

## 2

## Modernist Emancipatory Feminism: Liberal Feminism – Wollstonecraft to Wolf

I will begin consideration in this chapter of one of the main directions or trajectories within Feminism – that is, the Modernist Emancipatory perspective – and will attend to one of the types or strands of Feminism which take up this theoretical direction in order to provide an illustrative example. Liberal feminism offers a particularly useful instance of this Modernist positioning.

### Characterising Modernist thinking

In the previous chapter I identified five main directions spanning over the Modernist–Postmodern continuum within the overarching gender/sexuality field and provided a preliminary outline of these directions within Feminism. The first of these feminist theoretical directions was Modernist Emancipatory feminism. I also outlined certain features of Modernist approaches.

- Modernist thinking, I suggested, is concerned with what is *universal* to human beings. Most importantly, a universal Human nature is envisaged. Modernism is for this reason typically associated with ‘**Humanism**’ – that is, the notion that human beings intrinsically possess a foundational core (essence) which sets them apart from other animals and nature.
- Not surprisingly, given its focus on what marks out the universal Human as special, Modernism is preoccupied with what is universal about society and power relations within society. Modernist approaches conceive society and power as capable of being understood by a universal rule or law or ‘truth’.
- This foundational and macro-explanatory ‘truth’ orientation in relations to humanity, society and power is linked to conceptions of power as negative and top-down.
- The human self upon whom power acts is also understood as having universal features, and as repressed/subordinated/oppressed by power. Hence a true, essential self (core human capacities) can be liberated/emancipated from power. It is possible to throw power off.

I would add to this list of features that Modernist thinking is optimistic about the opportunities for change. It assumes that over time society and the self will be liberated. History, in this approach, is progressive and linear. Everything gets better over time. Such a perspective may be contrasted with strongly Postmodern thinking. Postmodernists are sceptical about any universalising monolithic foundational account and wary of any notions of any founding explanatory centre that is eternal or fixed in

human life. They declare there is NO foundational (essential) truth to the Human, society, power, the self or history. (The distinction between Modernist and Postmodern forms of thinking will be further elaborated in Chapter 4.)

## Feminism's relationship to Modernist thinking

In Feminism, as in Masculinity and Sexuality Studies, there are frameworks along the whole continuum from strongly Modernist to strongly Postmodern. Feminism has a long tradition of Modernist or Emancipatory thinking and as you can see in Figure 1.2, there are several 'types' of this form of thinking in the feminist pantheon. The most strongly Modernist types are those which began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (which continue to the present day) – that is, Liberal and Marxist feminisms though even these may be said to have a differential attachment to Modernism.<sup>1</sup> Those types of Feminism that began in the 'second wave' of the 1960s and 1970s are distinctly more ambiguous in this respect and offer a weaker Modernism. I will concentrate initially on those feminist approaches which began before the twentieth century and in particular will attend to Liberal feminism because this instance remains a powerful and pervasive 'type' of feminist theory today, while avowedly Marxist variants are now significantly less common.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as I have noted elsewhere, 'Liberal feminism ... is often seen as synonymous with feminism *per se*' (Beasley, 1999: 51).

