

# Empowering Women—A Series of Articles About the Surge in and Fragmentation of Mid-20th-Century American Feminist Theory: Article I: Radical Notions

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## Abstract

This article series examines the initial surge and ultimate fragmentation of second-wave feminist theory. The analysis reveals that, apparently unbeknownst to the theorists themselves, two primary types of “empowerment” appeared in their writings: empowerment of the autonomous self and empowerment of the relational self. Within these primary types, there are diverse understandings of “empowerment” that are based on varied but adamant notions of what it should accomplish. This first article, “Radical Notions,” discusses the implications of arguments within radical feminist theory. Rather than attempting to understand the reasons for their differences, at least some of them engaged in arguments about what constituted being a “real” radical feminist and attempted to ostracize those who did not fit the proscribed mold.

## Keywords

empowerment, feminism, feminist theory, oppression, radical, second wave

## Introduction to the Series

Most would argue that the majority of changes brought about by the mid-20th-century feminist movement were for the better. Domestic violence is now a crime, birth control devices and medications are readily available, women’s health issues no longer take a backseat to all other types of medical research, and women now have far more educational and employment opportunities than they did just half a century ago. In fact, based on students’ comments in my *Women and Politics* classroom, it seems to have been decided by many that women in the United States have gained all of the rights and equality that they need.

Yet, recent political debate and policy changes reveal that the issues dear to feminists do not lack relevance. For example, women’s access to birth control, an item whose use is so commonplace (Hurt, Guile, Bienstock, Fox, & Wallach, 2010) that it is taken for granted in most of the modern world, has come under attack. During the 2011-2012 election season, Republican primary candidates seemed to compete to declare the strongest opposition to women’s reproductive rights. During the course of the debates, it was suggested by multiple candidates that national law should declare that government-protectable human life begins at conception. Rick Santorum even argued that states should be able to outlaw birth control without interference from the Supreme Court (Bassett, 2012).

Then there was Todd Akin, with his suggestion that women rarely get pregnant during “legitimate” rape (Frumin, 2012). Meanwhile, Congressional Republicans pushed for the defunding of Planned Parenthood, a move that would force the closure of clinics that offer the only gynecological health care that most poor women in the United States can get, fought against the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act, and stalled the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. Yet all of these occurrences were not simply wrought by males. The Republicans found plenty of women who were willing to go along with their policy agendas.

It seems strange that reproductive rights, equal employment opportunity, and protection from abuse should become partisan issues. But an understanding of what happened during the 2011-2012 election cycle requires an understanding of the history of second-wave feminism and the corresponding “backlash,” which came not just from disgruntled men but from “traditional” women and alienated feminists as well.

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Even the debates *within* feminist theory were in the past, and can still be, very heated. Often, there was a seeming inability of second-wave feminist leaders to communicate and cooperate with each other (Debold, 2005). Anselma Dell'Olio,<sup>1</sup> having been a victim of “trashing” by other feminists, wrote in her 1970 speech at the Congress To Unite Women that “women [have] always been divided against one another, self-destructive and filled with impotent rage” (see Dark Star Collective, 2012, p. 45; see also Freeman, 1976). Based on the infighting that tore so hard at the U.S. radical feminist movement, some may agree. By the early 1970s, much of the movement had dissolved into disarray (Echols, 1989). Within the movement, activists and theorists often talked past each other and, sometimes, even saw each other as political enemies (see Freeman, 1976). Yet, I argue that the feminist movement did not slow because women cannot get along with each other. To conclude that it did would be a sad and dangerously incorrect prognosis. Rather, because their value systems and individually lived experiences varied, the women focused on differing primary concerns. Thus, their proposed remedies often seemed to be in conflict with each other.

A careful analysis of feminist *theory* during the decades of feminism's heyday sheds light on these differences. It is not enough, though, to simply point out that differences exist, because to do so does nothing to resolve the conflicts and confusions within feminism. What is needed most is a careful analysis of *why* the differences exist to reveal how women might come together to solve their collective problems.

This type of analysis is not only something we should do, it is something we *must* do if we are to stem the tide of indifference to proposed policies that could severely disrupt women's lives. With this effort in mind, I present a series of articles. This first article, “Radical Notions,” examines radical feminist theory. Next, “Women in Social Context” examines Marxist and socialist-feminist theory, explaining the agreements and tensions between this theory and radical feminist theory. Ultimately, my series examines prominent theoretical writings across four categories of second-wave feminist theory and includes an analysis of some so-called right-wing women's writings. In the process, I reveal multiple definitions of the term *empowerment* that are presented across the theoretical categories, and demonstrate that although the differing definitions may seem in conflict with each other, in reality they are all needed parts of a whole.

## Article I: Radical Notions

Radical feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s both documented and helped shape the so-called “sexual revolution,” that may have begun in the 1960s with “free love” but continues today in various forms. Radical theory also documented and helped initiate a mass “coming out” of a rage that was perhaps first sparked by dysfunctional marriages and

families seen or experienced by the theorists. This rage, which targeted American cultural norms of that day, began what would later be termed “gender wars,” because it declared all men evil and depraved by nature. It demanded that men step down from their roles as “heads of households” and primary wage-earners of families. And, while radical theorists could not agree on whether motherhood should be revered or abolished, it at least raised the question of how motherhood affects women and whether modern women need to accept the role.

Furthermore, to a degree never braved before, radical theorists examined and criticized the role that governments play in the generation and maintenance of gendered roles in society. Radical theory may even be at least partly to blame for the steady increase in divorce over the last few decades as well as the reluctance of many young couples to marry. It argued that marriage is always detrimental to women and suggested that a married woman could never fulfill her potential.

Since the debut of radical theory, a few authors have analyzed its various aspects. For example, Jean Elshtain (1981) analyzed a cross-section of feminist “social and political thought.”<sup>2</sup> Elshtain disagreed with what she saw as a universal assumption by radical theorists that women's personal problems must be acknowledged publicly and politically before women as a group could make progress toward ending their oppression. She also did not agree with the theoretical assumption that all men oppress all women, and collectively do so deliberately for their own collective gain. Yet, in her disagreement, she discussed and shed light on these assumptions that underlie much of radical theory. As such, her analysis is useful.

