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Feminism

Left feminism and the free choice debate

- Features - Sexual politics -

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Underneath many of the debates in the contemporary feminist movement is a hidden discussion about free choice versus structural impact. To put it simplistically, there's two sides: those who defend women's freedom of choice, and don't want (to see) any limitation on this choice, and on the other side those who stress the impact of societal structures and the way those structures can limit and hide our choices.

In reality many people try to combine both aspects in their theory and praxis. However, this isn't easy and there is a lot of misunderstanding and bad blood between both sides. Are these positions actually that different or is this mostly due to misunderstanding?

Structures and choices

The feminist movement has a goal of liberating women from oppression, from structural (power) inequality. This means that right now there is no equality, that women have less access to services, power, participation, possibilities for self development, safety and self-determination.

The existence of feminism implies both that women can make choices but are also restricted by structures. Well, that's solved then. We could ask ourselves whether we even need any more debate

Things look more grim in reality however. Debates about free choice versus the impact of patriarchal structures are causing problems in many feminist issues: unemployment, abortion, the Islamic veil, prostitution, surrogacy, work and poverty. The discussion is often quite problematic, simplistic and with a lot of hostility on all sides. It's our opinion that this underlying issue needs a closer analysis in order to be able to progress with current feminism.

These concepts are woven into the left as well. Marxists analyse capitalism, a pervasive structure that influences life in all aspects. This is often – wrongly – interpreted as Marxists saying these structures are completely determining: the substructure – the material conditions in which we live – determines the superstructure – how we think. Of course there is still something as “choice” – otherwise there would not be a resistance movement against capitalism.

Some examples

Unemployment

Recently we're seeing renewed neoliberal attacks on groups with little power. Unemployed people are accused of not doing enough to find jobs [1]. They supposedly choose to be unemployed. The discourse about free choice is in this case simply a liberal excuse to hide structural unemployment. In the neoliberal “active welfare state” [This is a term used in Belgium, “actieve welvaartsstaat”, it's the latest mix of a dying welfare state with some protection for workers, with the neoliberal blaming-the-victim discourse that is undermining this at the same time.] – with the right words you can sell anything – it's the individual that has to do it, empower him/herself, rise to the challenge, give 110% and so on: are you part of the winners or the losers.

Abortion

So is a free choice discourse always bad? Not necessarily. With regards to abortion the feminist movement as a whole stands behind the idea that women choose, decide about their own bodies. We don't want anyone deciding except the pregnant woman herself.

On the other hand, here, too, structures have an impact: socio-economic structures (being unemployed/poor can be a handicap for raising a child), the family as cornerstone of society (raising a child by yourself is not an easy thing to do), ideological structures like the Catholic church... In Belgium e.g. the latter has sabotaged the debate for decades, stopped laws, sent out horrible propaganda against women's choices...

When people "choose" – it can go both ways – to ignore women's choices, when women feel guilty about abortion, you see societal structures and ideology working on people. Free choice in this debate is more a principle than a reality: it's a goal we want to achieve. Even the most basic rights to self-determination about your own body aren't guaranteed in this world.

Veils

On the Islamic veil you see a similar debate. In Belgium a number of cities have banned wearing a veil for civil servants, it's also been banned in the state schools. [2] The feminist movement in Belgium is still divided about this. Muslim women claim the right to wear a veil, as an aspect of self-determination and religious freedom. Part of the feminist movement takes the same view on this as with abortion: the women decides / should decide. Other people shouldn't have any say about what women wear.

Some feminists take a different stance and point to the impact of monotheistic religions, whose origins are patriarchal and who have been telling – and forcing – women for centuries how to behave and what to wear. From this group comes the argument about "false consciousness": that women have been indoctrinated by religion and that's the reason they want to wear the veil. Many do not accept there can be multiple reasons and motivations for wearing the veil.

To make matters (much) worse, this debate is not always about people having honest discussions about different meanings and causes. There is a lot of racism involved and feminism is often abused by politicians looking for cheap ways of getting votes. A lot of politicians who have never done anything for women are suddenly feminist activists trying to protect women's rights from religion. The debate does not exactly take place in a neutral, non-racist, safe environment.

