FEMINISM

DEBORAH CAMERON

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 837 8

eISBN 978 1 78283 352 9

Designed by Jade Design *www.jadedesign.co.uk*

Printed and bound in Italy by L.E.G.O. S.p.A.

The paper this book is printed on is certified by the © 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C. (FSC). It is ancient-forest friendly. The printer holds FSC chain of custody SGS-COC-2061

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

'We should all be feminists', proclaimed the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her celebrated 2014 essay of that name. But a survey conducted in Britain a year later by the polling organisation YouGov found that many women were not so sure. Most agreed that feminism was still needed, but around half said they 'would not call themselves feminists', while one in five regarded the word as an insult.

This ambivalence is nothing new. In 1938 the writer Dorothy L. Sayers gave a lecture to a women's society entitled 'Are women human?' She began with this disclaimer:

> Your Secretary made the suggestion that she thought I must be interested in the feminist movement. I replied – a little irritably, I am afraid – that I was not sure I wanted to 'identify myself,' as the phrase goes, with feminism …

This sentiment was common enough at the time to prompt a contemporary of Sayers, the novelist Winifred Holtby, to ask: 'Why, in 1934, are women themselves so often the first to repudiate the movements of the past one hundred and fifty years, which gained for them at least the foundations of political, economic, educational and moral equality?'

Then, as now, one reason for women's reluctance to call themselves feminists was their awareness of the negative

stereotype associated with the label: 'feminist' has a long history of being used to disparage women as dour, unfeminine man-haters. In addition, Sayers was writing in the period immediately after women in Britain had gained the right to vote on the same terms as men. Feminism had come to be perceived as old-fashioned and irrelevant, with nothing to say to the post-suffrage generation. (Something similar would happen again 50 years later, as young women in the 1980s and 1990s rejected their mothers' 'Women's Lib', and media commentators proclaimed the advent of the 'post-feminist' era.)

But another answer to Winifred Holtby's question might be that attitudes to feminism tend to vary depending on what 'feminism' is taken to mean. When people use the word 'feminism', they may be talking about any or all of the following:

- Feminism as an idea: as Marie Shear once put it, 'the radical notion that women are people'.
- Feminism as a collective political project: in the words of bell hooks, 'a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression'.
- Feminism as an intellectual framework: what the philosopher Nancy Hartsock described as 'a mode of analysis … a way of asking questions and searching for answers'.

These different senses have different histories, and the way they fit together is complicated.

Feminism as an idea is much older than the political movement. In Europe, the beginnings of political feminism

are usually located in the late eighteenth century; but a tradition of writing in which women defended their sex against unjust vilification had existed for several centuries before that. The text which inaugurated this tradition was Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written by an educated secular woman in France at the beginning of the fifteenth century. This book made a systematic attempt to rebut the misogynistic arguments about women put forward by male authorities, arguing that the worth of a person does not lie 'in the body according to the sex, but in the perfection of conduct and virtues'. Over the next 400 years, other texts making similar arguments appeared in various parts of Europe. Their authors were relatively few in number, were not part of any collective movement, and did not call themselves feminists (that word did not come into use until the nineteenth century). But they clearly subscribed to 'the radical notion that women are people'. It has been argued that by criticising the masculist bias of what passed, in their time, for knowledge about women, they became, in effect, the first feminist theorists.

Dorothy Sayers also believed that women are people. 'A woman', she wrote, 'is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual.' But that belief was what made Sayers reluctant to embrace feminism as an organised political movement. 'What is repugnant to every human being', she went on, 'is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not as an individual person.' This is the paradox at the heart of feminist politics: in order to assert that they are people, just as

men are, women must unite on the basis of being women. And since women are a very large, internally diverse group, it has always been difficult to unite them. Feminists may be united in their support for abstract ideals like freedom, equality and justice, but they have rarely agreed about what those ideals entail in concrete reality. Historians note that feminism has only ever commanded mass support when its political goals were compatible with many different beliefs and interests.