Alison Jaggar (1983), stated that she personally prefers socialist-feminist theory, and created an overview analysis of a broad spectrum of feminist theory, including radical theory. She explained that radical theory blames women's oppression on cultural norms centered on biology. She further explained that these theorists turned their attention to biological difference, specifically because it is constant across time and culture. I often refer to Jaggar's statements in this article, as I also found her analysis helpful.

Yet, a fresh analysis of radical feminism's fiery and confrontational theory is in order, first to help bring understanding to its somewhat successful push for far-reaching change and its rapid demise as it was shuttled aside in favor of other, milder flavors of theory. There is, in earlier analyses, little acknowledgment or discussion about the roots of these slightly younger types of theory that were firmly planted in the fertile ground of early radical feminist theory.<sup>3</sup> Second, although the various aspects of radical theory were discussed by the authors above, there was little close examination of the nuances of specific works within the theory that disagreed with each other. Without that, it is impossible to answer the question as to *why* they disagreed with each other. Finally, it was never acknowledged that the theorists often

disagreed with each other specifically because they sought different types of empowerment for women, the realization of which would require solutions that often at least seemed in conflict with each other. It is with these ideas in mind that I present a new analysis of specific arguments within radical theory and attempt to untangle and clarify important aspects of this now nearly forgotten and at least partially discredited theory.

### Radical Empowerment

Some have argued that the subordination of women and the concomitant power accruing to men are rooted in biological differences between the sexes. Of all the differing political perspectives, it is radical feminism to which the latter view has often been attributed; that is, it is frequently claimed (although not commonly by self-defined radical feminists themselves) that radical feminism is biologically determinist, that it believes that existing gender differences are firmly rooted in, and determined by, underlying biological differences. (Birke, 1986, p. ix)

Birke's statement reveals a very common misunderstanding about radical feminism—that it is fatalistic, deterministic, and single-focused. Yet clearer understanding does not come as easily as one might at first suppose, because radical feminist theory does in fact turn to biology to find the roots of women's oppression. As will be shown in this article, these theorists turn again and again to the same theme: Women's problems all start with our reproductive physiology and with specific matters of sexuality faced only by females. For example, Douglas (1984) stated, "Virtually all of our theories are to a greater or lesser degree biological" and asked, "How can one talk about a form of oppression that has been so linked with sexual relations and childbearing without talking about biology?" (p. 22). However, some clarifications concerning radical feminist theory are in order.

First, radical feminist theory should be differentiated from the radical feminist movement that took place in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> The movement largely dissolved into disarray over various differences by the early seventies. Because Echols (1989) does a good job of recounting the movement's history, I have no cause to do so here. The purpose of my analysis is instead to examine radical feminists' theoretical writings, which began to be published in earnest at about the same time that the radical movement unraveled. The theory grew out of the movement, with a number of revolutionaries eventually becoming prominent writers.<sup>5</sup>

Second, although Birke's passage contains some truth, it nonetheless contains two erroneous assumptions that have repeatedly drawn inappropriate criticism to radical feminist theory. The first assumption is that if radical theory turns to biology to find a *beginning* or *root cause* of the problems women face, then it must *also* assume that biology is *the* major, perhaps only, determining factor of gender identification today and ongoing male domination. I will address this assumption shortly. The second assumption is that radical

theory must therefore believe in a sort of predestination—that is, it must have a defeatist attitude of "nothing can be done," or at best, it presents impossible propositions that give credit to conservative arguments that the male-over-female hierarchy is "meant to be."<sup>6</sup> Yet a number of plausible ideas are presented for how woman might be empowered, with each idea rooted in the theorist's perceptions of the present nature and condition of the human race. Although it is admitted that the difficulties are large, it is also believed that they are not insurmountable. Different perceptions of the nature of woman as well as different perceptions about woman's modern-day situation inevitably lead to different conclusions by the theorists about what female "empowerment" would mean and how it could best be accomplished. More on this shortly.

### Radical Theory and Hobbes

To understand radical feminist theory, one must understand the theoretical notions that feminists in this category share. First, they believe that "all women as a group are oppressed by men as a group"<sup>7</sup> and "that this oppression is, speaking historically, the first human oppression" (Douglas, 1980, p. 15; see also Daly, 1978; Dworkin, 1974; Firestone, 1970; MacKinnon, 1989; and analysis by Elshtain, 1981). Second, they reasoned that if women's oppression is so universal, it must be grounded in some universal *difference* between men and women. They turned their attention to *biological* differences because they are constant across time and culture (Jaggar, 1983). Finally, there is a "story" behind radical feminist theory that explains how and why women's oppression began. It is a story about the origins of modern human circumstance that closely parallels the story Hobbes told about the origins of civil society.<sup>8</sup>

According to Hobbes (1651/1998), prepolitical human beings lived under perpetually violent circumstances. Their lives were constantly threatened not only by wild animals and the forces of nature but also by other humans. Individual men were not strong enough or skilled enough to protect themselves alone. To alleviate their constant fear, social contracts were made between men and group leaders were selected. The leader of each group was responsible for making sure that all men in the group were protected. In return, the men became "subjects," granting their leader, or "sovereign," power to make decisions for them. Hobbes asserted that such loyalty and obedience was necessary to ensure survival. According to Hobbes, this original organizing of power is how the system of man ruling over man began.

In *Against Our Will*, Brownmiller embraced the Hobbesian notion that all humans "in the state of nature" existed in a "violent landscape" (p. 14). However, *woman* in the original "state of nature" would have been faced with multiple disadvantages not faced by man (Brownmiller, 1975; Firestone, 1970; Pateman, 1998). She was physically weaker than most of her male counterparts. This weakness was because of her

reproductive physiology, that ensured that she would menstruate, very probably be pregnant several times in her life, go through either miscarriage or childbirth at the end of each pregnancy—both of which are painful and debilitating, eventually, if she lived long enough, go through menopause, and even very likely suffer “female-only” maladies (Firestone, 1970). She could also be raped in a way that could have particular consequences that men would never face and that she could not retaliate in kind (Brownmiller, 1975; see also Dworkin, 1974, 1987). Finally, if she chose to care for any of her offspring, she then had both herself and the child to protect (Hobbes, 1651/1998; Pateman, 1998).

