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Colluding in the backlash?
Feminism and the construction of 'orthodoxy'

Rosalind Gill

Rosalind Gill argues that to talk of feminism as an orthodoxy is to play into the hands of those who call us 'femi-nazis' or 'political correctness thought police'.

The 'feminist fatwa'

Earlier this year, Ros Coward wrote an article for The Guardian which enraged other feminists. She argued that feminism was responsible for putting a 'gag' on debates about fatherhood, with the suggestion that even raising it as an issue would be treated as 'an act of treason'. Coward went on to assert that 'there's scarcely a leading feminist who has not added her own thoughts about the redundancy of fathers', and added that mere mention of fatherhood at a feminist gathering would be sufficient to have one branded as 'suffering from nostalgia for the patriarchal authoritarian family'. My aim here is not to get involved in an argument about

1. Ros Coward, 'Make the father figure', The Guardian, 12 April 1996.
fatherhood; instead, I wish to draw attention to the rhetoric of Ros Coward's argument, and to explore some of the political implications of her characterisation of feminism as a rigid orthodoxy which permits no dissent.

Beatrix Campbell picked up on this in her reply to Ros Coward. She described as bizarre the spectre conjured by Coward of a 'feminist fatwa', and argued: 'There is no party line, therefore no taboo and no treason'. I agree completely with Campbell. However, what struck me was not how strange Coward's construction of feminism was, but how familiar it has become. Increasingly, feminists seem to be taking part in a sport which was once the sole province of right wing misogynists: the construction of feminism as a set of narrowly defined and rigorously policed beliefs - a dogma or an orthodoxy. This is not just happening in one domain - I come across it in newspaper articles, in feminist journals and in academic writing; more and more, feminists seem to be queueing up to attack the prevailing 'feminist orthodoxy'. Sometimes the 'orthodoxy' they want to challenge concerns the apparent neglect of an important feminist issue - for example, motherhood or beauty oppression. On other occasions the challenge is to supposedly 'orthodox' ways of thinking about gender issues - classic examples here being sexual violence and pornography. Interestingly, there seems to be no consensus among these feminists about the nature or content of 'feminist orthodoxy'; for example, protagonists in different camps of the pornography debate routinely claim to challenge it, while, in discussions about the status of mothering in feminist theory, some claim that feminism has been preoccupied with it, while others claim that it has been virtually ignored. What unites these writers, then, is not any agreement about the nature of 'feminist orthodoxy', but a clear sense that there is an orthodoxy.

Am I alone in feeling disturbed by this? Let me state my position straight away: as far as I am concerned, feminism is not, and has never been, an orthodoxy. Indeed, feminists have disagreed about almost everything of importance to us - including the reasons for, the nature of, and the ways to challenge women's oppression. Feminism has always been fluid and dynamic, never static and unitary. But to suggest that now, in the 1990s, feminism is an orthodoxy seems the height of folly. Never has it been more open, and more contested than today, as differences between women - relating to 'race' and ethnicity, class, sexuality

and ability are at last taken seriously and debated, and as ideas from
poststructuralism and postmodernism challenge the very idea of a unified gendered
subject around which feminists can mobilise. It seems to me that now, perhaps
more than ever before, feminism is a space of permanent contestation, of strategic
alliances, and of a politics of articulation. In fact,

it is highly questionable whether it is even possible
to speak of feminism any more as if it had a clearly
identifiable referent; better to talk of diverse and
heterogeneous feminisms.

To suggest that feminism is an orthodoxy,
then, is, in my opinion, to misrepresent us.4 More
worryingly, it is to play into the hands of our
critics. Not only does it give them ammunition
to use against us, but it actually uses their discourse. It suggests implicitly that
critics of feminism are right about it, that it is a rigid dogma, a 'line' to which
strict adherence is required. It conjures up distinctions between authentic and
inauthentic feminists, between the fully paid-up, card-carrying members of the
orthodoxy, and the renegades. It thus cedes almost all our ground to those who
would call us 'political correctness thought police' or 'femi-nazis'. What the
suggestion of a 'feminist orthodoxy' does is to re-present decades of diverse
thought, argument and practice as a single, unitary, systematically policed
position. Above all, to speak of 'feminist orthodoxy' is to deny what feminism
needs most - a positive discourse of difference: a discourse, or discourses, that
would allow us to think about differences between us not in terms of problems
to overcome or transcend, but as inevitable and welcome features of any
movement aimed at radical social transformation.