However, my reason for this choice is not just based upon Liberal feminism's ongoing established position. Marxist, Socialist and Radical feminisms all demonstrate, to different degrees, somewhat less clear-cut adherence to a Modernist frame of reference. Their more mixed relationship to Modernism may be clarified by a brief comment about the character of this frame of reference. Broadly speaking, Modernism in the West has involved two major traditions, which have more or less indebtedness to its universalist humanism (Martin, 1999: 159–62). These two traditions are the individualist tradition that may be traced through Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Mill and Wollstonecraft, and the collectivist tradition that may be linked to Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Goldman, Kollontai and Said. While the former shaped Liberal political thinking and typically has become the mainstream 'ideology' of Western capitalist societies,<sup>3</sup> the latter has had its greatest impact in Socialist perspectives and has most often had an oppositional relationship to Western social systems. The oppositional stance of broadly Socialist inflected viewpoints, which includes Marxist, Socialist and Radical feminisms, has led to potentially more critical readings of mainstream (Liberal) Modernism. Such Socialist inflected feminisms are more inclined to question an unthinking assumption that a single viewpoint can give access to foundational Truth, because this may amount to little more than support for the status quo of Liberal capitalist society. While these feminisms remain indebted to Modernism and its concern with human agency, notions of the universal Human (that are so much a feature of the strong Modernism associated with Liberalism) are typically also undercut in Marxist, Socialist and Radical feminisms by recognition of specific social differences like class, 'race' and gender. Increasing recognition of such differences led to perspectives that began to question any foundation to the Human, to question Modernism itself. For this reason Liberal feminism appears as arguably the clearest, though not the sole candidate to illustrate Modernist perspectives within Feminism.

To make the strongest case for a Modernist Feminism I will give a broad outline of Liberal feminism in this chapter and briefly discuss the writer Naomi Wolf, and in the next I will focus in more detail on the work of Martha Nussbaum.

## Liberalism and Liberal feminism

Liberal feminism is a response to and development of Liberalism. For this reason it is necessary to provide some background on Liberal thought. Mainstream Liberalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in whatever variant (Minow and Shanley, 1996; Beasley, 1999: 51–3), offered a form of thought in which ‘the individual’ (the full adult citizen) is a ‘descendent of the Enlightenment concept of an autonomous rational being’ (Gunew, 1990: 17; O’Neill, 1999) and political equality is associated with that ability to reason. The **Enlightenment** is a term describing a collection of ideas which emerged in the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such ideas opposed religious explanation (God as truth) and the divine right of kings in favour of secular rationalism.<sup>4</sup> According to Enlightenment thinking, all those who can reason are capable of independent thought and action and hence should be able to participate in society. In practice, however, all women and certain men (men of colonised countries and working-class men until they gained the vote) were excluded from these claims as less capable of reason. Mainstream Liberalism is a form of thought and a form of social regulation that has dominated Western societies since the emergence of the Enlightenment and draws strongly upon this two-fold legacy. Hence, in Western Liberal societies some groups of people are afforded full citizenship and other are not.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, Liberal feminism pointed out that Liberal, supposedly universal standards of humanity, equality and reason were not in fact universal because women were denied full social participation, public life and education. The seeming paradox at the heart of Liberalism, which asserted equality and liberty for all yet maintained a rigorous inequality in relation to certain groups, should be understood in terms of the particular meanings given these words. Equality and liberty (from intervention by government) refer to human beings capable of reason. Only they can be granted the status of belonging to the universal human. Only they are to be regarded as autonomous persons, as individuals, and therefore able to be granted public rights and freedoms. Those who are deemed outside reason – that is, the ‘uncivilised’ or those closer to nature and therefore more animal-like – are not quite Human, and thus not capable of receiving these rights and freedoms. They – the ‘**other**’ – are instead to be controlled and cannot be ‘free’ within the private realm of the family (all women) and/or in public legal terms (all women and indigenous colonised men).

Liberal feminism from the late eighteenth century to the present day has pointed out that full social participation and public life has been denied women. Liberal feminism asserts that the universalist claims of the Enlightenment and its descendent, Liberalism, which strove to counter the fixed **social hierarchy** of medieval custom and to extend social status, did not extend so far as to include women. In excluding women, who constitute half of the populations of Western societies, mainstream Liberalism is revealed as less about justice than a narrowly Western masculine political project. While Liberal feminists continue to defend what they regard as the critical spirit associated with the Enlightenment reason,<sup>6</sup> they argue that mainstream Liberalism is a flawed descendent.

Liberalism's all-embracing pretensions are built upon the assumption that only Western men matter, that men's equality in the West is equivalent to equality for all fully human beings.

