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Getting Radical: Feminism, Patriarchy, and the Sexual-Exploitation Industries

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Abstract

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Keywords

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ABSTRACT

The sexual-exploitation industries, including prostitution and pornography, are patriarchal institutions that are inconsistent with dignity, solidarity, and equality. Radical feminism offers a compelling analysis not only for women but also for men striving to be fully human.

KEYWORDS

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Begin with the body.

In an analysis of pornography and prostitution in a patriarchal society, it's crucial not to lose sight of basic biology. A coherent feminist analysis of the ideology and practice of patriarchy starts with human bodies.

We are all *Homo sapiens*. Genus *Homo*, species *sapiens*. We are primates. We are mammals. We are part of the animal kingdom.

We are organic entities, carbon-based creatures of flesh and blood. Whatever one thinks about the concepts of soul and mind—and I assume that in any diverse group there will be widely varying ideas—we are animals, which means we are bodies. The kind of animal that we are reproduces sexually, the interaction of bodies that are either male or female (with a very small percentage of people born intersex, who have anomalies that may complicate reproductive status).

Every one of us—and every human who has ever lived—is the product of the union of an egg produced by a female human and a sperm produced by a male human. Although it also can be accomplished with technology, in the vast majority of cases the fertilization of an egg by a sperm happens through the act of sexual intercourse, which in addition to its role in reproduction is potentially pleasurable.

I emphasize these elementary facts not to reduce the rich complexity of human interaction to a story about nothing but bodies, but if we are to understand sex/gender politics, we can't ignore our bodies. That may seem self-evident, but some post-modern-inflected theories that float through some academic spaces, intellectual salons, and political movements these days seem to have detached from that reality.

If we take evolutionary biology seriously, we should recognize the centrality of reproduction to all living things and the importance of sexuality to a species that reproduces sexually, such as *Homo sapiens*. Reproduction and sexuality involve our bodies.

Female and male are stable biological categories. If they weren't, we wouldn't be here. But femininity and masculinity are not stable social categories. Ideas about what male and female mean—what meaning we attach to those differences in our bodies—vary from culture to culture and change over time.

That brings us to patriarchy, radical feminism, a radical feminist critique of the sexual-exploitation industries in patriarchy, and why all of this is important, not only for women but for men. I'm here as a man to make a pitch to men: Radical feminism is especially important for us.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy—an idea about sex differences that institutionalizes male dominance throughout a society—has a history. Though many assume that humans have always lived with male dominance, such systems became widespread only a few thousand years ago, coming after the invention of agriculture and a dramatic shift in humans' relationship with the larger living world. Historian Gerda Lerner argues that patriarchy began when “men discovered how to turn ‘difference’ into dominance” and “laid the ideological foundation for all systems of hierarchy, inequality, and exploitation” (Lerner, 1997, p. 133). Patriarchy takes different forms depending on time and place, but it reserves for men most of the power in the institutions of society and limits women's access to such power. However, Lerner reminds us, “It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources” (Lerner, 1986, p. 239). The world is complicated, but we identify patterns to help us understand that complexity.

Patriarchy is not the only hierarchal system that enhances the power of some and limits the life chances of others—it exists alongside white supremacy, legally enforced or informal; various unjust and inhumane economic systems, including capitalism; and imperialism and colonialism, including the past 500 years of exploitation primarily by Europe and its offshoots such as the United States.

Because of those systems, all women do not have the same experience in patriarchy, but the pattern of women's relative disadvantage vis-à-vis men is clear. As historian Judith Bennett writes, “Almost every girl born today will face more constraints and restrictions than will be encountered by a boy who is born today into *the same social circumstances as that girl*.” (Bennett, 2006, p. 10).

