



Liberalism and its Critique: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract:

Liberalism is the language of the free world. It forms an ideological basis of many political systems in the world. It embraces the spirit of freedom, justice, reason and toleration. But the question that arises is whether these principles can truly represent the foundation of a liberal society. A number of relevant controversies arise and this paper tries to bring out these controversies from a feminist point of view.

Keywords: *Liberalism, Freedom, Toleration, Feminist, Critique*

Introduction

Liberalism as an ideology has undoubtedly been the most powerful in shaping the western political tradition. Its core themes lie in individualism, freedom, reason, justice and toleration. A liberal is associated with open-mindedness and tolerance. Liberalism has become indicative of ideas and policies intended to reform, to emancipate, and to open up possibilities for individuals wishing to live their lives according to their own understanding.ⁱ Every adult should be able to make as many effective decisions without fear or favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult. That belief is the original and only defensible meaning of liberalism. As an ideology competing over space in a crowded ideological world, it has drawn many supports as well as criticisms from various ideological groups. Feminism, an ideology advocating women's rights, offered a blistering critique of liberalism.

Feminist critique of Liberalism

The term feminism is a relatively modern one- there are debates over when and where it was first used, but the term 'feminist' seems to have first been used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a cessation in development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients, who were perceived as thus suffering from feminisation of their bodies.ⁱⁱ

Feminist ideology is defined by two basic beliefs:ⁱⁱⁱ

1. That women are disadvantaged because of their sex and
2. That this disadvantage can and should be overthrown are still suffering injustice. It implies a voice of protest against the inferior status accorded to women in society.

Feminism is invariably linked to the women's movement and the attempt to advance the social role of women. Many women's movements have sprung up around the world, where women fight for their rights inside as well as outside the domain of the family. The first Women's rights Movement actually began in 1848 when the first political action organized by women was the Seneca Falls, New York, Conference, called by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott.^{iv} Mary Astell was one of the feminists, perhaps the first English writer to explore and assert ideas about women which we can still recognize and respond to. Mary Wollenstonecraft was also an English woman to write eloquently about the rights of women and the wrongs they experience. In USA, the women's rights movement was mothered by some prominent characters like Lucretia Mott, Mrs Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Miss Susan B. Anthony, Mrs Lucy Stone and Mrs Amelia Bloomer. Women around the world are using the language of liberalism. Liberal terms like Individualism, rights, dignity, self-respect, openness, freedom etc. caught their attention.

Liberals opposed interference of any kind which led to a backlash. Liberals often take pride in defending what they oppose- pornography, for example, or unpopular views.^v They say the state should not impose a preferred way of life, but should leave its citizens as free as possible to choose their own values and end, consistent with a similar liberty for others.^{vi} This commitment to freedom of choice requires liberals constantly to distinguish between permission and praise, between allowing a practice and endorsing it.^{vii} It is one thing to allow pornography, they argue, something else to affirm it.^{viii} Many feminists argue that pornography promotes rape. This view is associated with Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who are of the view that pornography as the theory behind the practice of rape, in which women can only and always, be the target of an aggressive male sexuality.^{ix} Equally clouded by specious media reports and outright lies has been the direct evidence of a causal relationship between the consumption of pornography and increases in social levels of violence, hostility, and discrimination.^x

Democracy is a combination of democratic and liberal constitutional values. Feminist also questions the credibility of democracy on a woman's question. Pateman in her essay 'Feminism and democracy' makes the following claim: "For feminists, democracy has never existed; women have never been and still are not admitted as full and equal members and citizens in any country known as democracy"^{xi} Women have been and continue to be excluded from democratic politics and this exclusion has been facilitated by the masculinist assumptions of democratic theorists.^{xii} Aristotle was emphatic that women should be made part of the city and its educational process, but could be left out of the political process.^{xiii} Woman, according to Aristotle, belonged to the private sphere. The female was considered as a passive partner for sexual reproduction only. Such assumptions drew widespread criticism from the feminist angle.

Liberalism has been thought by many feminists to be a political approach that is totally inadequate to the needs and aims of women ^{xiv}. Feminists have put forward many reasons to reject liberalism. In 1983, in one of the most influential works of feminist political theory, Alison Jaggar concluded that "the liberal conception of human nature and of political philosophy cannot constitute the philosophical foundation for an adequate theory of women's liberation." Many influential feminist thinkers have tended to argue with Jaggar, and to treat liberalism as at best negligent of women's concerns and at worst an active enemy of women's progress. Liberal theorists like Hobbes in particular imagined the human individual or having no natural love of others because they are guided by self-centred desires and interests. Liberal individualism sharply responds that each person is one and not more than one. The separateness of persons is a basic fact of human life. For the liberals, the demand for collectivity should not be made the basic goal of politics.

In her essay "The Feminist Critique of Liberalism," Nussbaum raises and responds to three central feminist objections to liberalism: (1) liberalism is too abstract, (2) it is too individualistic, and (3) it focuses too heavily on reason and not sufficiently on emotion.^{xv} According to Nussbaum, the feminist critique of liberalism being too abstract is explained in two ways. The first critique is the one Nussbaum associates with MacKinnon and Alison Jaggar: "Their claim is that liberalism's disregard of differences between persons that are a product history and social setting makes it adopt an unacceptably formal conception of equality, one that cannot in the end treat individuals as equals given the reality of social hierarchy and unequal power."^{xvi} The second critique of liberal abstraction is one that Nussbaum links to communitarian critics of liberalism. "In this communitarian view, liberalism focuses too heavily on the need to look at persons in abstraction from morally irrelevant features-such as ethnicity, gender, race and religion- and as a result disregards the extent to which these differences shape people."^{xvii}

Another feminist charge against liberalism is that it's too individualistic. Women's individual well-being has far too rarely been taken into account in political and economic planning and measurement.^{xviii} Women have been treated as parts of a larger unit, especially the family, and valued primarily for their contribution as reproducers and care-givers, rather than as sources of agency and worth in their own right.^{xix}

The third charge that Feminist put forth against liberalism is that it focuses much on reason rather than emotion. On the other hand, feminists have worried that liberalism is far too rationalist: that by placing all emphasis on reason as a mark of humanity, it has emphasised a trait that males traditionally prize and denigrated traits, such as sympathy and emotion and imagination, that females traditionally prize^{xx}. This emphasis has permitted men to look down on women as too emotional and alleged them of their lack of reason. Alison Jaggar notes how the rational has typically been contrasted with the emotional, but points to the fact that emotion was never excluded completely from the picture: 'The emotions were thought of as providing indispensable motive power that needed to be channelled appropriately. ^{xxi} In her article Love and Knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology, Jaggar lay emphasise on the importance of emotion which enable us to encounter reality, help us see problems in understanding of the status quo and are ways in which we engage actively and even construct the world.

The critique of an idea is important which can help new ideas to flourish and bring awareness to its misapplications and limitations. Liberalism as an ideology faced ideological challenges of being too open and free which can reinforce oppression against women. Women have been and continue to be excluded from democratic politics as she is considered to be passive and too emotional. Feminist have grounds to mistrust liberalism as being too abstract, too individualistic and focusing more on reason rather than on emotion.

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