Prostitution

Prostitution remains a heavily debated topic with many sides and problems. On one side, there are johns [3] explaining that with regards to prostitution – and sex – it's actually women that have the power and control men with their sexuality. [4] The men don't have any choice, they are driven by their genetic inbred drives and manipulated by women. This is, let's be honest, a very transparent attempt to avoid any kind of responsibility. [5] The prostitutes are depicted here as the people in the interaction that do have free choice, and the johns are the victims.

Postmodern feminists – *bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble* [very surprised to find themselves together] – are in practice on the same side and talk continuously about the agency of prostitutes, the problematizing of critical remarks about prostitution and trafficking, and so on.

Sociologists and feminists in the field talk about the connection with economic poverty, patriarchal ideology, problematic social circumstances up to and including force and the link with trafficking, that all impact prostitutes.

The importance of the context in these debates

Free choice or structural impact, obviously it's not so simple. In every context we need to look at reality and not just abstract principles. That's what left feminism is about: consistently taking reality – material conditions included – as a foundation for politics. Anne Philips, who came to speak on a women's day in 2011, made a speech [\[6\]](#) where she explained her belief that the choice / structure conflict needs to be examined anew in every context.

Those debates are difficult enough, but what makes them even more difficult is the context in which they take place. Several layers of context are interacting with each other: direct human interactions and the societal structures in which they take place and which produce many forms of inequality.

Let's take as concrete example the currently ongoing debate about prostitution in Europe. Mostly this comes down to two sides: those in favour of a general legalisation – which includes legalization of the pimps – like in the Netherlands and those that defend a mixed model with legalising the selling and criminalising the buying of sex, like in Sweden. Both camps have their well-meaning proponents and opponents.

Until the women's movement in Sweden [\[7\]](#) started promoting the idea of a focus on the "customer", the debate was largely formulated in terms of the free choice (or not) of the prostitute. No one was talking about the free choice of the customer to pay and abuse women. Now the debate is sometimes reversed: feminists think that men should make different choices. [\[8\]](#)

On the other hand the structures that drive women to prostitution still exist. Prostitution is also an industry with billions of profits for a select few, and those profiting from it logically try to ensure its continued existence. For pimps and traffickers, legalisation is a much better option than criminalising the customers & pimps, as shown in the results of over ten years of legalisation in the Netherlands. [\[9\]](#) Of course no matter what the laws they will look for ways to continue their activities, that might not be an argument for or against certain options but it does point to the dangers of a blanket legalisation.

And where is the prostitute in this debate. This rises above the question of (free) choice or not. Free at least it's not: a choice because of poverty, which is often the case, is not a free choice. Poverty is a structure, not an individual problem. The battle against (forced) prostitution necessitates a battle against poverty. It also needs to give prostitutes a way out and a road to alternatives.

The capitalist patriarchy that we have to live in has led to a disturbing co-mingling of prostitution, human trafficking and drug trafficking. Sex forced by lack of money and by physical force, can they still be separated in principle and in practice? Can we, should we in light of this choice/structure discussion, continue to separate choice and force in such a simplistic way?

It's self evident that we side with prostitutes as a group that is exploited and oppressed by sexism. We'll continue the discussion on this specific subject in another article.

Oppression and raising consciousness

When anyone practicing radical politics points out that free choice is a fairytale, and that all our actions are constrained within certain material conditions, this does not equate to saying we're all infantilized, little drones unable to make decisions for ourselves. It just means we're not all floating around in a cultural vacuum making decisions completely unaffected by structural issues like systemic economic inequality, racism and sexism. [\[10\]](#)

Marxism has this concept of a *class an sich* and *class für sich*. This is about the working class but is also interesting when applied to women as a group. Initially the working class is a class *an sich*, class that simply exists, of which most members are not aware they form a class. From this view stems the idea of a "false consciousness".

A class means a group with its own position and needs, in this case these are in conflict and opposed to the needs of the class of capitalists.

But, especially when people are not conscious of this, they often take over the prevailing values of the oppressors – which are available everywhere and presented as normal and average.

That's why we as a class are so sensitive to propaganda from the rich and the nationalists, the criminalizing of unemployed and minority groups and so forth.

When more and more workers become conscious of the oppression we experience and the fact that we are a group with interests that objectively conflict with those of the capitalists, we become a class *für sich*. That class like its organisations will always be heterogeneous, that does not preclude being a class and fighting our oppression together. This is the Marxist concept of class-consciousness.