The movement for women's suffrage, which began in the nineteenth century and peaked in the early twentieth, is a case in point. Two of the central arguments deployed by campaigners rested on different – and theoretically incompatible – views about the nature and social role of women. One view emphasised women's similarity to men in order to argue that they deserved the same political rights, while the other emphasised women's difference from men, arguing that women's distinctive concerns could not be adequately represented by an all-male electorate. The movement's objective – gaining political representation for women – also brought together people whose other interests and allegiances were not just different, but in some cases directly opposed. For instance, in the US there were Black women whose support for the suffragist cause reflected the belief that women's enfranchisement would advance the struggle for racial justice; conversely, there were white feminists who courted southern segregationists by using the racist argument that enfranchising white women would bolster white supremacy. In Britain, where suffrage campaigners included supporters of the Conservative, Liberal and Radical parties,

Conservative women sometimes used the argument that women from the educated and propertied classes had a better claim to the vote than working-class men; socialists by contrast favoured enfranchising all women, as well as all men, since that would strengthen the position of the working class as a whole.

These disparate interest groups all stood to benefit from the extension of voting rights to women, and that was sufficient to bring them into an alliance; but given the depth of their other disagreements, it is not surprising that the alliance did not last. Once the vote had been won, women's differences reasserted themselves, and 'sex solidarity' gave way to conflict. In 1930s Britain, the division between feminists who emphasised women's similarity to men and those who emphasised women's distinctiveness produced two competing approaches which were labelled the 'old' and the 'new' feminism: the first campaigned for equality with men (for instance, equal pay and employment opportunities), while the other concentrated on improving women's situation as wives and mothers (for instance, through the provision of widows' pensions and family allowances).

This kind of pendulum swing has recurred in the history of feminism. The movement keeps being reinvented, partly to meet the challenges of new times, but also because of each new generation's desire to differentiate itself from the one before. This tendency is emphasised in one common way of organising historical narratives about feminism – through the idea that it has advanced in a series of 'waves'. According to this narrative, the 'first wave' began when women came together to demand legal and civil rights in

the mid-nineteenth century, and ended with the victory of the suffrage campaign in the 1920s. The upsurge of feminist activism that began in the US (and quickly spread to other places) in the late 1960s was labelled 'the second wave' by activists who wanted to emphasise the continuity between their own movement and the more radical elements of nineteenth-century feminism. A 'third wave' was proclaimed by a new generation of activists in the early 1990s, who explicitly contrasted their approach with that of the second wave. The renewed interest in feminism that has become visible in the last ten years is sometimes described as a 'fourth wave'.

The 'wave' model, though widely used, has prompted numerous criticisms. One is that it oversimplifies history by implying that each new wave supersedes the previous one, when in fact the legacy of past waves remains visible in the present. Many second-wave creations (like women's studies courses and refuges for women escaping domestic violence) are still part of the contemporary feminist landscape, and there are some feminist organisations (like Britain's Fawcett Society, named after the suffragist Millicent Fawcett) whose approach would be recognisable to women of the first wave, supposing they were still around. The wave model has also been criticised for encouraging over-generalisations about the feminism of each historical moment – as though all the women who came of age politically in the 1960s, or in the 1990s, shared exactly the same beliefs and concerns. In reality they did not: political differences and disagreements (like the ones mentioned earlier within the suffrage movement) have existed in every wave, and among women of every generation. A third objection to the wave model is that

its discontinuous narrative obscures the actual continuity of feminist activism, which didn't just stop in the 1920s and lie dormant until the late 1960s. The suffrage campaign ended when its objective was achieved, but campaigns to advance women's rights continued in other forms and other venues.

This points to a more general difficulty in writing the history of feminism as a political movement: it is, and always has been, decentralised and somewhat amorphous. Its history is not just the history of specifically feminist organisations (like the suffragist groups of the early twentieth century, or America's National Organization for Women, founded in the mid-1960s, or Britain's recently formed Women's Equality Party), but must also take account of all the other movements in which feminist goals have been pursued – for instance, the Labour movement, the co-operative movement, the peace movement and the environmentalist movement. Autonomous feminist politics – organised by women, for women – has often developed out of other political struggles, like the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, the movement to abolish slavery in the nineteenth century, and the civil rights, anti-war and anti-colonialist movements of the twentieth century. Led by their involvement in these campaigns to see their own situation as oppressive, some women broke away to form their own, specifically feminist organisations. Others chose to stay where they were, but that does not mean they were not also feminists.

