

# The Descent from Radical Feminism to Postmodernism

by Ti-Grace Atkinson

Presentation on the panel "How to Defang a Movement: Replacing the Political with the Personal" at the conference *A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the Late 1960s and the Early 1970s* at Boston University on March 27-29, 2014

---

Ideas have real world consequences. What I want to do today is to compare the ideas in radical feminism with those in feminist Postmodernism, especially as regards two concepts: class identification and the difference principle. I will illustrate how these two notions played out in the case of the *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Sears Roebuck* (1973-1988).

The central question for feminists has always been: how does the oppression of women work? Where does it come from and how is it maintained? We can't dismantle any structures that we do not understand. Effecting change depends first on our analysis of the problem.

The period that this conference is devoted to (the late 1960s and the very early 1970s) was the one in which the very difficult theoretical work, which had never been done before, was begun. This work was never completed.

When we embarked on this project in early 1968, we faced two apparently overwhelming obstacles: women have always been oppressed throughout history and all over the world. It seems "natural". How could something so universal be explained as an injustice?

## **RADICAL FEMINISM**

Radical feminism emerges in early 1968 as a response to deeper understandings of women's oppression. To speak of "oppression" instead of "discrimination" is a significant shift in terms of scope and depth. We needed a more comprehensive analysis of women's oppression than the civil rights model.

Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*—her structuralist account—gave us a start. Beauvoir understands women's oppression by analyzing the particular institutions which define women's lives: marriage, family, motherhood, etc. Family law encompasses several institutions but some of us determined that the critical point of entry for women is marriage: this involves a state-governed legal contract. The "family" has no separate contract, although reproduction naturally falls out of the marriage contract under its sub-construct of conjugal rights.

I broadened Beauvoir's discussion in order to respond to the question of why, if women were not naturally inferior, our oppression had continued fundamentally unchanged. The traditional institutional analysis accounts for the mechanics of women's oppression but not the dynamics (what has kept it going). Since women are half the population, these dynamics had to feel intrinsic to women's identity and thus be embraced, not resisted, by women. The obvious candidate for this was "love". And for men, an obsession with sex and conquest.

In late 1968, I published an article on "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse." This was an attempt to challenge the necessity of heterosexuality and, by implication, those institutions which are based upon this assumption.

So "radical feminism" was/is a tendency to understand the oppression of women on the deepest possible level. The goal of this analysis is to pinpoint the crucial points at which women might attack the edifice of our oppression as a whole.

Institutions are by definition artificial, but no less powerful for that. The notion of a “class” is artificial in any “natural” sense since it is a construct which is meant to do certain work. For the oppressed, “class” awareness is essential for resistance. It’s the commonalities between formerly differentiated individuals which form the basis for solidarity and political change. Oppressed individuals by themselves are relatively powerless; together, it’s a different story.

The one assumption no one questioned was that women formed a class and that this class was an artificial one and designed for political purposes to oppress women. We called this artificial class “gender.” Our mantra was Beauvoir’s dictum: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

This central assumption that women form a political class and is the bottom half of a sex-class system never precluded the existence of other class systems, equally artificial: systems based upon race, or economics, etc. We generally agreed that the sex-class system was the first class system and that the other class systems were generated out of this initial bifurcation of the human species. Each system was built upon the one before until we have ended up with a pyramidal social structure defined by depriving one group after another of their humanity.

### **THE SEARS CASE**

The Sears case begins in 1973, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed sex discrimination charges against Sears, Roebuck & Company. Sears was the largest retailer of general merchandise at that time in the United States. This case was not finally decided until 1988, when the Seventh Circuit ruled against the women and for Sears.

What were the historical, legal and political contexts in which the Sears case arose? Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was the one legislative ground women had to stand upon. And women had won a number of Title VII cases

in the early 1970s: AT&T, Colgate-Palmolive, the Stewardesses. In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* came down. However, if a woman cannot independently support herself financially, she has few other live options, including reproductive rights.

The cases which had been brought initially in the late 1960s had all been brought by a few brave plaintiffs and serious retaliation against these women always followed. The Sears case broke new ground because the raw statistics concerning the patterns or practices of sex discrimination were overwhelming. Individual plaintiffs did not have to be offered up as sacrificial lambs.

The numbers spoke for themselves: 5 geographical regions; 920 stores; 380,000 employees. Sears was the largest employer of women in the country and the majority of its salespersons were women. However, although over 60% of the full-time sales applicants at Sears were women, women made up only 1.7% of full-time commission sales hires in 1973. The result was that men made three times as much as women at Sears.

The important distinction here is between non-commission sales jobs and commission sales jobs. The non-commission sales jobs are for small-ticket items; these jobs are paid by the hour—piece work. The commission sales jobs are for big-ticket items and are paid a basic salary PLUS between 6% and 9% of sales made over the goals set by the company. Women were tracked into the non-commission sales jobs.

Sears was the most massive sex discrimination case ever brought—before or since. And we lost it. We lost it because the political climate in which it worked its way up through the courts had shifted, and not for the better. At heart was this issue: Did women in fact constitute a political class? This is what the case was about: money and fair play: a woman’s equal right to earn her own living on the same basis as a man.

What the case gradually evolved into—led by the Sears defense, with some help from a Post-modernist Women’s Studies historian—was not a human rights issue about equal treatment. Instead, the case was lost because men and women were “different.”