Realizing rapidly that other women could offer her little help, woman would have turned to man to be her protector (Brownmiller, 1975; Firestone, 1970). Man would expect something in return for his protection, just as did the Hobbesian male sovereigns. Being less able to offer service as a warrior or laborer than her male counterparts, this “something” that woman offered to her protector would likely have been exclusive, willing, and virtually unlimited sexual access (Brownmiller, 1975). This access would have given him pleasure and satiation without struggle. Exclusive sexual access meant social prestige for him, based on the envy of other males. It would also have been a guarantee that her offspring were his, which allowed for the development of patriarchal families (Engels, 1884/1998). For her, however, it meant not only giving the male control over her sexual behavior, but even a restriction of her overall personal freedom in order that the male could be sure that she was keeping her end of the bargain. She would have found it necessary to allow this control and restriction to ensure her own survival and the survival of her children (Pateman, 1998). And thus, according to radical theory, began the collective and universal subordination of women.

This Hobbesian story explains why radical theorists collectively declared that “the personal is political” (see Echols, 1989; Elshtain, 1981; Hanisch, 1970; Rudy, 2001). Elshtain hinted that this declaration was absurd. Yet I would argue that within the context of this Hobbesian theoretical frame the personal *must* be political. From the Hobbesian point of view, it was a constant state of struggle that not only gave birth to politics but which *justifies* sovereign right and might. If patriarchy began and continues because of man’s ability to dominate woman’s personal life and physical body or her need for protection from other males, then real and widespread change could only be created through addressing these personal issues.

The Hobbesian story also tells us that it was not *only* woman’s physiology that began her subordination but also the hostile natural environment in which early humans had to live *and particularly* the narcissistic nature of *man*. It is assumed that “natural” man is warlike and aggressive (Brownmiller, 1975; Firestone, 1970; Hobbes, 1651/1998). It is further assumed that he is narcissistic and driven by instinctual appetites. Man’s nature, therefore, would have created a very hostile social environment for all humans,

which Hobbes said was improved by the establishment of the social contract. But radical feminist theory complains that when stable social order began to improve the life situation of free men, women’s needs were forgotten, their plight ignored (Brownmiller, 1975; Firestone, 1970; MacKinnon, 1989; Pateman, 1998).

Furthermore, although humans have subdued the natural environment, making it safer for our species in many ways, nonetheless, according to radical theory, the *nature of man* has not improved much, if any, over the millennia. Elshtain (1981) commented that radical feminists “sketch a vision of the male that is unrelenting and unforgiving in its harshness” (p. 205). She reminded us that Ti-Grace Atkinson called men “frustrated and insecure,” that Susan Brownmiller insisted that all men “lust for power” and that Mary Daly compared men with “demons.” As Elshtain (1981) pointed out, a common style of writing within radical feminist theory uses “hard language” filled with talk of power, exploitation, manipulation, and violence. A striking example of this language is Firestone’s (1970) description of the beginning of the “feminist revolution” as women who were “fleeing the massacre, shaking, and tottering” (p. 1). Men, Elshtain wrote, are cast by radical theorists as creatures who are cruel to women, and who are cruel because they can be.

Elshtain (1981) argued that radical feminism sees women as “pure” and men as “evil.” Yet, hers is far too simplistic an argument because it ignores the various nuances of radical theory. Jaggar (1983) wrote that radical feminists turned their attention to *biological* difference because it is constant across time and culture. She explained that, according to the radical feminist view, “almost every man/woman encounter has sexual overtones and typically is designed to reinforce the sexual dominance of men” (Jaggar 1980, p. 270). Yet Jaggar (1983) also commented that although radical feminists “do share some common assumptions,” different radical theorists nonetheless “grounded their work in different views of human nature” (p. 85).

Jaggar’s (1983) analysis split radical thought into four categories. The first of these categories was “sex roles and androgyny” (p. 85). She explained that radical feminists in this category advocated for a culturally unisex society. “Androgynous people would remain biologically male or female but, socially and psychologically, they would no longer be masculine or feminine” (p. 87). The second of Jaggar’s categories was “women’s biology as the problem” (p. 88). Within the context of this category, she discussed the notion that women are naturally more sexually promiscuous than men.<sup>9</sup> Also within the context of this category, she briefly discussed work by Brownmiller and then in more detail, discussed work by Firestone, both of which tell us that woman’s biology has disadvantaged her in a struggle against man. For Brownmiller, Jaggar said, the primary concern is rape. For Firestone, the primary concern is that sexual division of labor has a biological basis that causes women to be dependent on men.



The third category forwarded by Jaggar (1983) was “women’s biology as the solution” (p. 93). Within the context of this category she explored work by radical feminists who believed that women, lacking male testosterone and therefore lacking male aggression, could literally save humankind. They could do this, it was thought, by forwarding peace, empathy, and nurturing care for the earth and all living beings. The fourth of Jaggar’s categories was “one is not born a woman” (p. 98). Within the context of this last category, she discussed the work of Wittig, who argued that women give birth only because they are forced to do so by men and patriarchy, and the work of Dworkin, who argued that the our notions about heterosexuality are all socially constructed.

Jaggar’s work is extensive and helpful, but lacks the structured analysis and end-goal focus of my own work, which I hope can help to clarify why women are still, today, split in their support of policies that are intended to empower them. Jaggar’s work also reveals a small confusion, in that she stated that her categorical designations are based on radical feminists’ theoretical notions of human nature. Yet, her first category is based primarily on a proposed solution to the problem of oppression, whereas her other three categories focus on biology and sexual orientation.

I propose instead that radical feminism can be divided into two sets of categories, the combination of which reveals each theorist’s understanding of *why* oppression of women has occurred, or, the *context* of the problem. With said understanding, we can then discern what it is, exactly, that each theorist’s version of empowerment is intended to overcome. When we see that they have varying empowerment *goals*, we can understand why their methods for attaining said “empowerment” tend to vary as well.