Over thousands of years, patriarchal societies have developed justifications, both theological and secular, to maintain this inequality and make it seem to be common sense, “just the way the world is.” Patriarchy has proved tenacious, at times conceding to challenges but blocking women from reaching full equality to men. Women's status can change over time, and there are differences in status accorded to women depending on other variables. But Bennett argues that these ups and downs have not transformed women as a group in relationship to men—societies operate within a “patriarchal equilibrium,” in which only privileged men can lay claim to that full humanity, defined as the ability to develop fully their human potential (Bennett, 2009). Men with less privilege must settle for less, and some will even be accorded less status than some women (especially men who lack race and/or class privilege). But in this kind

of dynamically stable system of power, women are never safe and can always be made “less than,” especially by men willing to wield threats, coercion, and violence.

Although all the systems based on domination cause immense suffering and are difficult to dislodge, patriarchy has been part of human experience longer and is deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life. We should remember: White supremacy has never existed without patriarchy. Capitalism has never existed without patriarchy. Imperialism has never existed without patriarchy. From patriarchy’s claim that male domination and female subordination are natural and inevitable have emerged other illegitimate hierarchies that also rest on attempts to naturalize, and hence render invisible, other domination/subordination dynamics.

Radical Feminism

Feminism, at its most basic, challenges patriarchy. However as with any human endeavor, including movements for social justice, there are different intellectual and political strands. What in the United States is typically called “second wave” feminism, that emerged out of the social ferment of the 1960s and ‘70s, produced competing frameworks: radical, Marxist, socialist, liberal, psychoanalytical, existential, postmodern, eco-feminist. When non-white women challenged the white character of early second-wave feminism, movements struggled to correct the distortions; some women of color choose to identify as womanist rather than feminist. Radical lesbian feminists challenged the overwhelmingly heterosexual character of liberal feminism, and different feminisms went in varying directions as other challenges arose concerning everything from global politics to disability.

Since my first serious engagement with feminism in the late 1980s, I have found radical feminist analyses to be a source of inspiration. Radical feminism highlights men’s violence and coercion—rape, child sexual assault, domestic violence, sexual harassment—and the routine nature of this abuse for women, children, and vulnerable men in patriarchy. In patriarchal societies, men claim a right to own or control women’s reproductive power and women’s sexuality, with that threat of violence and coercion always in the background. In the harshest forms of patriarchy, men own wives and their children, and men can claim women’s bodies for sex constrained only by agreements with other men. In contemporary liberal societies, men’s dominance takes more subtle forms.

Radical feminism forces us to think about male and female bodies, about how men use, abuse, and exploit women in the realms of reproduction and sexuality. But in the contemporary United States, the radical approach has been eclipsed by the more common liberal (in mainstream politics) and postmodern (in academic and activist circles) strands of feminism. A liberal approach focuses on gaining equality for women within existing political, legal, and economic institutions. While notoriously difficult to define, postmodernism challenges the stability and coherence not only of existing institutions but of the very concepts that we use within them and tends to focus on language and performance as key to identity and experience. Liberalism and postmodernism come out of very different sets of assumptions but are similar in their practical commitment to individualism in politics, tending to evaluate a proposal based on whether it maximizes choices for individual women rather than whether it resists patriarchy’s hierarchy and challenges the power of men as a class. On issues such as pornography and prostitution, both liberal and postmodern feminism avoid or downplay a critique of the patriarchal system and reduce the issue to support for women’s choices, sometimes even claiming that women can be empowered through the sexual-exploitation industries.

Radical feminism's ultimate goal is the end of patriarchy's gender system, not merely expanding women's choices within patriarchy. But radical feminism also recognizes the larger problem of hierarchy and the domination/subordination dynamics in other arenas of human life. While not sufficient by itself, the end of patriarchy is a necessary condition for liberation more generally.

Today there's a broad consensus that any form of feminism must be "intersectional," Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) term to describe about how black women could be marginalized by movements for both racial and gender justice when their concerns did not conform to either group's ideology or strategy. While the term is fairly new, the idea goes back further. For example, the statement of the Combahee River Collective, a group of black lesbian feminists in the late 1970s, named not only sexism and racism but also capitalism and imperialism as forces constraining their lives:

[W]e are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives (Combahee River Collective, 2000, p. 264).

