

From Humanism to Gynocentrism

Reading: Iris Young, "Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics." *TF*.
Also: Addams, Lorde, Allen options.

Humanist feminism defines women's oppression as the inhibition and distortion of women's potential by a society that allows the self-development of men. (174)

Gynocentric feminism defines women's oppression as the devaluation and repression of women's experience by a masculinist culture that exalts violence and individualism. It argues for the superiority of the values embodied in traditional female experience and rejects the values it finds in traditionally male dominated institutions. Gynocentric feminism contains a more radical critique of male-dominated society than does humanist feminism. (174)

1. Humanist Feminism

Humanist feminism consists of a revolt against femininity....Women's confinement to femininity stunts the development of their full potential and makes women passive, dependent, and weak. Humanist feminism defines femininity as the primary vehicle of women's oppression and calls upon male dominated institutions to allow women the opportunity to participate fully in the public world-making activities of industry, politics, art, and science.(175)

According to Young, humanist feminism (175):

- i. Seeks to remove legal and institutional barriers to women's opportunities and development.
- ii. Seeks to provide resources to combat past discrimination.
- iii. Sees justice in terms of fairness.
- iv. Seeks sexual equality (understood as "bringing women and men under a common measure, judged by the same standards").
- v. Views difference as accidental to humanity.
- vi. Considers our primary virtues to be human virtues (distinguishing us from animals, but not from each other).
- vii. Assumes that the standards by which we judge one another are traditionally masculine standards: courage, rationality, strength, quick-wittedness, etc. (175)

Note that Young defines humanist feminism as making all of the above assumptions, whereas "liberal feminism" may not, e.g., some liberal feminists reject (vi) and (vii).

Young takes Beauvoir to be a paradigm humanist feminist. She argues that Beauvoir's approach is limited because (175-78):

- Beauvoir does not call into question the definition of being human of traditional Western society.
- Beauvoir devalues traditionally female activity in the same way as does patriarchal culture; for her, power, achievement, individual expression, rationality, mastery of natural processes, are the most human values.
- Although Beauvoir's account captures the problem of exploitation, it does not do justice to cultural imperialism of the masculine.
- Beauvoir's conception of humanity as transcendence requires setting a human being in opposition to nonhuman objects, and in particular, nature.
- repeats the traditional Western oppositions of nature/culture, freedom/life, spirit/body.
- Beauvoir devalues women's reproductive labor.
- Beauvoir portrays women as a victim--maimed, mutilated, dependent, confined to a life of immanence, and forced to be an object.

Paradox: to state the real horrors imposed upon women, we cast women as victims, and reduce women to something less than what we are. To critique femininity as a source of harm, we also critique what resources we have that distinguish us from men.

2. Gynocentric Feminism

Gynocentric feminism does not focus its analysis on the barriers to women's self-development and the exclusion of women from spheres of power, prestige and creativity. Instead gynocentric feminism focuses its critique on the values expressed in the dominant social spheres themselves. The male-dominated activities with the greatest prestige in society – politics, science, technology, warfare, business – threaten the survival of the planet and the

human race. That our society accords these activities the highest value only indicates the deep perversity of patriarchal culture. Masculine values exalt death, violence, competition, selfishness, a repression of the body, sexuality and affectivity. (178)

- Women's reproductive processes keep us more linked with nature.
- Female eroticism is more loving.
- Women are better at social cooperation and nurturing.
- Femininity is not the problem, but the source of our salvation.

Three factors support the move from Humanist to Gynocentric feminism: antifeminist reaction to feminism, black feminism, women's history and anthropology.

1. Antifeminists tend to view feminism as humanist feminism. They claim that feminists are naive or insensitive because they assume all women want to be (and can be) like men. Gynocentric feminism is been responsive to this charge. (179)
2. The attack on femininity as the problem has a class and race bias, since mainly white well-off women have been victimized in the ways humanist feminism suggests. (180)
3. Women's history has revealed how the particular critique of femininity is culturally specific; women's cultures are strong and powerful. (180)

The polarity between humanist and gynocentric feminism might be considered part of the logic of feminism itself...either feminism means that we seek for women the same opportunities and privileges the society gives to men, or feminism means that we assert the distinctive value of womanhood against patriarchal denigration. While these positions need not be mutually exclusive, there is a strong tendency for both feminists and nonfeminists to make them so; either we want to be like men, or we don't. (183)

We need to rethink our analysis, not to form a synthesis of the two, but to cook up a better mixture out of some of the old ingredients. (183)

Gynocentric feminism reveals the ideal of universal humanity as both unrealistic and oppressive. This ideal proposes to measure all persons according to the formal standards of rationality and rights. But the material differences among persons...continue to operate, so some will measure differently. Only an explicit affirmation of difference and social plurality...offers the hope of overcoming sexism, racism, ethnic oppression. (183)

Gynocentrism goes beyond a case by case critique of social institutions and provides a perspective from which we can criticize the society as a whole, even when it is not specifically concerned with women.

3. Potential problems with embracing gynocentric feminism uncritically

- a) Lingering essentialism? "By "essentialism" I mean an account that theorizes women as a category with a set of essential attributes". (184)
- b) Lingering use of oppositional categories?
- c) Binary construction of gender difference? "Gynocentric feminism, however, still tends to see gender difference as a relation of inside and outside. We need a conception of difference that is less like the icing bordering the layers of a cake, however, and more like a marble cake in which the flavors remain recognizably different but thoroughly insinuated in one another." (184)
- d) The revaluation of femininity can weaken the claim that women are oppressed.
- e) Rejecting too thoroughly the values of masculinity.
- f) Feeding into antifeminist backlash. Doesn't it reinforce stereotypes?
- g) Pragmatically undermining: The focus on values and language as the center of critique gives little direction to political action; it is so global and abstract that it doesn't offer concrete ways of challenging specific institutions or offering more viable alternatives. (185-6)

If feminism turns its back on the centers of power, privilege and individual achievement that men have monopolized, those men will continue to monopolize them, and nothing significant will change...without being willing to risk such co-optation, feminism can only be a moral position of critique rather than a force for institutional change. (185)

Young, Iris M. "Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics." In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Oxford University Press, 2005. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.301J / 17.007J / 24.237J / 17.006 Feminist Thought
Fall 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.