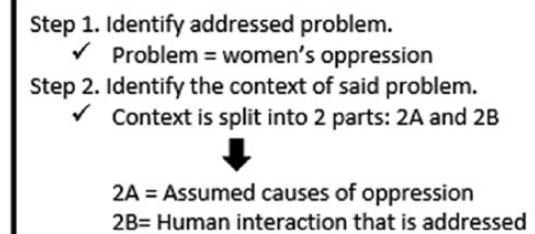
### Structured Analysis

I have formulated a step-by-step process of theoretical questioning intended to reveal these varying definitions of empowerment. The first step (1) is to identify the addressed problem. The second step (2) is to inquire as to the context of the problem that “empowerment” is intended to overcome. This “context” includes both (a) the assumed cause of the problem and (b) the kind of human interaction that is being addressed. The third step (3) is to ascertain the method that the theorist in question recommends as the best way to attain “empowerment.” The fourth step (4) is to understand the theorist’s goal, that is, what the “empowerment” intends to accomplish.

Radical feminists agreed with each other as to the “problem” that women face. They all began with the assumption that all women are universally oppressed by men and that this oppression began in prehistoric times because of biological differences. In my analysis of the works of a few specific radical feminist theorists, however, I discovered that the first set of categories I define splits the writings according to

the specific “assumed cause of the problem” of oppression—Step 2a of my analytical structure. That is, although the theorists share the belief that female oppression began during some original prehistoric physical power struggle, they have differing opinions as to the specific and primary cause of woman’s modern-day misery.

The second categorical set splits the theories according to the human interaction that they address—Step 2b of my analysis structure. These concepts of human interaction are based on the theorists’ interpretation of the “nature of woman” as she interacts with narcissistic man. Remember that Steps 2a and 2b combine to equal the “context of the problem.” I use two sets because it would be erroneous to say that the theoretical writings split cleanly with no overlap between the sets. Instead, some theorists moved from one category to the next and back again across time (as explained by Echols, 1989). Also, as I will demonstrate, at any given time there is crossover between the two sets, with theorists who agree with each other in Set 1 (2a) disagreeing with each other over Set 2 (2b) assumptions.



*Set 1 (2a): Specific causes of oppression.* Set 1 categories are based on what the theories see as the specific “cause of the problem,” that is, of woman’s misery in her modern-day situation. These categories are as follows: (1) reproduction as burden to and/or as forced on women, (2) male lust and sexual aggression against women, (3) male-defined and controlled sexuality of women, and (4) lack of social prestige and privilege for women (low-class status). Each category is explained below, and actual theories that fit these categories are presented later in this article.

The specific causes of women’s oppression as forwarded by these theorists are:

- Reproduction (as unfair burden)
- Male-defined sexuality
- Male sexual aggression and lust
- Low-class status of women

*Reproduction.* Theories in this category (Allen, 1984; Firestone, 1970; Gimenez, 1984) see the primary cause of woman’s modern-day misery as being her responsibility for the reproduction of the human race. As mentioned in the Hobbesian story above, woman’s reproductive physiology and the burden of caregiving caused women to have an

unfair disadvantage in competition with males and/or left women vulnerable to aggression. This unfair disadvantage is seen as continuing into the present time, now causing women misery in the modern world. As will be seen, recommended solutions range from biotechnology that would free women entirely from the “burden” of childbearing, to options that would give women a choice in their reproductive roles, to the suggestion that all women should refuse to reproduce at all without regard to the preservation of the human race.

**Male sexual aggression and lust.** Theories in this category (Brownmiller, 1975; MacKinnon, 1989) see reproduction and preservation of the human race as only an indirect cause of the real problem: The aggression and animallike lust of men. According to this view, lust is the driving reason for the male’s conquest for power over the female in the first place. Then, when a woman turns to a particular male to be her “protector,” he takes advantage of her need for protection to establish his own “right” to the sexual use of her body. Suggested solutions range from laws that would control or ban pornography and stricter laws against rape, to teaching women to “fight back” against male violence, to separating women from men as much as possible.

**Male-defined sexuality.** These theories (Dworkin, 1974, 2002; Rich, 1986) concentrate on what is seen as a serious consequence of male control of the female over time: male-defined and male-controlled sexuality of women. That is, the Hobbesian male conquest of the female is seen as only the beginning point of patriarchy, which, experienced over time, has usurped woman’s right and ability to define and control her own sexuality. Solutions offered range from universal lesbianism, to celibacy, to separatism, to universal “free love.”

**Low-class status of women.** These theories (Alpert, 1973; Daly, 1978; Griffin, 1980) focus on the social status of women. According to these theories, men, who always desire and seek power, are jealous of the power-over-life that women wield. Whereas the Hobbesian male had no thought for his children, civilized man wished to control the family and reproduction (Engels, 1884/1998). Because he had already gained power over woman, he used his authority to debase her, to keep her power and status low, so that he could have some measure of control of this enormous power-over-life.

**Set 2 (2b): The nature of woman.** The second set of categories of radical theory I label “Nature of Woman.” The three categories in this set are as follows: (1) woman as competitor, (2) woman as victim, and (3) woman as angelic or as loving goddess. Remember that, in all categories, men are seen as narcissistic and aggressive.

Because males are always assumed to be both narcissistic and aggressive, the “human interactions” addressed by these theorists are:  
**woman/competitor vs. narcissistic/aggressive male**  
**woman/victim vs. narcissistic/aggressive male**  
**angelic woman/loving goddess vs. narcissistic/aggressive male**

**Woman as competitor.** Theorists in this category (Allen, 1984; Firestone, 1970; Pateman, 1998) see both men and women as struggling for power and seeking pleasure. There is very little, if any, perceived difference between the “nature of man” and the “nature of woman.” Women, however, are unfairly disadvantaged in their struggle for power. To these theorists, the situation of the original state of nature still exists for women. That is, they still struggle ceaselessly in a battle they have never collectively, and seldom individually, won. However, these theorists believe that the playing field must and can be leveled. They present varying, interesting ideas about how women could lose their disadvantage and compete in a fair fight at last.