If we consider feminism in the third sense listed at the beginning of this introduction – as an intellectual framework – the picture is not much more straightforward. Feminism

does not match our usual prototype for a philosophical movement or theoretical current (like, say, 'existentialism' or 'post-structuralism'), because it does not centre on the works of an agreed canon of Great Thinkers. There are some theoretical texts that are widely acknowledged as foundational in the history of modern feminist thought – like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) – but beyond that it would be hard to make a list that every feminist would agree on. 'Feminism' is a label that often comes with a pre-modifier, like 'Black', 'socialist', 'liberal', 'radical' or 'intersectional' (this is not an exhaustive list). Some of the categories overlap – an individual feminist can claim allegiance to several at once – while others are, or are seen as, opposed. On some issues there is relatively little disagreement among feminists, but on others the differences can be stark.

So far, then, my answer to the question 'What is feminism?' could be summed up in the formula 'It's complicated'. Feminism is multifaceted, diverse in both its historical forms and in its political and intellectual content: it's an umbrella, sheltering beliefs and interests that may be not just different but incompatible with one another. (And some of those beliefs are also held by people who deny they are feminists at all.) Is there anything that holds it all together, any set of basic principles to which all self-identified feminists subscribe? Many writers have concluded that the answer is 'no', and that we should speak not of 'feminism', singular, but of 'feminisms', plural. Attempts to universalise usually produce definitions that are too general

to be helpful: for instance, 'feminism is an active desire to change women's position in society' immediately invites the question: 'change it from what to what?' (It might also invite the criticism that overtly anti-feminist groups also manifest 'an active desire to change women's position in society'.)

In this book I will aim to reflect and explore the complexity of feminism(s), but since we need to start from somewhere, I will start by offering a minimal definition which is slightly more informative than the very general one quoted above. Feminism undoubtedly comes in many different varieties, but all of them, arguably, rest on two fundamental beliefs:

1. That women currently occupy a subordinate position in society; that they suffer certain injustices and systemic disadvantages because they are women.
2. That the subordination of women is neither inevitable nor desirable: it can and should be changed through political action.

Feminists hold a range of views on the reasons why women occupy a subordinate position in society, how their subordination is maintained, who benefits from it and what its consequences are; but whatever their disagreements on these points, they all agree that women's subordination is real, and that it has existed in some form in the majority of human societies for which we have any record. Anti-feminists, by contrast, may dispute that women are subordinated: some supporters of the contemporary men's rights movement claim that women in modern Western

societies have become the dominant sex. Other anti-feminist ideologies acknowledge the subordinate status of women, but justify it on the grounds that it is ordained by God and/or nature. Rejecting such justifications is another fundamental feminist principle. Though feminists may disagree on what changes they want to see in the position of women, all believe that change is necessary, and all assume that it is possible.

Although I have been using the generic term 'women', this account should not be taken to imply that 'women' form a single, internally homogeneous group who all suffer exactly the same injustices or disadvantages. Most currents of contemporary feminism incorporate the principle that Kimberlé Crenshaw labelled 'intersectionality', which acknowledges that women's experiences are shaped not only by their sex, but also by other aspects of their identity and social positioning, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality and social class. Different systems of dominance and subordination, such as sexism and racism, intersect to produce different outcomes for different groups of women, and not infrequently conflicts of interest between them. Though feminists believe that the subordinate status of women has negative consequences for all women, those consequences are not identical in every case.

The principle of intersectionality offers a way of thinking about the relationships among differently situated women within a single society. But we also have to think about the situations of women across national and regional boundaries: we live in a globalised world, and feminism today is a global movement. That point will be reflected in

the following chapters, but in a book as short as this it is impossible to do justice to all of feminism's many regional and national forms. I should acknowledge, therefore, that my main focus will be on the Western (and more particularly, Anglo-American) feminism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is itself an internally diverse tradition (and one that has become increasingly aware of the need to think globally); but it is not the only one, and in making it my main reference point (a choice that reflects my own location) I am not suggesting that it is or should be the main reference point for all feminists everywhere.

The story of feminism is full of complications. The label 'feminist' has never been actively embraced by all women (or even the majority of women), and there have always been conflicts among the women who did embrace it. Yet feminism has survived: reports of its death always turn out to have been exaggerated. Its core idea – 'the radical notion that women are people' – is one that few people today would openly dissent from. But the devil is in the detail of what follows from that idea in practice. The answers feminists have given to that question are the subject of the rest of this book.