

Volume 33, Number 2, November 2023

Political ideas

Feminism: what does 'the personal is the political' mean?

One of the most important additions that feminism has made to political thought is to redefine the term 'politics'. This word traditionally referred to an activity carried out by men in the public sphere, involving negotiating power relationships, making decisions and allocating resources. Women were excluded from this world and confined to the private sphere of the home. Power relationships and hierarchy in domestic life were seen as natural, and unrelated to the world of politics.

Feminists have a much broader definition. They argue that politics takes place in all parts of life, including in the private sphere – in the intimate personal relationships between men and women and within family structures. Key thinker Kate Millett defined politics as 'power-structured relationships'. These often-exploitative relationships are therefore not innate but are an example of the artificial construction at the heart of feminism – patriarchy. This system is designed to oppress women and uphold male superiority. As patriarchy is socially constructed, it can and should be reformed or eradicated (depending on the strand of feminism).

Feminists seek to break down the private/public division of life. The phrase 'the personal is the political' was first heard in the 1960s and is part of the second-wave feminism movement. These feminists moved beyond a belief that legal reform would end patriarchy and saw it as a much more deep-rooted and complex phenomenon. However, different types of feminist perceive this phrase in contrasting ways, and it is an area of disagreement between strands.

Liberal feminists

Although liberal feminists agree that patriarchy exists in all areas of life, they have concerns about bringing politics into the home. As liberals, they believe in freedom, human rationality and individualism and they have a fear of state tyranny. What takes place in the domestic sphere is a private matter, as long as it is not exploitative and harmful. Women should be able to choose to live in whichever way they like. The separation of the private and public must be upheld to protect privacy and liberty.

Liberal feminists have therefore focused on legal and institutional change, such as education reform or abortion rights. However, this does not mean that liberal feminists ignore domestic life. Betty Friedan (NB defined as a liberal key thinker by the exam boards) explored the unhappiness and frustration felt by many middle-class American housewives confined to a maternal role. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) she described this as the 'problem with no name', suggesting that this lack of fulfilment could not be discussed, as it was seen as shameful.

Socialist feminists

In contrast, socialist feminists see patriarchy as being at the heart of both the private and public spheres, alongside its close ally, capitalism. Women provide free domestic labour and childrearing, which enables a future and present male workforce to manage long hours, boredom, exploitation and low pay. The private sphere is the place where men can relieve work-related tensions, ensuring that they have the strength to be back at work the next day to be exploited further. The confinement of women to the home also ensures that men need to remain in work to provide for their families.

Key thinker Sheila Rowbotham wrote that patriarchy and capitalism are so interconnected and deep-rooted that to eradicate them, we would need to start in the heart of the family and how we bring up children. Socialist feminists believe strongly that 'the personal is the political' but they see reform or revolution of the capitalist economy as the central (but not the only) way to liberate women.

Radical feminists

'The personal is the political' is very much at the heart of radical feminism. Radicals believe that patriarchy is a systematic and institutionalised system of oppression, deeply rooted in the private, rather than the public, sphere. To tackle it, feminists need to start with the private sphere. The nuclear family and motherhood help to enforce patriarchy, uphold gender stereotypes and trap women in domestic roles. Personal and political life is therefore identical. In order to liberate women, radicals have suggested a range of revolutionary changes to private life, such as political lesbianism, artificial insemination and women-only communities. Key thinker Kate Millett wrote that the rejection of the traditional family was the only way to overcome patriarchy.

Black feminists

Black feminists agree that patriarchy is active in the private sphere. However, they challenge the belief that women all experience oppression in domestic and personal life in the same ways. For example, in a racially-intolerant society, the family can be a place of empowerment and support. Ethnicity, class and sexuality create overlapping systems of oppression. This broadens the definition of 'the personal is the political' to suggest that the phrase should not just be about gender. It is actually much more complex and nuanced, as are women's lives. Key thinker bell hooks argued that second-wave white feminism excluded black women, or presumed that their experiences were identical to white women.

Difference feminists

Within radical feminism there is a strand known as difference feminists. They believe that women and men have fundamentally different natures. This controversial branch argues that sex and gender are connected. For example, women's ability to give birth has an impact on their talents and nature. This can lead some to argue that the unequal relationship between men and women may have some natural elements.

Student tasks

- 1 Create a table to show the view of each of the feminist key thinkers (Gilman, de Beauvoir, Rowbotham, Millett, hooks) in relation to this topic.
- 2 Which of the thinkers would agree on this topic? Who might disagree, and why?

Exam-style questions

- 1 To what extent do all feminists agree that 'the personal is the political'? (Edexcel-style)
- 2 'Feminists all agree that 'the personal is the political'. Analyse and evaluate this statement with reference to the political thinkers that you have studied'. (AQA-style)

Jessica Hardy is the editor of Politics Review online.

This resource is part of POLITICS REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: www.hoddereducation.co.uk/politicsreview