**Woman as victim.** Radical theorists in this category (Brownmiller, 1975, 1984; Dworkin, 1974, 2002; MacKinnon, 1989, 1997) see men as eternal sexual aggressors and women as eternal thus-far victims and slaves. According to these theorists, women do not tend to be driven by instinctual appetites and should not have to put up with the sexual aggression of the half of the human race that is. The aggression of males and particularly the coercive sexual power that they have held over women is branded as evil. These theorists do not seek a “level playing field” between the sexes, but rather a mass emancipation of women that could only be accomplished through the severing of all sexual-relational ties with men.

**Woman as angelic, loving goddess.** To theorists in this category (Alpert, 1973; Daly, 1978; Griffin, 1980; Whitbeck, 1983), the nature of man and the nature of woman are two entirely different things. Men are naturally narcissistic and aggressive. Women, however, are seen as naturally other-regarding and gentle. Whereas other radical theories assume that women in the “state of nature” were very much like men—hostile and concerned foremost about self preservation (Brownmiller, 1975)—this set of theories assumes that women must have been different than men. How else would the children, and thus humankind, have ever survived? Babies, after all, are dependent on adults for their survival. Human milk, provided only by the female and for which in premodern times there was no substitute, is necessary for at least the first year of life. Furthermore, compared with other mammals, human children take a very long time to mature to a point where they are able to care for themselves. If Hobbes

was correct in his belief that prehistoric *man* felt no responsibility for and did not care for children, then survival of the human race would have depended on the behavior of *females* (Pateman, 1998; Whitbeck, 1983). Therefore, it follows that women must have been empathetic, loving, and nurturing.

These ideas were present during first-wave feminism, were furthered by lesbians during the radical movement,<sup>10</sup> and finally were taken up with full enthusiasm by the “Mother-right” theorists of the 1970s (see Echols, 1989). These theorists see woman as the pure nurturer and life-giver of the human race. She is a being of low status, even though, because of her goodness and great contribution to the human race, she should instead be of a social status higher than man. Lesbians in the movement used these arguments to ease the discomfort of women who viewed them as at-least-potential sexual predators, not unlike their male counterparts (Echols, 1989). Soon after, the Mother-right radical theorists would use these same arguments to demand social prestige and privilege for mothers and caregivers.

### Theories and Proposed Solutions

When examining the differences across the various categories of radical feminist theory, we see that they all address what they believe to be the original and overarching problem that women face today: that women as a group are oppressed and harmed by men as a group. However, to understand the specific modern problems they hope to cure, and thereby to understand their recommendations and hopes for the empowerment of women, one must also examine their various views concerning the specific problems women face within their modern-day situation. Once these views are revealed, then recommended methods for empowerment and the goals said empowerment hopes to achieve become readily understandable.

**Reproduction.** Firestone (1970) and those who agreed with her, sought an empowerment that would free women from biological reproduction, allowing them an avenue to end “male domination” based on sex and “female weakness.” This freedom from biological reproduction would have the added benefit of freeing them from the responsibility of taking care of children. This benefit in turn would free them to live out their lives in a fashion similar to their male counterparts.

Firestone (1970) blamed reproduction for women’s oppression (also see Allen, 1984; Gimenez, 1984). To Firestone, women who have children have always been necessarily dependent on men in some way. She therefore declared that reproduction is costly and demeaning to women. To her, nature had placed an unfair burden on females, but because of our human ability to seek out and find medical and scientific miracles, there remains no need for modern women to continue to shoulder this responsibility. Technological advances, not so far out of reach, could

free women from their traditional reproductive role. That is, according to Firestone, biological reproduction can and should be replaced by some technological process that is carried out apart from the female body.

However, Firestone’s complaint, and her solutions, were far more complicated than may at first be apparent. Firestone believed that psychological problems, relationship problems, degradation of women, the sexual conquest of women, and an array of other social problems all trace their roots directly back to women’s reproductive physiology and the mother–child relationship. The only way to truly create gender equality, to Firestone, was not only to end the need for biological reproduction but also to end family interdependence altogether, including child-to-mother dependency. In fact, Firestone further argued that sex *distinction*, rather than only sex privilege,<sup>11</sup> should be eliminated in societies. Only if women are relieved of their role as childbearers and the biological family disbanded can this revolution change take place. This change, she believed, would set women and children “free” to “do as they wish,” sexually and otherwise (Firestone, 1970, p. 209).

Firestone saw “the burden of reproduction” as woman’s specific, modern-day problem, which can be cured, with male-defined sexuality and the low-class status of women as byproducts of this central problem. This assertion pinpoints her assumption, and the assumption of those who agree with her, about the specific cause of oppression. It is Set 1, No. 1: “reproduction as burden to and/or as forced on women.” Women are “competitors” in a modern-day “battle of the sexes” (for jobs, leisure time, sexual equality, and so forth) who could rise to man’s equal, enjoying equal pleasures with him, if only the unfair burden of reproduction were lifted. This idea pinpoints her assumption about the nature of woman. It is Set 2, No. 1: “woman as competitor.” Finally, she sought an empowerment defined as freedom from the burden of reproduction. The type of empowerment she sought for women, then, is of the autonomous self. This last is obvious because there is nothing here that would, or that would strive to, give women increased ability to care for others; in fact, the intent is to end all need for women to care for others entirely. The goal is to create a society in which no individual is ever coerced to or ever even needs to care for any other individual (care of infants would be done collectively).

