

Wimmin are from Mars, women are from Venus

**Though chauvinist men remain their common enemy,
feminists have become fiercely divided between old-style
radicals and new-style pragmatists**

IN THE beginning, there was the "first wave", the feminists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who fought for women's suffrage. Then there was the second wave, the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s who fought for equality before the law and equality of opportunity.

These two waves destroyed, at least in the West, the old belief that women were unsuited to many activities performed outside the home. Not long ago, it was argued without embarrassment that if a man was paid more than a woman for doing the same job, it was because he had a family to support; that if a stewardess was fired at the age of 30, she shouldn't want to be flying anyway; and that women just weren't cut out to be cops or marathon runners.

That these arguments have been resolved in women's favour is one of the biggest social changes of our times. In effect, the debate about whether women should have equal pay, opportunities and responsibilities is over in the West. The battle for Women's rights is won. In this sense, everybody is a feminist now.

After that victory, however, things got complicated. In Britain and continental Europe cracks began to appear in the feminist movement. Scandinavian feminists argued about whether a quota for women in parliament was an innovation or an insult; in Britain, feminists had similar worries about women's-only book prizes. But it is in the United States, where feminists took their ideas to the most absurd limits, that the movement is most deeply divided. So this article will concentrate on the fierce, indeed bitchy, arguments in America about the future of feminism.

The turning point in America was the defeat in 1982 of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have made equality of the sexes a constitutional principle. The fight for the ERA had had the effect of keeping the women's movement together, and when it faltered, splits developed. At a conference on the politics of sexuality at Barnard College in New York a week before the ERA finally died, for instance, things turned ugly when feminists who saw heterosexuality as a form of collusion with the "patriarchy" (in this view, clitoral orgasm is the only authentic expression of "gynocentric sexuality") had a well-publicised fight with those who did not see orgasm as a political issue.

It was the shape of things to come. In the 1980s feminism became preoccupied with "identity politics". This meant a woman identifying herself according to certain categories—straight, lesbian, sado-masochist, Marxist, disabled, fat, and so on—as if such labels were sufficient to define a person's identity, social role and rights. In a not untypical example of the genre, Gloria Anzaldua is described in a collection of essays as "a Chicana *tejana* dyke-feminist poet, fiction writer, teacher and culture theorist." Well, fine, but what is this supposed to tell us about Ms Anzaldua?

Big difference

The most intellectually audacious of the feminist "isms" is "difference feminism", which argues that women have a different, and better, way of thinking, acting and being than men. Difference feminists reckon that women are equal to men (thus the relative shortage of female physicists and audi-

tors is held to be evidence of sexism) except when they are superior (thus the relative shortage of female muggers).

Moreover, according to the difference feminists, men are much worse than is generally recognised. Rape, they say, is the central metaphor for male-female relations and men's relationship with society, while pornography is a social weapon to subordinate women. Such reasoning led the National Organisation for Women (NOW), America's largest women's group, to proclaim in 1992 that American society regarded sexual assault as a cultural norm. "Feminist consciousness is consciousness of *victimisation*," argued Sandra Bartky, an influential theorist.

For difference feminists, the solution to women's inferior status is to reorder society away from patriarchy and towards "female values". These they define as co-operation, collegiality, intuition and niceness, as opposed to the "male values" of competition, hierarchy, rationality and violence. An unwittingly humorous account of the establishment of *Rag*, a feminist journal at Harvard, reported that the founders "proposed a method of consensus for decision-making and suggested that the positions of facilitator, time keeper and vibes watcher (whose job it was to monitor the tension in the room and notice if people were being silenced) should rotate on a voluntary basis." In a result that could surprise only an Ivy League-educated radical feminist, this proved an unworkable basis on which to run a publication. *Rag* was shortly to close.

American women notched up many achievements in the 1980s. They stormed the professions, started businesses by the million, attended university in greater numbers than men, narrowed the earnings gap, and even got men to do the laundry once in a while. A reader would hardly know that from feminist literature, which came to be defined by its excesses. The movement's least appealing adherents grabbed the most attention, and the feminist establishment—institutions like the National Women's Studies Association, NOW, *Ms* magazine, the Fund for a Feminist Majority and various state-funded commissions—failed to restrain them. Supposedly serious feminists argued, to audiences which did not snigger, that Newton's "Principles of Mechanics" and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony were rape fantasies.

As Feminism became associated with humourlessness and hairy legs, the term became a pejorative one. By the early 1990s only a third of college women called themselves feminists—and this at a time when there were more than 600 women's studies programmes on American campuses. While feminist scholars were producing strikingly creative work in history, medicine, Bible studies and other fields, many women's studies programmes were explicitly ideological and intellectually vapid.

One syllabus explained a course in feminist theory this way: "We will begin with feminist challenges to the inadequacy of Eurocentric male epistemologies, analytic categories and the masculinist world views which have structured the public world ... We will initiate our inquiry by demystifying malestream (this is not a misspelling) 'theory', 'reason', and 'science'."

