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INCLUSIVE FEMINISM

R. LEA BRILMAYER*

I. INTRODUCTION

I don't know exactly why, but for some reason one advertisement has stayed in my mind for twenty years. I saw it in 1973, the year I started law school. *Ms.* magazine had only recently started publishing, and I read every issue. It was exciting. But then, the ad¹—a full-page ad, focused on a large photograph. Four women (they seemed to be middle-aged, a phase of existence I found almost unimaginable at the time) sitting around a card table covered with cards, empty coffee cups, and half-full ashtrays. Their clothes were frumpy, their hairdos stiffly sprayed, their expressions bored. These were clearly not women who vacationed on the Riviera. If they had the money to vacation at all, I imagined, it would probably have been at some trailer park on a small lake in the Midwest. Actually, the scene itself almost looked like it should have been taking place inside a trailer. The caption read: "The magazine that separates 'the women from the girls.'" It was an ad for *Intellectual Digest*.

In a fit of what in hindsight can only be described as political correctness, I wrote to *Ms.* cancelling my subscription. If I recall correctly, I accused the editors of "classism." (A few years later in time, and I would probably have been able to add "lookism" to my accusations, but in 1973 that would only have puzzled people.) Of course, there is a sense in which *Ms.* "asked for it"—they claimed to have an advertising policy prohibiting the publication of ads that were degrading to women. That ad, I thought at the time (and continue to think), was degrading to women. "Why," I asked myself, "do we *want* to separate the 'women' from the 'girls'? Shouldn't feminism be about solidarity?" In the sixties and seventies, the buzzword was "sisterhood," and this ad didn't seem very sisterly.

People don't use the word "girl" to refer to middle-aged women quite as much as they used to, but not much else has changed in the advertising community's belief that the best way to attract the dollars of women who consider themselves enlightened is by dumping on women whose degree of liberation is open to doubt. Last week I saw an ad on the side of a bus in midtown New York City. The woman in the ad was blonde; she was beautiful; she wore an expensive suit; and she was carrying a gun. She was identified as the head of the largest company in the United States that teaches self-defense to women. The ad was for *Working Woman*, and the

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1. Advertisement, *Ms.*, Mar. 1973, at 103.

caption read: "I didn't get where I am today reading *Good Housekeeping*." The creators of that ad might be interested to learn about a confirmed sighting, at an academic conference several years back, of a current member of the United States Supreme Court, sitting by the pool wearing a scarf and sunglasses and reading the very same. The magazine doesn't seem to have done his or her career much harm.

Advertising, of course, often appeals to the worst side of our natures. It would be nice to believe that advertisers' attempts to play to our snobbism don't actually work. It would be nice to think that "liberated women" are free from the insecurities and elitism that Hollywood and Madison Avenue types try to cater to. As feminists, we start out just as prone to snobbery and insecurity as any other human beings; but as feminists, we seem to have taken on a commitment to rise above our own snobbery and elitism, at least when they collide with the welfare of other women. It would be nice to think that we have been successful, and the continuing conviction of advertisers that we have not is rather depressing.

During the last twenty years, there have been some changes in what it takes to be considered liberated or enlightened. I don't know what prompted the scorn of earlier generations of feminists, but by the time I was in college, the idea of getting married and having children was considered beneath feminist contempt. There was also a notion that all heterosexual sex was rape, leading some to conclude that it was impossible to be a feminist if one persisted in being sexually attracted to men. (This, of course, is a theme that resurfaces occasionally today, although apparently without awareness that many women of my generation react, "Oh, come on. We've been through that one already.") Even incorrigible heterosexuals were convinced that if one was truly a feminist, one wouldn't have children; or that even if one did, one would raise them communally; or that even if one settled into a monogamous relationship, one would not—of *all* things—get married.

It's more common now to hear the opposite. A woman who commits herself entirely to her career is somehow suspect—"male-identified." Women are "supposed to" be concerned with how to balance a career with having children, not with competing with men on their own terms. Things have gone so far that a few years ago a leading feminist seemed to insinuate that a female Nobel Laureate was "an honorary male."² The scientist's sin, apparently, was to have gotten the Nobel Prize by working extremely long hours, neglecting along the way to carry out her female responsibility to procreate.