Intersectional approaches like these help us better understand the complex results of what radical feminists argue is a central feature of patriarchy: Men's efforts to control women's reproductive power and sexuality. As philosopher Marilyn Frye puts it:

For females to be subordinated and subjugated to males on a global scale, and for males to organize themselves and each other as they do, billions of female individuals, virtually all who see life on this planet, must be reduced to a more-or-less willing toleration of subordination and servitude to men. The primary sites of this reduction are the sites of heterosexual relation and encounter—courtship and marriage-arrangement, romance, sexual liaisons, fucking, marriage, prostitution, the normative family, incest and child sexual assault. It is on this terrain of heterosexual connection that girls and women are habituated to abuse, insult, degradation, that girls are reduced to women—to wives, to whores, to mistresses, to sex slaves, to clerical workers and textile workers, to the mothers of men's children (Frye, 1992, p. 130).

This analysis doesn't suggest that every man treats every woman as a sex slave, of course. Each individual man in patriarchy is not at every moment actively engaged in the oppression of women, but men routinely act in ways that perpetuate patriarchy and harm women. It's also true that patriarchy's obsession with hierarchy, including a harsh system of ranking men, means that most men lose out in the game to acquire significant wealth and power. Complex systems produce complex results, and still there are identifiable patterns. Patriarchy is a system that delivers material benefits to men—unequally depending on men's other attributes (such as race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, immigration status) and on men's willingness to embrace, or at least adapt to, patriarchal values. But patriarchy constrains all women. The physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering endured by women varies widely, again depending on other attributes and sometimes just on the luck of the draw, but no woman escapes some level of that suffering. And at the core of that system is men's assertion of a right to control women's reproductive power and sexuality.

The Radical Feminist Critique of the Sexual-Exploitation Industries

I use the term “sexual-exploitation industries” to include prostitution, pornography, stripping, massage parlors, escort services—all the ways that men routinely buy and sell objectified female bodies for sexual pleasure. Boys and vulnerable men are also exploited in these industries, but the majority of these businesses are about men buying women and girls.

Not all feminists or progressive people critique this exploitation, and in some feminist circles—especially those rooted in liberalism or postmodernism—so-called “sex work” is celebrated as empowering for women. Let’s start with simple questions for those who claim to want to end sexism and foster sex/gender justice:

- Is it possible to imagine any society achieving a meaningful level of any kind of justice if people from one sex/gender class could be routinely bought and sold for sexual services by people from another sex/gender class?
- Is justice possible when the most intimate spaces of the bodies of people in one group can be purchased by people in another group?
- If our goal is to maintain stable, decent human societies defined by mutuality rather than dominance, do the sexual-exploitation industries foster or impede our efforts?
- If we were creating a just society from the ground up, is it likely that anyone would say, “Let’s make sure that men have ready access to the bodies of women in commercial transactions”?

These questions are both moral and political. Radical feminists reject dominance, and the violence and coercion that comes with a domination/subordination dynamic, out of moral commitments to human dignity, solidarity, and equality. But nothing I’ve said is moralistic, in the sense of imposing a narrow, subjective conception of sexuality on others. Rejecting the sexual-exploitation industries isn’t about constraining people’s sexual expression, but rather is part of the struggle to create the conditions for meaningful sexual freedom.

So why is this radical feminist critique, which has proved so accurate in its assessment of the consequences of mainstreaming the commercial sex industry, so often denounced not only by men who embrace patriarchy but also by liberal and left men, and in recent years even by feminists in the liberal and postmodern camps?

Take the issue I know best, pornography. Starting in the 1970s, women such as Andrea Dworkin (2002) argued that the appeal of pornography was not just explicit sex but sex presented in the context of that domination/subordination dynamic. Since Dworkin’s articulation of that critique (1979), the abuse and exploitation of women in the industry has been more thoroughly documented. The content of pornography has become more overtly cruel and degrading to women and more overtly racist. Pornography’s role in promoting corrosive sexual practices, especially among young people, is more evident. As the power of the radical feminist critique has become clearer, why is the critique more marginalized today than when it was first articulated?

