

Opposition to the Political Participation of Women and Gender Justice Advocates

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What are the distinctions between backlash, resistance, opposition, and violence? Why do they occur and how do they matter?

I actually think it is vital for feminists to articulate very clearly the differences between and within these terms/concepts. Let me start with both the most important and the most overused – and that is “violence.” Obviously for feminists, the struggle against the (global, epidemic, banal) plague of male violence is central to both feminist theorizing and the very possibility of constructing a post-patriarchal and feminist civil society and social order. Like reproductive freedom, freedom from violence in the home, the streets, the schools, the workplace is a nonnegotiable “bottom line.” And connecting the dots between the violation of women and (let’s say) toxic masculinity which builds bombs, starts wars, guns down schoolkids and concert-goers is a key move of even the most tepid intersectional feminism.

But when we use “violence” too loosely we are going down a very slippery slope. I got into this issue a bit during the whole “Tuvel/Hypatia” affair where the signatories to the now infamous open letter asserted that broaching particular subjects produces inevitable harm and that the publication of the article itself caused actual harm. The idea that any article in a specialized feminist journal causes harm, and even violence, is a grave misuse of the term “harm.” An argument you may disagree with should not be conflated with actual violence, and similarly it is important to distinguish (in debates about how best to deal with campus sexual

assault) between an attack and an unwanted advance or actual harassment and writing about harassment (e.g. the Kipnis case). There is plenty of real violence out there – particularly against women and girls – so it seems wholly counterproductive to make these conflation.

Backlash is another concept that demands rethinking because how a backlash manifests changes over time, particularly as feminist ideas and images become commodified and integrated into mainstream culture. It's not at all clear to me that it is a useful term anymore. Perhaps we would do better to recognize that virulent misogyny and anti-feminism are never far from the surface and that the renewed wave of misogyny we see now is not so much a backlash as a surge or the lessening of the strictures that may have been in place a bit more pre-Trump. It may also be the case that the idea of backlash invites the (mistaken) post-feminist assumption that feminism has somehow "won" and that the backlash is the result of that victory.

Resistance and opposition seem to me not that far apart conceptually but what they are missing is, perhaps, a notion of re-invention. I often think of this when we talk, for example, about gender fluidity and malleability in this new era. The "new fluidity" is fabulous of course but it is not at all clear that gender transgressions of this sort lead to or are identical to gender transformation. Can gender bending or the proliferation of non-binary subjectivities exist alongside the hegemony of normative gender? And if this is the case, so what? In other words, is that co-existence itself transformative, opening up possibilities for more proliferation, slowly chipping away at the presumption of binary frames? Or does it simply become a sideshow to the real drama of heteronormative dominance? But while feminism is always "about" gender it is not reducible to it. Put another way, it is not at all clear to me that the chipping away at

binary gender, the loosening of the reigns of gender norms and behaviors, will necessarily upend male dominance. Gender fluidity and gender “trouble” - as the brilliant Judith Butler puts it - can only aid in deconstructing the hold of dominant power. But gender transgressions – even on a large scale – are no guarantee of an end to gender inequity. Transforming gender is key to ending male domination but I fear it is not the only key or, to add to this unfortunate metaphor, there are many keyholes...

Here then, in thinking about gender transformations and their import to feminist transformations it is important to remember that men’s performance of gender so often hurts others – both men and women, boys and girls. Women do cause harm, of course, but it is largely not harm produced through an enactment of their normative gender. In other words, “gender” is clearly not some symmetrical sorting mechanism. Feminist theory – of whatever stripe – has always recognized that gender and gender power and gender inequity and gender violence must always be thought together in order for any one aspect to be transformed meaningfully.

I think here of same-sex marriage and whether or not it will ever have the capacity to overturn or deeply challenge the gender norms so fundamental to the institution.

So, I think the question is resistance and opposition for what? For who? To what end? I actually think resistance can be its own end, giving us sisterly solace in terrible times. Resistance can model kinds of feminist subjectivity and agency and leadership (see the Women’s March for example) and can enable the shift into transformative politics. But again, I do think our slippages can be problematic when we start talking about “self-care” and such as akin to resistance or even opposition.

How should scholars capture and measure resistance, backlash, and violence? How might feminists respond effectively?