One thing that's hardly changed, though, is the notion that there's a right way (and a wrong way) to lead your life; that if you don't do things

2. See Fred M. Hechinger, *About Education: When Motherhood Interferes with the Training of Young Female Scientists*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 9, 1988, at B11.

the right way, you can't be a feminist, and that all right-thinking feminists are entitled to come together in a group to stone you. While it has never been more than a small group that adopts this posture in its most virulent form, there is something very important about this group, about who counts as its members, and about how they (and the rest of us) tend to see them. These individuals are typically acknowledged to be "the most feminist" of all. No one ever accuses *them* of not being feminists, yet they are somehow given the right to aim that charge at anyone else. The very fact that they are willing (eager?) to denounce others for not being feminist enough is taken as evidence that their own political credentials are beyond reproach. The rest of us must then be on the defensive, must be willing to justify what we do, or else be willing to relinquish the label "feminist" to these self-appointed custodians. The burden of proof is on us.

A lot has been written recently about political correctness, and my object here is not to rehearse all the evils political correctness is said to rain down on our heads. My point is not that narrow-minded feminist Thought Police are ruining the universities, silencing dissent, undermining our civil liberties, and generally taking all the fun out of life. Those claims come from outside the feminist community as well as from inside it, while the point I am making here is primarily of concern only to feminists. My point is that we should not allow a small segment of feminist opinion—*any* small segment of feminist opinion—to appropriate a label that means a great deal to a widely diverse group of individuals and to reserve it for their exclusive use. No small, self-appointed group owns the title "feminist."

II. THE COST OF EXCLUSION

It might seem that any group with political aspirations, especially one operating in a democracy, would want its membership to grow as large as possible. The Republican Party figured this one out, even if the "Big Tent" idea didn't carry the last election. But there's a stereotyped image of left-wing political movements that is hard to dismiss as completely mistaken. The left generally, one hears, is too busy fighting with the people it is close to to fight the people on the other side. The same is said to be true specifically of feminism. Around the time of the Ginsburg nomination,³ there was a joke circulating: "What's the difference between a feminist and a cannibal?" Answer: "Cannibals eat their enemies."

The cost of exclusion is obvious: diminished political strength. There are many who think that the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment is

3. See Richard L. Burke, *Clinton Names Ruth Ginsburg, Advocate For Women, To Court*, N.Y. TIMES, June 15, 1993, at A1.

directly traceable to the general perception of the amendment as a "feminist" issue. Unfortunately, what that label means to many American women is that the amendment is divorced from their concerns—it is the province of snooty, over-educated, privileged white women who look down on women who play bridge, read *Good Housekeeping*, and don't have jobs as heads of major American corporations (or jobs outside the home at all). Dirty tricksters who opposed the amendment may be partly to blame for disseminating this portrait of the typical feminist, but the movement itself may bear some of the responsibility for this common belief; and lately the movement has tried to take a good look in the mirror. Many national women's groups are firmly committed to building a broader coalition, in particular one in which women of color and women from less economically advantaged backgrounds play a more central role.⁴

Unfortunately, though, as some women's groups devote their energies to programs that will attract wider involvement, there are those who denigrate their positions for being "liberal." As women's groups reach out, some "feminists" write them off for not being radical and feminist enough. It is as though there was something intrinsically wrong with casting the net too broadly. Of course, women's groups are not the only ones that have to choose between catering to a smaller, more militant, group and broadening their electoral appeal; organizations such as the NAACP also worry about losing their appeal to the alienated as they try to address the concerns of the mainstream. And people of color have to deal with slurs such as "oreo," "banana," and the like. What seems particularly interesting about the problems of women's groups, though, is the way the word "feminist" is used, and the ambivalence the general public has toward it.

It is not uncommon to hear young women say that, yes, they believe in equal pay for equal work, and yes, they believe in the right to reproductive freedom, but no, they don't consider themselves "feminists."⁵ What would the analog be for race relations? Someone might describe him or herself as more or less militant on questions of race relations, but the fact is, these are points on a spectrum. "Feminist," on the other hand, seems to be something that you either are or are not, and many young women (not to mention men) say they are not, even when

4. For example, the theme of the National Organization for Women (NOW)'s 1993 annual convention was "Everyday Women, Extraordinary Acts." Sara Rimer, *Ordinary Women Receive A Tribute From Feminists*, N.Y. TIMES, July 5, 1993, at A6 (reporting on efforts to broaden NOW's appeal to "ordinary women," and describing the reception given to two former cafeteria workers, Marilyn Jancy and Sally Bartolo, who initiated a lawsuit challenging the higher pay that was given to the mostly male custodial workers at their school).