### Liberal feminism: a broad grouping

Liberal feminists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), argued for women to be included in this masculine project. Wollstonecraft's aim was for women to be given access to education, to the Liberal model of knowledge and rationality and to enter public life (Wollstonecraft, 1978 [1992]: 293–4; Gunew, 1990: 15). She wanted women to attain what men of a similar class had in terms of opportunities and access to public activities. Wollstonecraft, in common with other Liberal feminists of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

drew on the liberal tradition's value of equality and individual freedom to argue that, just as social status at birth was no longer a legitimate basis on which to discriminate among men as liberals argued, so also sex at birth was no longer a legitimate basis on which to discriminate against women. (Ackerly, 2001: 5499)

In other words, she did not question the model of a universal humanity based in rationality, or the universal notion of 'the individual' within mainstream Liberalism, but rather advocated women's simple inclusion/assimilation into its protocols.

By the second wave of Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, most women in Western countries had gained basic social and political rights such as the vote after considerable social dispute. The new 'women's movement' gave rise to a new form of Liberal feminism. Activists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem in the USA and Beatrice Faust in Australia exemplified this new Liberal feminism. They were crucially involved in the emergence of new reform-oriented women's organisations such as NOW (National Organisation of Women) in the USA and WEL (Women's Electoral Lobby) in Australia. They argued that despite most gaining formal rights, women remained confined to the domestic and were still subject to many legal and customary constraints which significantly hindered their ability to access public life and its opportunities as men did. The public worlds of politics, business and the professions still remained gendered. This view is supported by the ILO (International Labour Organisation, United Nations) which reported in 1993 that it 'will take nearly 1,000 years for women to gain the same economic and political clout as men if current trends continue' (*Advertiser*, 1993: 17). Relatedly, second-wave Liberal feminism asserted that women continued to be marked as lesser, because they were judged *as women* and only secondly as individual human beings, whereas men were still more likely to be judged individually. This meant that women continued to be discriminated against, not on the basis of merit but on the basis of their sex (Tuttle, 1986: 182). This viewpoint amounted to a development of first-wave arguments, like those of Wollstonecraft, supporting women's entry into the male world of public life.

Liberal feminism, from its earliest forms to now, may be understood as focusing upon the elimination of constraints facing women and gaining *equal civil rights* for

32 *Gender & Sexuality*

women as public citizens. Today this focus remains an important aspect of the public face of Feminism. It is crucial to public campaigns regarding childcare, maternity leave and flexibility in waged working hours among others, which aim to make workplaces more 'family friendly', or perhaps more accurately more 'parent, relationship and community friendly'. Provisions like childcare are designed to assist women in juggling their continuing greater responsibilities for domestic and childcare labour with waged work in ways that lessen the impact of this 'double load' on women's public participation. The orientation of such political interventions is overall to assimilate women more comfortably into a basically masculine model of social life without much altering the discrepancies between the existing differential roles of men and women. Women are assisted in fitting into workplace priorities, rather than fundamentally confronting gender inequities in public and domestic life. This orientation towards assimilation rather than significant reform is also revealed in the Liberal feminist concern to reverse women's under-representation in various areas of public life, especially those associated with higher status, economic reward and authority.

Second-wave Liberal feminism has tended to extend the more 'welfarist' version of mainstream Liberalism and, as such, counters the marked **individualism** of most of its forms. This second-wave approach develops the welfarist strand within mainstream Liberalism in terms of advancing a sense of collective or social responsibility and a marked attention to social justice. The collective and social justice political programme of this form of Liberal feminism is evident in its focus upon overcoming discrimination against women as a class or group. It is also evident in the attention given to repealing or reforming social obstacles to women's public participation.

The emphasis on improving women's legal and political position as a group in second-wave Liberal feminism, while undercutting the individualism characteristic of mainstream Liberalism, nevertheless continued to be firmly oriented towards enabling women to become like men. Hence, even second-wave Liberal feminism's concern with collective politics, with women as a class/group, is strategic and temporary rather than long-term. Its political aim remains recognisably Liberal – that is, to enable women to achieve the status of autonomous 'individuals' in public life as equals of men and as equally capable of public participation.