Other theorists revealed similar assumptions concerning the context of the problem and display a hope for the same type of empowerment. However, their ideas for attaining said empowerment vary from Firestone’s proposed technological solution. For example, Jeffner Allen (1984) declared that this is a “man’s world,” and that “a mother is she whose body is used as a resource to reproduce men and the world of men” (p. 315). Her assertion that women should refuse to bear children (p. 328) was grounded in a notion that said refusal begins an empowerment for women by allowing them to shape the “whole” of themselves in their



“own lifetimes” (p. 328). There appears to be no room for compromise, because Allen asserted that motherhood is “servitude” (p. 325), is “imposed” on women by men (p. 316), that it “endangers” (p. 316) and annihilates (p. 325) the individual woman. The empowerment she sought was for the individual self in the present moment. She offered no solutions for the human race as a whole. Rather, she admitted that her goal was not “to save the world,” but to shape her own life “in the present” (p. 328). However, Martha Gimenez (1984), although also holding a pessimistic view of motherhood, offered a more compromising style of empowerment: To Gimenez, women should have greater choice in whether or not they wish to give birth. She stated that women must have a right to decide “not only how many children they want and when they want them, but also whether they want any children at all” (p. 308). Like Firestone, these theorists saw “the burden of reproduction” as woman’s specific, modern-day problem. However, they sought empowerment defined as reproductive choice (see also analyses by Echols, 1989; Jaggar, 1983). The type of empowerment sought, again, is of the autonomous self.

**Male sexual aggression.** MacKinnon (1989) also discussed a need for reproductive freedom, but the principal focus of her writings was male sexual aggression and “supremacy.” MacKinnon saw rape and pornography as the primary problems faced by women. She wrote that “women often find ways to resist male supremacy,” but that “they are never free of it” (MacKinnon, 1997, p. 166). Women are “silenced,” said MacKinnon, by sexual abuse and by other social inequalities foisted on them because of their sexual vulnerability. Rape harms them physically and psychologically; pornography is exploitation and “sexual intrusion.” To MacKinnon, the cure was feminist jurisprudence—laws that stop pornography, that help to protect women from rape, that force equality, and that work to end discrimination against women. She believed that governments can and must take responsibility for ending sexual oppression.

Like MacKinnon, Susan Brownmiller (1975) wrote about male sexual aggression. Her primary focus was on rape and fear, lack of personal freedom for women, and other problems created by rape. To her, the problem is universal, even though not all women get raped and not all men rape, because the actions of rapists leave all women intimidated and turning to hopefully nonraping men for protection. Rape, she said, “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15).

Adding insult to injury, according to Brownmiller, once women began to turn to males to be their protectors against other males, they were reduced by their protectors to the status of “chattels” or property. A crime against the female body became a crime against the estate of the male who protected her. Retaliation for rape might be to rape the women who “belonged” to the rapist. Furthermore, freely raping the

women of conquered men was an accepted practice throughout history, because it was by this action that the conquerors increased their numbers. However, that men rape women and only protect them if they are willing to become their “property” was, to Brownmiller, only part of the problem. The other component of this situation is that women are socially taught to be submissive and not to fight. This passivity makes a woman even more vulnerable to rape and even more dependent on the male who is willing to protect her at the high price of her personal integrity and freedom. The cause of the problem of women’s fear and dependency, then, is a complex union of male lust and aggression with female learned passivity.

Women who learn to fight, Brownmiller stated, are actually able to instill fear in men. When the tables are thus turned, women can overcome their own fear and eventually end their dependency on males for protection. Brownmiller saw women as victims, but sometimes, she said, this is because of their own socially learned behavior. She wanted them to learn to be physical *competitors* with men instead of behaving passively toward them, so that they may prove themselves to be at least equal to men in the modern physical arena, and thereby become able to “instill fear” when necessary. This competition, Brownmiller believed, will empower women and raise them out of their “victim” status.

Both MacKinnon and Brownmiller saw the most important, specific problems that women in the modern world face as rape and other sexual abuses exacted against women by men (note that MacKinnon defined pornography as a sexual abuse of women). Their goal was to cure these specific problems by some means, in this case by changes in the law and, for Brownmiller, teaching women to fight. These ideas pinpoint their assumption about the specific cause of woman’s oppression. It is Set 1, No. 2: “male lust and sexual aggression against women.” It is also relatively simple to recognize their assumption about the nature of woman. It is Set 2, No. 2: “woman as a victim” who needs to be legally protected and/or who needs to be taught to protect herself. Finally, they sought an empowerment defined as individual and collective freedom from said male lust and sexual aggression. That Brownmiller suggested that women who learn to fight can instill fear of women generally in men collectively gives a slight nod to a possible relational empowerment, as this would allow women to help each other indirectly. I also suggest that safety and protection for women who face real aggression such as rape and family violence could, in fact, allow them to better care for others such as their children. This is evident if one refers back to the notion that women become more in need of “protection” of some kind when/if they give birth to children. Empowerment to better care for their children would, of course, be a relational empowerment. However, the primary type of empowerment both of these theorists seek for women is of the autonomous self.



*Male-defined sexuality.* Dworkin (2002) stated that “‘victim’ is a dirty word, [but] it is also a true word, a word that points one toward what one does not want to know” (p. 194). Like Brownmiller and MacKinnon, Dworkin’s focus was rape, pornography, and prostitution. However, Dworkin framed the problem as one of male definition of female sexuality (see also Rich, 1986). Dworkin (1974), examined fairy tales, pornography, Chinese foot-binding, and even mythology to demonstrate her notion of male domination. To Dworkin, male culture has always striven to keep women either passive, weak, or both in order that men might maintain power over them. Her solution: refusal to participate in the roles she views as imposed on women by controlling men. “We must refuse,” she says, to participate or submit to “marriage, the nuclear family, religions built on the myth of feminine evil” (Dworkin, 1974, p. 192).

Also, Dworkin (2002) seemed to see only men as evil, even though women have been known to betray other women—to commit incestuous molestation of children, to usher their own daughters into pornography or prostitution, and so on. The men are evil and not the women because these women are simply taking their own frustrations and anger out on other women because “betrayal is always an easier choice” (p. 199). No matter how bad the things some women may do are, they seem by this logic not to be to blame. “Their venom goes in the direction of other women because it is easier than taking on men” (Dworkin, 2002, p. 200). Eternal victims cannot be to blame for their own actions.