5. Thus, although Jancy and Bartolo praised NOW for supporting their lawsuit, they are not members of the organization, and "[t]hey do not call themselves feminists." *Id.*

they adhere to principles that years ago were taken to be the core of a feminist agenda. Perhaps more to the point here, some segments of the feminist community are only too cooperative in narrowing the range of what is allowed as a feminist position.

So one hears that "the feminist position" on pornography is that it should be barred; or that "the feminist position" on surrogate motherhood is that it should (or should not) be allowed; or that "the feminist position" on date rape is that it is utterly irrelevant that the act was committed by a person you had been going out with (and having sex with) for a long time, after you had a few too many drinks, when you really couldn't get it together to say you didn't want it. As previous core feminist positions come to be more widely accepted, they no longer qualify one as a feminist; it's a classic case of moving the goalposts. It's as though some immutable law of physics, identical in function maybe to the rules about conservation of matter and energy, requires that no more than some certain percentage of the population be entitled to the honorific—sort of the equivalent of Mensa for women's politics. As soon as too large a number of people buy into the feminist agenda, it has to be changed, so that only a smaller number will qualify.

The obvious result of making the qualifications for membership more onerous is that fewer people join. Like anything else, when price goes up, demand goes down; fewer people are able or willing to pay it. Telling women that in order to be a feminist you have to believe that all heterosexual sex is coercive or that movie censorship is a good thing is going to convince some subset of women that they aren't feminists. That is, unless they already have a prior personal identification with the term. If they do, the consequences may be rather different. Those women may be willing to fight.

III. THE FIGHT FOR THE SYMBOL

The chief rhetorical objective of the claim that some particular point of view is not consistent with feminism is to dissuade people who already think of themselves as feminist from adopting it, or to persuade them not to continue to hold it. The message is, if you care about feminist aims and aspirations, you cannot possibly believe that, so don't. But there may also be subsidiary messages, for instance, that if you persist in publicly holding that point of view, you will be ostracized by a group whose approval means something to you. Even if that group ceases to be psychologically important to you, its disapproval will be painful, because its members will join forces against you. The first rhetorical gambit is an attempt at persuasion. The second is a veiled threat.

How should one respond to this threat? There are costs to meeting it head on. It is not just the fear that one's antagonists are truly able to inflict injury, although for those involved in political life, or for those who

are otherwise politically vulnerable, this fear may be real. Even in universities, where we are most sheltered from political pressures, students fear the disapproval of their classmates (or teachers); untenured professors worry about what evaluation letters will say at tenure time; university administrators know that political unpopularity in the state legislature may cost them their jobs. It's not that there is some incredibly powerful feminist cabal that squashes its enemies. It's more that, people being what they are, it always seems easier and safer not to make waves unnecessarily; making even minimally powerful enemies seems unwise.

Aside from these personal costs, though, there may be a genuine sense that one is selling out one's feminism by the simple fact of breaching solidarity. Surely it makes political sense for women to join the fight together. The women's point of view (to the extent that there is one) is dissipated when women themselves disagree. It makes sense, whenever possible, to try to find a position that all women who consider themselves feminist will be able to support. Subsuming one's own position into the position of the group is sometimes necessary if we are to make political progress.

There are times, though, when the price for solidarity is too high. This can happen, first and most importantly, when a matter of high principle is at stake. I don't think anyone in the women's movement thinks, today, that women of color ought to swallow their complaints about the focus of the movement in the past, simply so that "women" can provide a united front. There is an important point of principle here, and everyone pretty much agrees that the movement as a whole would be much better if those grievances were fully aired, and adequate accommodations made.

Reluctance to adopt what is put forward as the official position also can arise from a different source. In some cases, it is possible that those who claim to represent "the women's position" are simply not representative of a wide range of opinion, but have been recklessly inattentive to what anyone outside their select circle might think or want. Breaking ranks may be difficult, costly, or painful in such cases but the only alternative may be to allow one set of individuals a unilateral option to speak for the group. If debate within the group is not enough to solve the problem, some women may feel the need publicly to disassociate themselves from a "feminist" position that does not, to them, ring true. This is not a step that most take lightly; but the only alternative is to be held hostage to one's loyalty, when one feels that one's loyalty is being taken advantage of.