More recently, a number of usually younger feminists have criticised this practical political **collectivism** with its focus on obstacles and discrimination/oppression against women. These '**third-wave**' Liberal feminists (sometimes called 'post-feminists') argue that the 1960s and 1970s women's movement and those which continue to adhere to its agenda are inclined to overestimate social obstacles and are disinclined to admit women's own responsibility for their lives and status (Gamble, 2000b: 44; Andermahr et al., 2000: 205). Third-wave Liberal feminists, some of whom are sometimes described as 'anti-feminist' (Modleski, 1991; Wilgman, 2001a), instead argue that women must take individual responsibility and not hide behind a group status as 'victims'. This amounts to a strong, indeed thoroughgoing, return to the individualism of mainstream Liberalism. Such writers may still be viewed as occupying a feminist position insofar as they still assume and advocate the equality of men and women<sup>7</sup> but their explanation for women's inequality resides more in individuals, and in particular in individual *women*, than in social discrimination. In the work of some third-wave writers like that of Katie Roiphe (1994) or Rene Denfeld (1995), this analysis amounts

to women-blaming but in others like Naomi Wolf there remains a greater recognition of women as collectively subject to discrimination (see also Gamble, 2000b: 48–9; Lehrman, 1994).

### Third-wave Liberal feminism: Naomi Wolf

In Wolf's books on beauty and motherhood, *The Beauty Myth* (1990) and *Misconceptions* (2001) respectively, she devotes considerable attention to the social obstacles women face and, in typical Liberal feminist style, she urges social reform of these obstacles. Nevertheless, like other third-wave Liberal feminists, she also focuses upon empowering individuals. Her political programme as well as her political aim is about individuals. She celebrates the autonomous individual in traditional Liberal terms and criticises what she calls 'victim feminism' (*Fire with Fire*, 1994) for saddling women with an 'identity of powerlessness' (Lehrman, 1994). Wolf suggests women should seize the power that is on offer (Hughes, 1997: 25). For Wolf this appears as a relatively simple matter (Gamble, 2000b: 49), perhaps as much as anything a question of attitude, a matter of will. She argues that seeing 'competition, ambition and aggression as male and somehow evil undermines women's quest for autonomy and self-determination' (Lehrman, 1994). Her 'power feminism' celebrates meritocratic social hierarchy, personal responsibility, public success and the individual. This paean to social mobility is also evident in more recent writings which return to the problem of obstacles for women but remain up-beat about women as individual subjects, as active agents of change – especially personal change. Personal individual change flows on to a collective result. In her rather traditional reiteration of Liberal conceptions of power and the self, empowered/emancipated individual women can alter power relations. There is virtually no reference to the state or other social institutions in the analysis, but rather a focus on the spreading impact of empowered individuals who take control of their lives. Hence, she says in *Misconceptions* (2001) that the 'greatest loss for many new mothers is the loss of self' (cited in *Weekend Australian*, 2001: 21).

Naomi Wolf specifically locates her 'power feminism' as an extension of the Liberal feminism of nineteenth-century thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft. In common with Wollstonecraft and most Liberal feminists, she is little concerned with class or money or race, and appears primarily focused on the problems of women like herself – that is, white, educated, middle-class young women.<sup>8</sup> She encourages women, for example, to form 'power groups' to pool their resources in the way men do. Like all Liberal feminists, she seeks to incorporate women and Feminism into capitalism (a North American style of capitalism in her case). Her vision of 'power feminism' indeed appears itself to be a capitalist commodity: 'I propose specific strategies to make pro-woman action into something that is effective, popularist, inclusive, *easy, fun and even lucrative*' (Wolf, 1994: xix, emphasis added).

