaphorical sense.
- Greer was at the forefront of promoting direct action such as demonstrations in which women burnt items of underwear etc.
- In *Women, Race & Class* (1981) Angela Davis began to explore the intersections of race, gender, and class, highlighting the experiences of women of colour in the feminist movement
- This work and others would influence the Third Wave which began to develop in the late 1980s explores the way in which different groups of women were affected by patriarchy

Third Wave Feminism

- Key figures include;
- Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) continued to study issues of intersectionality
- She argues that black women experience complex discrimination; sexist and racist from white men, sexist from black men and racist from white women.
- bell hooks has explored similar themes in works such as *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984, 2000)
- In this work she critiques mainstream feminism for its focus on the experiences of middle-class white women, which she argues excludes women of color and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds

Third Wave Feminism

- In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler challenges 'essentialist' concepts of womanhood.
- In this and other works she argues that there is a clear difference between a person's **sex** (i.e. biological sex - female) and their **gender** (i.e. a social construction based on stereotypes – 'feminine')
- In this she was at the forefront of gender studies as a theory and ideological stance
- Feminist theory continues to evolve, addressing new challenges and incorporating diverse perspectives on the debate
- See for example, *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014)

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