The feminist debate over pornography seems to have reached that divide. There is a genuine and strongly held difference of opinion over whether society should censor material that is considered (by many) to be degrading to women. Some feminists believe that "pornography" can actually serve the interests of women, by turning society away from sexual

repression and freeing women's imaginations. Some feminists find pornography repulsive but recognize that censorship has traditionally been a tool for the oppression of women. Some feminists hate pornography but hate censorship at least as much, for reasons other than that it has been turned against women. Some think that censorship just won't work; some distrust the alliance with the Religious Right; some think pornography is a distraction from more important issues. And some, obviously, think that pornography should be legally suppressed.

The insistence that the last position is the only possible feminist one is itself a form of censorship. It is an attempt to impose solidarity where solidarity seems, increasingly, impossible. Imposed solidarity, though, is rigid conformism. Further, the tool which is used to impose conformity—ostracism—is a dangerous one for a group that needs every warm body it can muster. What to do about pornography is not an issue on which there is consensus; nor is there going to be consensus any time soon; nor did the custodians of the "feminist" position ever attempt to create consensus. Saying that someone who disagrees with you on the pornography issue is not a feminist is divisive and, in the long run, disastrous politics. It is feminism's exclusionary side, when what we should be looking toward is a more inclusive feminism.

IV. INCLUSIVE FEMINISM

Feminism would be more powerful as a political movement if it were more *inclusive*; if we tried to take seriously the subjective identification people have with the movement, and stopped trying to discriminate between those with "real" feminist credentials and those who should be dismissed as "sell outs" or "traitors." Too much time is spent, too much acrimony generated, and too much credibility wasted in the eyes of the rest of the world for us to get involved in theoretically rarefied, and personally vicious, attacks on nonconformists. The Spanish Inquisition may have looked like a smart strategy in the short run, but in the long run, how well did it work out? Unlike the Catholic Church, the feminist movement has room for heretics. More to the point, there is no single privileged group of feminists with the right to define who is and who is not heretical. We are all heretical.

Insisting on a narrow definition of feminism plays into the hands of those who would marginalize the movement. In the sixties, feminists were scorned as "bra-burners" by those who assumed that you couldn't be a feminist unless you wore—or refused to wear—a particular type of underwear. The media now portrays feminism as extremist because feminists (supposedly) are all fanatical puritans who believe in censoring everything they personally find offensive, from sexually explicit materials to campus speech they find politically incorrect. To hear the media's version of the story, feminists are the American analog of the Iranian

religious police who prowl the streets of Teheran with vials of acid looking for women wearing lipstick. We are not to blame for the media's shallow depictions of the feminist movement as rigidly one-dimensional, mindless, and shrill. On the other hand, there's no reason to make life easier for the stereotypers by engaging in endless turf wars or insisting on rigid ideological conformity.

There are genuine points of disagreement within the movement, and legitimate fights to be had. The point, though, is precisely that these fights are *within* the movement. Liberal feminists *are feminists*; so are libertarian feminists, and so are radical feminists. There are lesbian feminists and straight feminists, white feminists and feminists of color, feminists from the middle class and feminists from the upper and lower reaches of the income spectrum. There are male feminists as well as female feminists. Feminists differ about what are acceptable means as well as what are the most important goals. Like every other vibrant political community, the feminist movement reels and buzzes with differences of opinion.

Is everyone, then, a feminist? No, of course not; and the question is how to draw the line. To some degree, the question whether a particular person should be considered a feminist can be answered simply by asking whether she or he considers herself or himself to be a feminist. There are many admirable people who do wonderful things for the female half of the human race, or who prominently exemplify women's achievements, who might not consider themselves feminist even if that term was understood quite broadly. Does Mother Theresa consider herself a feminist? Janet Reno? Margaret Thatcher? Sandra Day O'Connor? Or, for that matter, Bill Clinton or Jesse Jackson? The first thing to do is to ask. If someone chooses not to identify with the label "feminist," there doesn't seem to be any reason to force the issue.

The harder question, though, is what to conclude about people who *do* identify themselves as feminists, but who have views from outside the mainstream feminist creed. Does feminism necessarily carry with it particular attitudes toward race or homosexuality? Toward pacifism? I once saw a poster advertising a meeting where the relationship between feminism and vegetarianism was to be discussed. The organizers clearly believed that a commitment to feminism necessitated a certain (negative) attitude toward eating meat. It is probably true that the feminist community has a higher-than-average percentage of vegetarians, anti-nuclear activists, gay-rights supporters, and adherents to other liberal/radical causes.

