

Dismissing Feminism? A definition problem. [Marxist ideology]

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MAY 4, 2018 BY KEVIN WILLIAMSON [HTTPS://WWW.COMMENTARYMAGAZINE.COM/POLITICS-IDEAS/DISMISSING-FEMINISM/](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/politics-ideas/dismissing-feminism/)

When I was an English major at the University of Texas, I often found myself registering for classes late because I was still paying off my tuition from the previous semester. UT would float you for a semester then, but you couldn't register for the next semester until you'd paid off the previous one. Many of the English classes I wanted were full by the time I tried to register, but a great many cross-listed as women's studies classes were reliably open. Hence my early encounters with Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and other female writers of the Middle Ages, countless readings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and, as I mention in [the current issue of COMMENTARY](#), my passing familiarity with the feminist-psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva, lately outed as an informer for the Bulgarian secret police. I believe I completed coursework sufficient for a minor in women's studies.

I came to conclude that feminism is an intellectually null non-philosophy. In its mild form—the version deployed for public-relations purposes—feminism is a small collection of banal and largely unobjectionable moral truisms. “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people,” as one feminist writer put it in the 1980s, asserting a claim that no one in the civilized world really disputes. If feminism is the idea that women ought to enjoy equality before the law, full economic opportunity, personal autonomy not dependent upon fathers or husbands, etc., that's also a claim that is rarely if ever disputed, at least as a political and legal question. (Many people believe that society would be better off if more women stayed at home raising children rather than working, but few seek to make that a legislative matter.)

Another operational definition assumes the foregoing and adds that society (and government) ought to pay special attention to issues of particular concern to women. That's the feminism of corporate America. (Is there a major brand that is not currently running a soft-feminist PR campaign? It's “Girls Move Mountains,” at North Face, “Power Her Potential” at Whole Foods, Dior and its \$710 “We Should All Be Feminist” T-shirts.) For the most part, it, too, is noncontroversial, at least in principle. We may disagree about whether it is a good idea to mandate parental-leave programs through federal legislation, and we may disagree about the needfulness and effect of equal-pay laws, but few people object in principle to employers making life easier for mothers or to businesses offering equal pay for equal work.

The feminism one encounters in an academic setting is a different thing. The crudest of its texts read like somebody did a **search-and-replace on the Marxist canon, replacing “proletarian” with “women.”** It is infected with pseudo-science (especially Freudian hogwash and related modes of psychoanalytic analysis), intellectually incoherent, illiberal, and shallow. It’s a kind of intellectual version of one of those old Hollywood sets depicting a Wild West boomtown: its jargon forms a convincing enough edifice, behind which is basically nothing.

These thoughts were occasioned by Sarah Quinlan’s essay at National Review Online, headlined [“Conservatives Are Wrong To Dismiss Feminism.”](#) She writes:

Unfortunately, the word “feminist” is often treated as though it were synonymous with “liberal,” and so it’s become a dirty word to many of us on the right. It shouldn’t be.

The concept of feminism should be nonpartisan; after all, the basic definition of feminism is the idea that there should be social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, and that it is important to defend women’s rights and equality. This definition of feminism is, admittedly, different from the one promoted by some of today’s most prominent and vocal feminists.

The concept of feminism should be nonpartisan, but the reality is that it is not. But where resides the partisanship? Is it among conservatives who are entirely open—indeed, enthusiastic—about the unobjectionable feminism goals mentioned above? **Or is it among the feminists themselves, who cleave to a very different notion of feminism, one that is ideologically rigid and not synonymous with “liberal” but with “left-wing,” being, as it is, a creed that is either plainly or implicitly Marxian? That feminism is anti-capitalist, anti-Christian, and opposed to constitutional republican government as practiced in the United States—and opposed, more generally, to the entire Anglo-American model of government and social relations. Feminists of that stripe are not very much interested in making common cause with conservatives.**

The political semantics of feminism are very much like the political semantics of capitalism: We could save ourselves some time and effort if we could agree about what it is we’re talking about. For conservatives, “capitalism” means Adam Smith, free enterprise, F. A. Hayek, property rights, free trade, etc. For the left-wing anti-capitalist, “capitalism” means CIA shenanigans in Guatemala undertaken at the behest of the United Fruit Company. (Left-wing fanatics of a certain age reliably will mention the United Fruit Company in the first ten minutes of any political debate.) Conservatives and libertarians may denounce “crony capitalism,” while anti-

capitalists believe that that is the dominant form of capitalism, and perhaps the only kind of capitalism.

Quinlan argues that conservatives should listen to the valid concerns of feminists. **It might be easier and more productive for conservatives to commit themselves to listening to the valid concerns of women.** The distinction is not merely semantic.