For Wolf this has not proved to be an outlandish claim. She has published very widely and regularly embarks on international lecture tours to packed houses. Wolf even seeks to develop a brand logo for Feminism to sell it all the better (Nemeth, 1993). This kind of approach, with its emphasis on self-improvement and marketing, has a peculiarly North American tinge which becomes perhaps most strongly evident when

### 34 Gender & Sexuality

her notion of Feminism's future is linked to particularly North American conceptions of individual liberty. Wolf, for instance, celebrates 'gun ownership among women as a sign of progress beyond victimhood' (Lehrman, 1994). Nevertheless, the enthusiastic self-help and inspirational tone of her work, combined with its readability, has often been galvanising and highly effective in showing women in an increasingly conservative political climate what Feminism might mean to them individually. Wolf is indeed herself a highly marketable front-person for Feminism, a kind of celebrity feminist, in an age of celebrity worship. Perhaps this is a crucial Feminism for our times.

## Conclusion

You can see from this brief and broad overview of Modernist feminism, and Liberal feminism within this, that there are many directions and debates to consider. Liberal feminism is an assimilationist and reformist (rather than revolutionary) approach. It aims to fit women into existing society and to remove obstacles to their public advancement. If Liberal feminism were a shirt, it would probably be pinstriped and have shoulder-pads. It dresses for success. However, its willingness to accommodate and indeed celebrate the virtues of mainstream capitalist democracies makes it a form of Feminism that is comparatively widely accepted and hence possibly the only populist platform for feminist thinking today. In the next chapter I look in more detail at another Liberal feminist who provides a kind of scholarly version of Wolf's populism.

## Notes

1. Hartsock (1998a: 236) argues that Marx cannot simply be viewed as pro-Enlightenment. This point has implications for Marxist feminism.

2. A relatively limited number of feminist writers now espouse a scrupulously *Marxist* feminism. It is more common to find feminist theorists/writers who explicitly or implicitly repudiate a previous commitment to a Marxist or at least broadly Marxian approach. Michèle Barrett's movement from Marxism to Postmodern thinking provides an important example of this repudiation, which gained particular force during the 1990s. Nevertheless, aspects of Marxism remain a significant influence in the work of Socialist and Post-colonial feminist writers, like Nancy Hartsock and Gayatri Spivak respectively, as well in the work of feminists influenced by the Western Marxism of 'Critical Theory' and Jürgen Habermas. See Barrett, 1991, 1992; Milner and Browitt, 2002: 57–91; Benhabib, 1992a, 1994).

3. For short definitions of 'ideology', see Osborne (2001: 162) and Gamble (2000a: 252).

4. For an accessible and brief description, see Osborne (2001: 120–2); for another longer version, see Martin (1999: 156–67).

5. Jane Flax (1997 [1995]) has noted in this context that 'the freedom, homogeneity, autonomy and identity of the modern individual are produced and dependent on its marked other – the slave, the inferior races, the homosexual'. See also Flax, 1998; Carver, 1998; Hindess, 2001; Helliwell and Hindess, 2002; MacMillan, 1998).

6. See Nussbaum's defence of Reason in Chapter 3. This more sympathetic reading of the Enlightenment project is characteristic of Modernist approaches in Feminism and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the perception of a potentially useful critical attitude associated with the Enlightenment, despite its limits, is sometimes even expressed by strongly Postmodern thinkers whose positions are precisely supposed to be anti-Enlightenment. What this indicates

is that Modernist pro-Enlightenment theories are not always to be cast as the opposite of Postmodern perspectives. The continuum between Modernist and Postmodern frames of reference is precisely that, not a question of either/or but of shadings. See, for example, the embrace of the critical imperative in the Enlightenment in Michel Foucault's later work (Foucault, 1984b: 43–6).

7. Despite a strong attack on Feminism *per se*, Rene Denfeld (1995: 267) asserts that she is 'an equality feminist' who believes 'women should have the same opportunities and rights as men'.

8. See the debate with bell hooks et al. (panel discussion) in 'Let's get real about feminism: the backlash, the myths, the movement', *MS*, iv: 2, September–October 1993, p. 36.