But there does not seem to be any intrinsic reason that feminism has to go along with "correct" views on any of these issues. Treating these other views as corollaries of the feminist commitment, in fact, denies them their independence and distinct importance. The commitment to freedom and dignity for gays is not, after all, a subset of feminism. Some of our feminist predecessors (Margaret Sanger is said to be one) had notably

unattractive views on matters such as race and eugenics.⁶ Regarding such women, surely it misdiagnoses the problem to say that they were not feminists; the problem, surely, is that they were racists (or homophobes, or whatever). We need to abandon any illusions that to be a feminist one must be a politically perfect person. It should not be necessary to point out that it is logically possible to be a feminist, and at the same time an otherwise despicable individual.

The question is more difficult when the issue is not an independently important set of beliefs, but one that most feminists find central to their conception of equality for women. Are there pro-life feminists? How much tolerance can feminists have toward polygamy and still be feminists? What if you believe that God intended women to stay in the home, and so think it is good for women not to have outside paid jobs? Does a real feminist ever approve of using women's bodies as commercial sex symbols? How convincing was the recent full page ad in the *New York Times* for *Cosmopolitan* magazine, showing a luscious young thing in a real humdinger of a bikini:

Am I a feminist? Yes. Feminism means you want the best for *both* sexes, everyone gets the chance to be his or her most achieving self My favorite magazine says equality and achievement are crucial for women but you don't have to stop loving men while you get there. *That's* being *feminine*. I love that magazine. I guess you could say I'm That COSMOPOLITAN Girl.⁷

At some point, the line has to be drawn; there must be some core beliefs. It must mean something to say that one is a feminist, something more than the subjective belief that one is a feminist. What the core consists of is certainly contentious, and disagreement over its content is an important debate. My point here is independent of the view one takes about what precisely falls within that core; it is about how to handle the disagreement. We have tendencies to each choose the issue that matters most to us, and then insist that it's not possible to disagree with our

6. In the early part of this century, Sanger edited *The Birth Control Review*, a publication of the American Birth Control League, which featured such slogans as "Birth control: To create a race of thoroughbreds." THE BIRTH CONTROL REVIEW, Nov. 1921. In 1922, Sanger wrote, "Every feeble-minded girl or woman of the hereditary type, especially of the moron class, should be segregated during the reproductive period. Otherwise, she is almost certain to bear imbecile children, who in turn are just as certain to breed other defectives. . . . Moreover, when we realize that each feeble-minded person is a potential source of an endless progeny of defect, we prefer the policy of immediate sterilization, of making sure that parenthood is absolutely prohibited to the feeble-minded." MARGARET SANGER, PIVOT OF CIVILIZATION 101-02 (1922).

7. Advertisement, N.Y. TIMES, June 29, 1993, at D24.

position on that issue and still be a feminist. But even the most one-dimensional of feminists must realize, on some level, that theirs is not the only issue feminism must deal with. Militant and focused anti-pornography feminists must still be aware that there are other defining issues of the feminist movement. If they weren't, they would have to conclude that members of the religious right are feminists (regardless of their views on the proper role of women in society), merely because they wanted to suppress pornography.

The realization that there are other issues that might exclude one from being called a feminist ought to be taken as an indication that these same issues are relevant bases for inclusion. For, any issue that has the potential for detracting from a person's claim to be a feminist has the potential to *support* his or her claim to be a feminist, as well. If denying that there ought to be a right to an abortion counts as evidence that someone is *not* a feminist, then affirming that there ought to be a right to an abortion counts as evidence that someone *is*. It makes no sense to take issues as a litmus test for feminism—abortion rights, equal pay for comparable work, the right to child care, or family leave—but then deny these issues any weight when an individual has the “right” view on one or all of these matters but takes the “wrong” position on others.

Inclusive feminism requires defining the core to include more people rather than fewer. It means taking at face value, and treating in good faith, a person's claim to identify with the feminist movement. It means genuinely preferring to see others as feminist if they wish to be seen that way, and only reluctantly concluding that the definition is not broad enough to encompass their set of views. It means treating differences of opinion as being different, legitimate views about what feminism requires. It means not trying to silence others by ostracizing them or by calling them traitors or “honorary males,” and it means keeping the door open to “girls” who play bridge, read *Good Housekeeping*, or defend freedom of expression.