To cure the problem of male-defined sexuality, Rich (1986) tried to encourage all women to engage in lesbian sex rather than heterosexual sex. Dworkin (1974), however, wrote that it is fine for males and females to mate, so long as they do not restrict themselves to this heterosexual orientation or fall into traditional male/female roles. She argued that sex as we understand it must be changed. Much like Firestone (1970), she suggested that sexual taboos should be done away with. For example, she stated that “unambiguous conventional heterosexual behavior is the worst betrayal of our common humanity” (p. 184), and therefore states that male/female sexual roles must be eliminated. She also thought we should do away with taboos against bestiality and even incest. Even children should be allowed, perhaps encouraged, to be “erotic beings” (Firestone, 1970, p. 191). Dworkin equated female empowerment with total sexual promiscuity and freedom because she believed that sexuality has been ruthlessly controlled by men for their own purposes. The goal of Dworkin’s particular style of “empowerment” is the end of all sexual “control” plus all sexual social norms and taboos, because, according to her, these things have been instigated by and are maintained by a male-dominated culture.

It is interesting to note that MacKinnon (1989) took issue with the notion that sexual permissiveness will cure any of the problems women face. For example, she wrote that “lesbian sex, simply as sex between women, given a social

definition of gender and sexuality, does not by definition transcend the erotization of dominance and submission” (p. 119). MacKinnon argued that if the problem is truly that men have constructed the meaning of sexuality and femininity, then said problem cannot be cured by men’s absence—separatism, advocated as a solution by a number of radical feminists in the late 1960s (see Echols, 1989), or by sexual permissiveness. Yet MacKinnon also did not see sexually defined roles or sexual taboos to be the primary problem women face in the modern world. Her framing of the problem was therefore, of course, different from Dworkin’s frame. That she was seeing a different problem and was therefore seeking a different type of empowerment altogether apparently did not occur to her.

Dworkin saw the specific problem that woman face, and therefore the specific *cause* of their oppression, as Set 1, No. 3: “male-defined sexuality.” Yet, as mentioned above, she, like MacKinnon and Brownmiller, saw the nature of woman as Set 2, No. 2: “woman as victim.” She sought an empowerment for women that would allow them to redefine their own individual sexuality without hindrance from males and male-defined society at large. Her focus was exclusively on empowerment of the autonomous self.

*Low social class.* Finally, one group of radical theorists (Alpert, 1973; Daly, 1978; Griffin, 1980) sought an empowerment for women that would give social prestige to them based on their unique ability to give birth and on the debt owed to them by the human race for their nurturance of children. Feminists who hold these beliefs have been labeled “cultural feminists” by theorists who also say that they are not “true” radical theorists (Alcoff, 1997; Echols, 1989). However, I would argue that, based on the theoretical notions that they share with other radical feminists, these theorists, for all of their differences, do belong in the “radical feminists” category. Like other radical feminists, this group of theorists turned to biological differences between men and women to explain the beginning point of the problems between the sexes. They also addressed the male-over-female social hierarchy, and, like other radical theorists, assumed that men gained their higher position through physical aggression coupled with narcissism. However, these theorists did not advocate changes in the biological, reproductive “nature” of females as a solution, nor do they simply turn to law to restrict the power of males.

Instead, “cultural” radical feminists sought a distinctive type of empowerment for women, an empowerment that is something other than power against male physical dominance. What they sought was power in the form of “social prestige.” Hartsock (1983) explained that coercive power and social prestige are two separate and distinct types of power. The power to coerce is hierarchical power that involves domination and submission. If it is assumed that the primary problem women face is forced submission to male sexual coercion, then to empower woman means either to

make her equal to man physically or to in some other way raise her up to be equal to him or above him in the physical hierarchy. Power in the form of social prestige, however, may have nothing to do with physical hierarchical arrangements. Instead, it affords individuals the power of respect. Respect can exist between equals or can even be accorded to someone in a hierarchy from someone who ranks above them. Through respect, individuals may find that others cooperate with them without coercion. Furthermore, those who can coerce may refrain from doing so if they have respect for the individual they would otherwise exercise their power of coercion on. Social prestige also allows for self-respect, which in turn creates opportunity for fulfilling self-potential.

For radical theorists in this category, “empowerment” means a social enhancement of woman’s prestige, based in part on her unique ability to bear children. These theorists would charge that Firestone’s ideas cast a dark shadow on the natural processes that could just as readily be seen as beautiful and as contributing to a unique power that only females have. Firestone’s arguments lead to the conclusion that women’s natural biology is bad for women. An opposite conclusion presented by these radical feminists was that women are naturally superior to men, beginning with the ability to give birth that men do not share (Alpert, 1973; Daly, 1978; Griffin, 1980). To strip a woman of this natural power and right is to take from her one of the greatest sources for happiness and empowerment in her life.

Therefore, rather than believing that nature must be somehow overcome, these feminists concluded that woman’s natural physiology makes her special, allowing her to experience and even to know and feel things that men cannot (Alpert, 1973; Daly, 1978). If it is further believed, as mentioned above, that the human race owes woman a special debt for its very survival, it makes sense that she should command a high level of respect and prestige. Said prestige would be an empowerment that would allow her to fulfill her own potential and ensure that her children could fulfill theirs. This would, in turn, bring other rewards to her life.

Thus, the so-called “cultural” radical feminists saw a “low-class status of women” as woman’s most important specific, modern-day problem, which can and should be cured by a change in social and cultural attitudes and norms. This idea aligns with Set 1, No. 4 of the “specific causes” of woman’s oppression. Within the notion that women are superior to men and that the human race literally owes its survival to women, we find these theorists’ assumptions about the nature of woman. It is Set 2, No. 3: “woman as angelic, loving goddess.” The type of empowerment sought by these theorists is primarily empowerment of the autonomous self, however, in that some of them suggested that prestige will also help them to help their children (Noddings, 1984; see also Reddy, Roth, & Sheldon, 1995); it also touches on empowerment of the relational self.

## Conclusion

It was likely these very real and deep ideological splits that eventually caused radical theory to largely recede to the sidelines of feminism. Questions of ideological difference, rather than being recognized for what they were, dissolved into finger pointing and arguments about who qualifies as a “radical feminist” (Echols, 1989). These problems at the theoretical level eventually dissolved into disputes and disunity at the political-action level. This, of course, was not the only fracture in contemporary feminist theory, nor was fracturing among activist-feminists new.<sup>12</sup> The disagreements are interesting to note, however, not only because of the tension they caused but also because of differing notions about empowerment that formed the foundations of the theory in the first place. We see this same contention, with the same root cause, in our political arguments even to this day.