Suppressing debate
So what is going on when feminists claim to challenge feminist orthodoxy? As a
rhetorical strategy, the claim to attack orthodoxy is deeply embedded in Western
individualism. It affords the writer an almost 'heroic', romantic status; she is cast
as brave critic, as one who courageously speaks out against received wisdoms, often

4 It is clearly problematic to speak of 'us' as if 'we' constitute a self-evident and
uncontested group. I use it here inclusively, to signal not the homogeneity of those
who identify as feminists, but their diversity.
at some personal cost, not least that of being cast out of the movement. The subject position it offers the person making the assertion, then, is a positive one - the truth-speaking individual, not cowed by the orthodoxy. What it offers feminisms, however, is less positive. It flattens out all the differences between us, represses the dynamism, excitement and genuine debate within our movement, and presents us as our attackers see us.

Sometimes the claim is made in a serious context and with the aim of advancing feminist debate. Lynne Segal's most recent book, *Straight Sex* for example, seeks to challenge what she describes as the current orthodoxy that heterosexuality is the basis of men's domination of women. The book makes several important criticisms of particular writers' positions. But the attribution of a feminist orthodoxy troubles me. It transforms the writings of a handful of women, who were struggling to make sense of women's oppression, in particular historical and cultural locations, into a rigid dogma. It is important to be clear that I am not suggesting that we should not argue with each other; on the contrary, I am suggesting that we should - and we do. But the notion of feminist orthodoxy denies this. It re-presents differences between feminists as a binary divide - between the orthodox and the rest. Not only does it buy into the discourse of feminism's attackers, but the corollary of the argument seems to be that there is also a small group of women who 'control' the content of feminist knowledge, and who suppress dissident voices.

Interestingly, this leaves open the possibility of the construction of an identity as 'victim of feminist orthodoxy'. Feminist newspaper columnists seem, with increasing regularity, to take on this role, recasting for their readers the questioning they have received from feminist friends, over issues such as shaving one's legs or buying designer clothes, into a kind of full-scale victimisation by the orthodox feminist police. Such writers are then able to present themselves to the world as brave and defiant challengers of feminism's narrow and restrictive beliefs. Ros Coward uses this kind of rhetoric in her article about fatherhood, suggesting that not only have fathers lost out as a result of feminism's stifling of debate, but that

5. The examples I have chosen were selected merely because they were to hand, but they seem to me to be part of a much broader trend. My wish is not to single people out for criticism; nor to debate the substance of their arguments. I am interested simply in the political effects of claiming that feminism is an orthodoxy.
ultimately we are all victims of it.

A similar example can be found in Maureen Freely's writing about motherhood. Her entire argument - that motherhood should be taken seriously - seems to be premised on a caricature of feminism as a small cabal of cold, childless women, whose energies are primarily invested in being hostile to mothers. Take this introduction to a recent article:

Talk about taboo. Talk about unpopular subjects. There is no faster way to get up mainstream feminists' noses. And if you don't believe me, try yourself. Try standing up in front of a group of child-free feminists - they can even be any age, they can even be friends - and say, actually, there is something to be said in favour of mothers... Here's a few of the slurs you can expect if you persist: fifties throwback, maternal revivalist, elitist, ethnocentrist. And worst of all, essentialist.'

Freely suggests that women who are mothers have been so victimised by feminism, that even speaking of motherhood requires gross 'daring', and one risks becoming a 'martyr'. I find this portrait unrecognisable (and I am a mother). Perhaps it is the adversarial nature of contemporary academic and journalistic life - the pressure to make one's own name by attacking other people's ideas - which leads Freely to argue that 'orthodox feminists' claim 'anyone who becomes a mother is colluding with patriarchy'. What it achieves for her is the status of a heroine who will not be silenced, will not be constrained by (what she identifies as) the 'feminist canon', and who is prepared to sacrifice herself for the future of all other mothers. But she is attacking a straw target. Her attacks on feminism do great injustice to the many feminists who have written and argued about motherhood, campaigned for better maternity leave and for workplace nurseries, and struggled for decades to secure real choices, to combat isolation and to improve the quality of life for mothers and women without children alike. Perhaps more worryingly, her portrait of feminism gives more ammunition to those who wish to eradicate our ideas altogether.

Colluding in the backlash
Closely allied to the tendency of feminists to identify a feminist orthodoxy is another disturbing trend. This is the tendency not to challenge reactionary and oppressive accounts of our history or our movement. Over the last five years or so I have
noticed a growing reluctance on the part of a wide variety of feminists to challenge lies and misrepresentations about feminism. Negative statements about feminism of the 'feminists are...x' or 'feminism is...y' variety, which would previously have attracted criticism or complaint, are increasingly allowed to stand in public discourse. Even more worryingly, some feminists are actually beginning themselves to endorse these reactionary portraits of feminism. Where once we would have cried out to challenge the stock caricatures - ugly, man-hating, bra-burning, etc - increasingly, some feminists are reproducing them, if only to relativise them historically - 'feminists were like that, but we are different' - or socially - 'some feminists are like that, but we are different.'