The backlash against backlash

Many feminists attributed the failure of so many women to embrace feminism to base ingratitude or to "backlash". This is the idea broached in 1991 by Susan Faludi, a favourite theorist of the feminist establishment, that a host of American industries, from lingerie-makers to television producers, were trying to undermine women's rights. Though the evidence for

the backlash hypothesis is dubious—women, remember, had advanced on all fronts—the idea has become a shorthand way for the feminist establishment to dismiss criticism. Anyone who dares to challenge the reality of backlash is accused of participating in it.



In fact, a real backlash is underway, not so much against Feminism as against its excesses. The challengers call themselves power feminists, equity feminists or liberal feminists. They are often young, sassy and successful. Ms Faludi dismissively calls them "pod feminists", suggesting that, like alien pods in a science-fiction film, they are evil invaders of the women's movement.

The pod feminists are led by writers and academics like Karen Lehrman, Anne Roiphe, Wendy Kaminer, Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia, Cathy Young, Danielle Crittenden, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Katie Roiphe (daughter of Anne), Christine Hoff Sommers and Rene Denfeld—a roll call to raise hisses at any conference on gender. They don't agree on everything, of course, but they are fundamentally sympathetic to capitalism and American institutions. They believe in individual rights, personal responsibility and equality before the law. They think group rights are for wimps and that vaginal orgasms are okay. And they wonder, if men are the enemy, what does that make the women who love them?

More specifically, the Independent Women's Forum in Washington, DC, a leading pod group, campaigns for allowing single-sex education in state schools (on the grounds that this is good for girls), flexible working hours for women, mandatory AIDS testing for pregnant women (which traditional Feminist groups oppose) and repeal of affirmative action preferences (on the grounds that women don't need them, thanks very much). That may not be as expansive an agenda as overthrowing the patriarchy and feminising the economy, but it is an agenda of sorts.

Ms Faludi has attacked the pods for taking money from conservative foundations and for publishing in *Commentary*, the *New Republic* and other centre-right journals. The pods don't care. The fact is, they argue, the reigning women's organisations are so overwhelmingly left-wing that they have to be attacked from the right. In 1992, for example, the platform of the 21st Century Party, a women's party funded by NOW, called for gender and racial quotas in politics and business, pay schemes that reward the "intrinsic worth" of jobs, and nationally subsidised day care. Is it mandatory, the pods ask, for a woman who calls herself feminist to subscribe to these goals? Wouldn't the women's movement be strengthened if it didn't shut out the 37% of women who voted for the Republican presidential candidate, Bob Dole?

In the past, the answer from the feminist establishment has been no. Gloria Steinem, Founder of *Ms*, once referred to Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, a moderate conservative, as a "female impersonator". Women's studies departments tend to be Republican-free. This ideological intolerance, say the pods, is a large part of the reason why

many women who are sympathetic to feminism are nevertheless unwilling to describe themselves as feminists. The point of feminism, they argue, should not be to impose a set of policy preferences but to broaden the choices that women are able to make. Too bad if some of these choices—to read pornography, for example, or to enter the Miss America pageant—may not meet with NOW's approval.

Unsurprisingly, the pods hate difference feminism. A feminism that believes in the moral superiority of women, they say, is just a post-modern way of dressing up distinctly old-fashioned stereotypes. Middle-class Victorians also believed women to be more nurturing and compassionate—and used this as a reason to keep the little woman at home. The following passage sounds a lot like a statement of difference feminism; in fact, it is from a letter quoted in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, arguing that college women should be specifically educated to be housewives:

It would seem that if women are to restore their self-respect, they must reverse the tactics of the older Feminism which indignantly denied inherent differences in the intellectual and emotional tendencies of men and women. Only by recognising and insisting upon the importance of such differences can women save themselves, in their own eyes, of conviction as inferiors.

Finally, the pods take issue with what they see as the importance of victimhood in much feminist thinking. Emphasising victimisation, they say, makes women appear permanently inferior. For example, broadening the definition of date rape to include any sex act which the woman later regrets—a definition of which many feminists approve—means that the man becomes responsible for determining whether his lover means "no" even if she is apparently enthusiastic at the time. The implication is that women are not capable of making a sexual choice, communicating it and accepting the consequences—hardly an assertion of equality.

In sum, the pod feminists have attacked many of the totems of orthodox feminism. This has angered Ms Steinem, Ms Faludi and others, but it has also provided a breath of fresh air to a movement that was choking on its smug certainties. The establishment feminists are stuck with an angry, state-driven, quota-ridden 1960s mind-set that is looking dowdy.

At the moment, with its base in the universities and public administration, establishment feminism is still stronger. But the pods are winning the argument, and are having more fun with it, too. Their pens positively drip bile as they ridicule those who, for example, consider hanging a Goya painting to be sexual harassment.

But attacking such excesses is relatively easy. Do the pods have a philosophy which is gripping enough to revive the movement? They agree that women have problems—ranging from family-unfriendly workplaces and absent fathers to uncomfortable shoes and a peer review process in the sciences that may discriminate against them—but think that these are best addressed individually. There is no really big idea here, except to keep plugging away. Even as women go from strength to strength, the Feminist movement is still short of a new rallying cry; and for all their appeal to younger women, the pods are not the third wave of feminists.

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