A prime example can be found within the debates about how laws can best handle the situation of pregnant and nursing women in the workplace (see Williams, 1997). If women are treated differently than their male counterparts, they risk losing equal opportunities within the workplace. If they are treated as being exactly the same, there is no special accommodation for pregnant and nursing mothers who wish to continue their employment while enduring the various maladies associated with pregnancy and then nursing their infants throughout the day. This dilemma presents itself as a conflict between the need for woman to empower her autonomous self through employment, and the need for woman’s relational self to be empowered, so that she can care for her infant.

The radical feminists’ attempts to empower woman’s autonomous self were arguably largely successful. It is mostly thanks to the legal work of Catharine MacKinnon that we have laws against sexual harassment in the workplace. Also, over the last several decades, as the nation’s cultural attitudes have shifted, marriage laws that had once perpetuated a male-over-female hierarchy were rewritten to give women rights more comparable with those enjoyed by their husbands (Whetmore, 2013). The radical feminist dialogue that encouraged these changes, and to a certain extent demonized marriage, (see Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 2002; Firestone, 1970) may have helped to realize them.<sup>13</sup> U.S. law now protects teenage women from marriage to or pregnancy by older men, and modern law also forbids one’s legal spousal abuse. Furthermore, marital rape, which was once thought to be an impossibility, because marriage for the male equated unlimited sexual access to his wife, is now illegal in all 50 states.<sup>14</sup> U.S. law now also gives married and divorced women rights that were nonexistent for them only a few decades ago (Whetmore, 2013).

However, radical and other feminists’ attempts to empower the relational self have not been so successful. With divorce on the rise, so too is the feminization of poverty. Hopes for the availability of universal day care for

children were dashed when President Nixon vetoed the Comprehensive Child Development Act. And, child care workers and those who care for the elderly still tend to be very low paid. Arguably, women's roles as mothers and caregivers are no more valued by society today than they were in the mid-20th century.

Like the "cultural" radical feminists, so-called "right wing" women today tend to emphasize the importance of caregiving roles that they believe are necessary for the protection of families, the care of children and the elderly, and in general, the well-being of the human race. These women tend to join Republican men in efforts to limit divorce, access to birth control and abortion and, to some degree, the equal treatment of women in the workplace (see the political stances of Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann). They likely do so because they believe that these things undermine the strength of the "traditional" family and, therefore, their own relational empowerment.

There is need for a study of the conflicts within radical feminist theory because there is a need for women today to understand the foundations of these arguments. Without this understanding, they may never know why these same arguments persist to this day. And, it is only with this knowledge that they may come to realize that women desperately need both empowerment of the autonomous self *and* empowerment of the relational self. These two types of empowerment may seem at first blush to be in hopeless conflict with each other. But as with laws that govern the treatment of pregnant and nursing women in the workplace, we cannot hope to solve the dilemma of conflicting values without first bringing it into the light.

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### Notes

1. Anselma Dell'Olio's (1970) speech, "Divisiveness and Self-Destruction in the Women's Movement," was printed as a sidebar in Joreen's (1976) "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood" (Joreen was the temporary pen name of Jo Freeman). Dell'Olio's speech was also more recently reprinted in an anthology collection edited by "Dark Star Collective."
2. This phrase comes from the title of Elshtain's (1981) book *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*.
3. Relatively recently, Mary Dietz (2003), in her analysis of contemporary feminist theories, explains that a multitude of current theory arose from within the "basic four" categories of "second wave" feminist theory. She does not, however, explain that the other three second-wave categories of theory (socialist, liberal, and psychoanalytic) all also had roots within

certain aspects of radical theory, as I show by my dissecting analyses.

4. Rudy (2001) says that the term "radical" has been "used by different groups with different ideologies at different times," but that the term "implies that adherents believe that the ideology and strategies of their particular group will ultimately lead to revolution and reconstruction" (p. 193). This definition of "radical" is applicable to both the movement and the theory. Radical *theory*, however, is also defined by its quest to locate "the root source" of female oppression. "Going to the root source" is an accepted alternative definition of the term (see the Houghton Mifflin Dictionary).
5. For example, Jane Alpert, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Susan Brownmiller, and Shulamith Firestone.
6. That radical theory has been used to "underwrite feminist claims" as Birke (1986) accuses is true enough. However, it is common for opposing camps in political battles to take ideas out of context and reframe them to suit their own purposes. It is not my purpose to take sides in this battle, but rather to show that radical feminism has been misunderstood.
7. This assumption is sometimes argued against by feminists whose writings fall under other theoretical categories (e.g., Elshtain, 1981; Gilligan, 2002).
8. Although some may accuse that the use of a Hobbesian analogy would brand a theorist as a liberal rather than a radical (see, for example, Jaggar, 1983), nonetheless I maintain that the analogy fits nicely with radical notions that patriarchy was the first human oppression—beginning before recorded history, that males are naturally aggressive and seek power, and that woman originally succumbed to male authority because of her reproductive physiology.
9. According to Jaggar, this notion, similar to ancient notions about female sexuality, was forwarded by Dr. Mary Jane Sherfey during the 1960s.
10. According to Echols (1989), lesbians within the radical movement used arguments about differences between male "aggressive sexuality" and female nurturing "sensitivity" to attempt to calm the worries of heterosexual women who feared that the lesbians may be bringing predatory sexual desires into the movement (pp. 217-218).
11. This argument parallels Marx's assertion that socialism should eliminate class distinctions, rather than only class privilege.
12. The history of first-wave feminism in the United States, for example, reveals extreme splits in theory and political focus that often stalled the movement toward gaining basic political rights for women, such as the right to vote. For one reference on this subject, see McGlen, O'Connor, Van Assendelft, and Gunther-Canada's (2005) *Women, Politics, and American Society*.
13. With so many cultural and legal forces in play, the direct impact of this dialogue is impossible to measure. Nonetheless, legal and attitudinal changes are evident.
14. Until 1976, marital rape was legal in every state in the United States, because it was not recognized as rape.

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