This trend is not limited to feminism, but has become a feature of much political discourse of the left. Whilst writing this article I came across a typical example of it, relating more broadly to affirmative action policies. In this example, an ostensibly positive stance on anti-discriminatory practices is prefaced by a statement which would make the most right-wing populist ideologue proud:

The overstaffed race units with inflated budgets have long since closed down. 'Red Ken' and 'Barmy Bernie' vanished aeons ago. Baa baa black sheep, black bin liners and 'black coffee, please' are no longer outlawed. And the thought-police who once dominated the corridors of power in Britain's town halls are living in comfortable retirement.

Where once we would have expected a 'quality' broadsheet journalist to challenge these racist and politically-motivated lies about metropolitan councils, now we have them uncritically reproduced - even as the article goes on to offer a more considered assessment of anti-discriminatory policies. This is not an isolated example. And it does not come from the Daily Express but The Guardian. Increasingly - or so it seems to me - we are failing to challenge pernicious statements about progressive movements generally - particularly feminism - and we are even recycling them ourselves.

I say 'we' deliberately, because I do not think it is helpful to assume that those of us who are implicated here are 'not real feminists'. Better that we try to understand the social and cultural conditions that make 'feminist bashing' so

difficult to resist - in order that we can find new ways of challenging it. The primary reason must be the hostile climate in which Western feminists currently find themselves. The backlash against feminism and other progressive movements has been devastating. Despite - or, perhaps, because of - the huge gains made by feminism, it is becoming more rather than less difficult to identify as a feminist - outside certain relatively safe environments.

Against this background it is not difficult to appreciate why we reproduce, or fail to challenge, oppressive accounts of feminism. Mostly it is well-intentioned; sometimes an act of damage limitation; at other times an attempt to distance ‘our’ feminism from negative perceptions of feminism more broadly: a dynamic is set up within the argument which distances ‘them’ (extreme, mistaken, excessive, etc) from ‘us’ (moderate, responsible, realistic, etc); on other occasions still, sheer weariness comes into play. Generally, it is done for strategic or tactical purposes - it salvages some semblance of a positive identity for the speaker, whilst also seeming to ‘rescue’ contemporary feminism (or some strand of it) from complete dismissal. ‘If we don’t contradict their caricature of us in the 1970s’, we may think, ‘then maybe we can win them round to seeing just how different and important our struggle is today’. Or ‘If we just go along with their view of lesbian feminists, then we can persuade them that our feminism is much less threatening’. So runs the perverse logic - perhaps. Divisiveness has set in. We condemn each other - and all in the name of ‘rescuing’ feminism from hostilities. It is easy to understand. It is also entirely mistaken. There is a high price to be exacted from reproducing ideological accounts of our movement.

I can see part of the price being paid when I talk to my eighteen and nineteen year old students. For them, what I regard as lies, misrepresentations and hostile caricatures, represent the consensus, or indeed, the truth, about what feminism is - or has been. I have still not got used to the certainty with which they will routinely pronounce that feminists in the 1960s, 1970s (and now even the 1980s) were all man-hating extremists who went ‘too far’. Small wonder, then, that so few of them regard themselves as feminists - and even less surprising when they may have heard the same statements endorsed by feminists.

The highest price, however, is paid by us directly. It is as if we have internalised the backlash. We have allowed hostile commentators to set the agenda, and to define the ‘legitimate’ face of feminism. This can only lead to the fragmentation of our movement. Going along with ideological accounts of feminism may seem to
Soundings

make sense in the short term and in terms of realpolitik, but in the longer term it will lead to our destruction.

Towards positive discourses about differences

The trend to treat feminism as an orthodoxy, and the trend to collude with - or even actively to reproduce - ideological accounts of feminism are intimately related. What is happening in both cases is that feminists are drawing on and reproducing the discourse of those who are hostile to feminism. In both cases, feminism is reified. Feminism - or particular strands of it - is treated as something which has ossified, is rigid, closed and irrelevant. Moreover, in both cases, violence is done to the diversity of opinion within feminism. In the first case, differences are handled by the construction of a binary divide - between 'orthodox feminists' (an entirely flexible discursive category), and the rest of us. In the second case, differences between us are handled by discursively distancing ourselves from other feminists - largely, it seems, for misguided reasons of political expediency. In both cases, differences are treated as problems. This is a measure of both the force and pervasiveness of the backlash against feminism, and - more disturbingly - a contribution to it. What we desperately need are positive discourses for talking about differences between feminists, as well as between women more generally. As long as we characterise feminism as an orthodoxy, and recycle hostile myths about our sisters, then this will elude us.

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