Part of the answer is that the radical feminist critique of pornography goes to the heart of the claim of men in patriarchy to own or control women’s sexuality. Feminism won some gains for women in public, such as more expansive access to education and a place in politics. But like any system of social control, patriarchy does not quietly accept change, pushing back against women’s struggle for sexual autonomy. Sociologist Kathleen Barry describes this process:

[W]hen women achieve the potential for economic independence, men are threatened with loss of control over women as their legal and economic property in marriage. To regain control, patriarchal domination reconfigures around sex by producing a social and public condition of sexual subordination that follows women into the public world (Barry, 1995, p. 53).

Why Should Men Care?

Barry is not suggesting that men got together to plot such a strategy. Rather, it's in the nature of patriarchy to respond to challenges to male power with new strategies. That's how systems of illegitimate authority, including white supremacy and capitalism, have always operated.

Men can no longer claim outright ownership of women, as they once did. Men cannot always assert control over women using old tactics. But they can mark women as always available for men's sexual pleasure. They can reduce women's sexuality—and therefore can reduce women—to a commodity that can be bought and sold. They can try to regain an experience of power lost in the public realm in a more private arena.

This analysis challenges the liberal/postmodern individualist story that says women's rights are enhanced when a society allows them to choose sex work. Almost every word in that sentence should be in scare-quotes, to mark the libertarian illusions on which the argument depends. I'm not suggesting that no woman in the sexual-exploitation industries ever makes a real choice but am merely pointing out the complexity of those choices, which typically are made under conditions of considerable constraint and reduced opportunities. And whatever the motivation of any one woman, the validation and normalization of the sexual-exploitation industries continues to reduce women and girls to objectified female bodies available to men for sexual pleasure.

If we men really believe in the values most of us claim to hold—dignity, solidarity, and equality—that is reason enough to embrace radical feminism. That's the argument from justice. Radical feminists have shown how the sexual-exploitation industries harm women, children, and vulnerable men used in the industry. But if men need additional motivation, do it not only for women and girls. Do it for yourself. Recognize an argument from self-interest.

Radical feminism is essential for any man who wants to move beyond “being a man” in patriarchy and seeks to live the values of dignity, solidarity, and equality as fully as possible (Jensen, 2019). Radical feminism's critique of masculinity in patriarchy is often assumed to be a challenge to men's self-esteem but just the opposite is true—it's essential for men's self-esteem.

Consider a claim that men sometimes make when asked if they have ever used a woman being prostituted. “I've never had to pay for it,” a man will say, implying that he is skilled enough in procuring sex from women that money is unnecessary. In other situations, a man might brag about having sex with a woman being prostituted, especially if that woman is seen as a high-class “call girl” or is somehow “exotic,” or if the exploitation of women takes place in a male-bonding activity such as a bachelor party.

All these responses are patriarchal, and all reveal men's fear of vulnerability and hence of intimacy. That's why pornography is so popular. It offers men quick-and-easy sexual pleasure with no risk, no need to be a real person in the presence of another real person who might see through the sad chest-puffing pretense of masculinity in patriarchy.

One of the most common questions I get after public presentations from women is “why do men like pornography?” We can put aside the inane explanations designed to avoid the feminist challenge, such as “Men are just more sexual than women” or “Men are more stimulated visually than women.” I think the real answer is more disturbing: In patriarchy, men are often so intensely socialized to run from the vulnerability that comes with intimacy that they find comfort in the illusory control over women that pornography offers. Pornography may give men a sense of power over women temporarily, but it does not provide what men—what all people—need, which is human connection. The pornographers play on men’s fears—not a fear of women so much as a fear of facing the fragility of our lives in patriarchy.

When we assert masculinity in patriarchy—when we desperately try to “be a man”—we are valuing dominance over mutuality, choosing empty pleasure over intimacy, seeking control to avoid vulnerability. When we assert masculinity in patriarchy, we make the world more dangerous for women and children, and in the process deny ourselves the chance to be fully human.

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