I'm not sure "capturing" or "measuring" are the issues here...and not sure really how one does that. I do think, however, that it is vital for feminists to claim our place at the head and heart of the current resistance. Too often we don't do this...or we accede to simply being team players. But this moment is different and the forces of toxic white masculinity call out for a recognition of the privileged status of feminist theorizing and practice. And we have a whole array of theoretical frames for doing this – from standpoint epistemology to intersectionality and beyond.

We need to make the case for Big Feminism. Not just for feminism as one strand of a broader progressive social justice movement. Instead, we need to argue that feminism – as theory and practice and as way of life – has the unique capacity to substantively address core causes of inequity, violence, discrimination. Feminism – and feminism alone – brings to the table an agile and capacious analytic and a vibrant and coalitional politics. Beyoncé may be employing some wishful thinking when she asserts that girls run the world, but there is little doubt that they will save it.

Feminism has both the breadth of vision and depth of analytic rigor that can imagine us into a new and more equitable world. Why is that? Well, if you can judge a country by how well it treats its most vulnerable, then perhaps you can judge a theory (and a social movement) by how well it treats the criticisms of it. And here's the truth: rigorous and systematic internal

self-examination has characterized the feminist project from the beginning. Contrary to popular belief – and a skewed intellectual history of feminism that is often trotted out – feminism as both theory and practice has been markedly supple and responsive to criticism. From the early criticisms of class and race biases and blind spots to more recent challenges to Western-centric frames and heteronormative assumptions, feminism's calling card is its unique capacity to rethink and even reinvent itself in profound and pervasive ways. Feminist theory and feminist politics have both, therefore, undergone significant change over the decades in response to internal reckonings as well as to changing social realities. Feminism's flexibility, its simultaneously global and local concerns, its incessantly self-reflexive stance, render it uniquely suited to address the myriad problems of our world.

But it's not just this willingness to bend, to address and redress, to recalibrate and reimagine that makes of feminism such a transformative movement. Simply put, feminism *moves* uniquely. As the pioneering feminist theorist Dale Spender once wrote, "feminism has fought no wars. It has killed no opponents. It has set up no concentration camps, starved no enemies, practiced no cruelties. Its battles have been for education, for the vote, for better working conditions, for safety in the streets, for child care, for social welfare, for rape crisis centres, women's refuges, reforms in the law." This simple and true statement should be a shot across the bow, a recognition that feminism is uniquely suited to simultaneously address a wide range of social ills and imagine a radically more inclusive and healthier future. What other movement can really make this claim?

What differences in identity, national context, and other mediating factors influence understandings of these issues?

I'm going to go a bit out on a limb here and call for a re-imagined feminist universalism. Of course, all of these "mediating factors" matter and our theorizations of them have been significant, particularly in recent years. But I want to animate discussion now of the importance of scale and proportion, of keeping our eyes on the prize, of assuming good intentions from other feminists, of stopping – finally – the destructive pattern of "eating our own," hellishly exacerbated by contemporary social media driven call-out culture.

It's long past time to go big on feminism. Back in the day, feminism and feminists made bold, sweeping claims and arguments. Sure, some of those were overblown, undertheorized, and full of righteous hubris. But they were also visionary, expansive, utopian. Writing here from the perspective of the editor of *Signs* I want to make the case for Big Feminism, a feminism without apology, an insistence that feminism can provide answers not simply to narrow questions of gender and sex but can imagine new worlds and ways of being. But we've got to step it up and bring it on. Too often, the submissions I receive for the journal are narrow, hemmed in by disciplinary strictures and hesitant assertions. There is no doubt in my mind that feminist scholarship has suffered from a decline of those earth-shattering, paradigm shifting articles and books that *made a difference*. Part of this is simply the institutionalization of an outsider field. But there are other reasons as well: a fear of making "grand theory" arguments that might be deemed universalizing and too all-encompassing; a ceding of "the political" to the new generation of feminist bloggers, as if scholarly work can't be clear and powerful and angry; a worry that the policing of supposedly proper feminist subjects will prove you to come up

short or to be overstepping your identity markers; a gnawing suspicion – fueled by mainstream media’s trumpeting of a supposed “post-feminism” - that feminism’s time has come and gone, that hipper paradigms will gain more traction. I mean, what’s with all this nagging anyway about gender inequality? Aren’t we all over that anyway? But the “narcissism of small differences” has too often come to characterize both the academic and more public face of feminism, at an historical moment in which can ill afford it. Goodbye to all that.