Of course, every individual is different in various ways from every other individual. However, the issue in an employment discrimination case turns on “differences” related to bona fide occupational qualifications. How are such “differences” relevant to selling Sears products? THIS is the question.

The Seventh Circuit’s judicial decision cited two primary justifications for the pay discrepancy between men and women at Sears: (1) women did not demonstrate “interest” in commission-sales; and (2) women were risk averse. The “interest” angle had to do with the products being sold. Considering that the bulk of Sears big-ticket items are household appliances, such as refrigerators, stoves, washing machines, clothes dryers, dishwashers, and so forth, it seems strange to assert that women lack expertise with such products or an interest in selling them. And, what does “risk” averse mean? Perhaps skydiving was involved? No, the reference to risk involved the fact that commission sales jobs did not have fixed compensation. However, since the compensation—even at the base salary—was so superior to that for non-commission sales, where was the “risk”? Between “more” and LOTS “more”? So, the “reasons” given were not very persuasive, to say the least.

Furthermore, the EEOC’s case was criticized for the lack of individual plaintiffs: no blood in the water. But the point of the vastness of the Sears case was that the discrimination was so blatantly obvious: Someone would have to claim that women LIKED being cheated of their just remuneration, unlike men. If women are human beings, then it’s safe to assume that they don’t enjoy being raped. Well, unless your proposal is that women are just “different” that way.

This is basically what Rosalind Rosenberg, the Women’s History professor, claimed as a witness for Sears: it’s always been this way for women; ergo, women must have different values—“higher” values—than do men when it comes to monetary compensation for their labor.

Professor Rosenberg must be no doubt referring to the Sears’ Personnel Manual for her evidence in support of her position: “Male employees may be granted a day’s paid leave when the employee’s wife gives birth, however, female employees are not granted a day’s paid absence when she GIVES birth.” Can anyone imagine a more perfect instance of “unpaid labor”?

### **POSTMODERNISM**

The Sears case is such a travesty that we have to ask how this could have happened and why the Women’s Movement was not clearer about the import of this case. The seminal essay to read for the theoretical underpinnings of this period as it concerns women, using the Sears case as illustration, is Joan Scott’s “Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism” (1988).

In 1975, Simone de Beauvoir warned me in Paris: “Watch out for the anti-feminist differentialists.” I finally understood, in the late 1980s, what Beauvoir was talking about. Postmodernism is a profoundly reactionary political theory. Postmodernism pretends to focus on words, and on words ABOUT words (which it calls “discourse”). Postmodernism pretends to analyze discourse through something called “deconstruction,” but instead words are used to mystify and confuse and, finally, to prevent any meaningful steps forward—especially as regards thinking about the world. Words are not facts. It is facts which deny all women our humanity. It is facts we must change.

Women are a political class. The first one. It produced the paradigm for the other class systems, a sequential bifurcation of the human

species. A bifurcation which is repeated, one atop another, until every individual is pitted against every other.

What makes a political category a class are commonalities. In the case of an oppressed class, these grievances are observed and shared. It is only as this class mobilizes around these grievances and forms political groups that meaningful social change can be achieved.

It is the differences between us which keep us isolated, ineffective—and in despair. But differences are not what we organize around. The fact that Postmodernism emphasizes “difference” gives their political game away. Difference keeps us separate, not together.

Postmodernists claim they are “post”-structuralists. But what does this mean? It means that they reject any attempt to understand how things work: where conditions come from and how they are maintained. It means, in political and practical terms, putting change beyond our reach. It means thinking in a circle so that in the end we arrive back again at the beginning, but this time we are so worn out from trying to disentangle the Postmodernist abracadabra that we lack the strength and morale to start over.

Considering the importance Postmodernists give to language, they are incredibly sloppy in its usage. Critical terms such as “binary” and “essentialism” have no fixed meaning and function simply as perjoratives.

As for the pretentious philosophical posturing by prefacing their claims with words such as “metaphysical” and “epistemological,” “meta-epistemological,” and “critical theory,” these have no purpose other than to intimidate the reader. None of the ordinary meanings associated with these terms apply. So why use them?

Words are not being used to inform or to clarify. Nor to build one thought upon another until some explanation emerges. Words are tossed in to

impress or to dupe. It is impossible to tell what Postmodernists mean because they use the same words to mean different things at different times. For all the emphasis on the importance of language, Postmodernism throws away language as a tool of either understanding or of communication. At best, language becomes an end in itself.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women make up 50% of the population. There is no system already in existence, on any level—economic or social, that can be tweaked to accommodate such numbers.

Here are our options: (1) we can limit our goals to advance a FEW women up into whatever existing systems we happen to find ourselves in; or (2) we must understand and prepare ourselves for not only turning the world upside down but—more importantly—inside out. All social relations are at bottom political ones. They CAN be changed. But it will be much harder than the Women’s Movement of ANY “wave” has indicated it appreciates.

No gain is forever. Progress has to be made on the most radical grounds and then constantly guarded. If you need a reminder, consider the right to abortion.

We need to protect our collective identity as women. We also need to work with other oppressed groups. Since each oppressed group experiences their oppression in disparate ways, we must avoid the trap of competing victimhoods by identifying common goals which we all need. We could start with the United Nations Human Rights Declaration. But substitute “every individual” for “every family.” Women’s individual rights should not be conditional on their existence within a family framework.

The most obvious common goal for all individuals is the equal distribution of material goods, without regard to merit.

# # #