As an analogy, let's apply this analysis to women. Women can be seen as a class *an sich*, because women – like workers – share a common condition: a reality of patriarchal oppression. The goal of feminism then, is to develop this group to a class *für sich* that can act, well formed and organized, to end this oppression. Once again, that women are a class does not mean it is not heterogeneous with subgroups with different experiences, views, analysis and actions.

Paternalism and white knights

It's clear that there is a danger here for paternalism. Many of us have had the kind of conversations with a socialist guy droning on and on about how he's going to tell you exactly how everything works. Politicians say they want to liberate women "somewhere far away, certainly not this country (unless these women wear veils)" and even use it to justify wars. NGO's – the new colonialists – wave money around to force people into following western policies. [\[11\]](#)

The idea that others know better and should decide how you should think and act, isn't really something that leads to liberation, no matter how well the intentions. So how can we handle things differently?

The personal is political

Becoming aware of oppressive gender mechanisms is only possible through your own experiences, conversations with others, further reflection... Within feminism there's always been a major tendency that sees consciousness

raising as a very important aspect, organising consciousness raising groups both explicitly and more implicitly.

Discovering all this together lead – e.g. in the feminist second wave – to creating theory, the kind of theory discovered from practice instead of ivory tower approaches. The intent was always to talk, discuss and discover together, not to reprimand individual women or holding ourselves up to some kind of perfect standard – which we then fail which makes us “bad”. This approach is summarised in the famous slogan *the personal is political*.

Consciousness-raising is the major technique of analysis, structure of organization, method of practice, and theory of social change of the women’s movement. In consciousness raising, often in groups, the impact of male dominance is concretely uncovered and analyzed through the collective speaking of women’s experience, from the perspective of that experience.

– Catharine A. MacKinnon

It’s our opinion that this method deserves renewed attention and that it can serve as a better framework for solving problems and building up a feminist movement. This way we can start from a multitude of perspectives and form a foundation for both a broad reach as well as a solid resistance against the sexist hegemony. Importantly, this approach also strengthens solidarity between women. [\[12\]](#)

Conclusion

We cannot simply make an *a priori* choice between a focus on choices or on structural impact. For a truly progressive politics we’ll have to analyse and discuss each concrete situation in all its aspects.

For many years liberalism has triumphed in the feminist movements of the West, a movement weakened with the end of the second wave that could no longer effectively resist the flood of neoconservatism and neoliberalism.

Liberal feminism can only take us so far. The myopic focus on “free” choice is not a solution, but neither is the paternalistic prescribing of perfect principles and blueprints. We believe a solid focus on material reality combined with the knowledge and solidarity gained through consciousness raising groups is the best way to be able to work together for a broad and radical movement.

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[1] 1There are much less jobs then unemployed, e.g. in Belgium about seven times less jobs then unemployed people, less, meaning not everyone can have a job under a capitalist system. Honesty is of course not an aspect of these attacks.

[2] The state school officials stated they banned the veil to promote diversity.

[3] There are no neutral terms for the men who visit prostitutes. One could say customer, which sounds nice and clean and hides any power relations. Or rapist. Or abuser. We’ll go for john here.

[4] The same rhetoric, in fact, as used by so-called “men’s rights activists” who claim that men as a group are oppressed these days, not women.

[Dutch reference](#) and [here](#).

[5] Evolutionary psychology seems an area of pseudoscience particularly devoted to legitimizing this kind of nonsense.

[6] Her speech (in English) can be read [here](#).

[7] Gunilla Ekberg, 2004 and updated. *The Swedish Law That Prohibits the Purchase of A Sexual Service: Best Practices for Prevention of Prostitution and Trafficking in Human Beings*. This article is an updated version of the article, "The Swedish Law That Prohibits the Purchase of Sexual Services: Best Practices for Prevention of Prostitution and Trafficking in Human Beings," published in the October 2004 issue of the journal *Violence against Women* 2004; 10:1187-1218.

[8] This same reversal is also visible in the current thinking about violence and street harassment: it used to be – and often still is – women that were asked to dress modestly, don't go out alone, don't go out late... These days the women's movement has shifted this to a focus on the criminals: abusers should make different choices, to put it simplistically. People with more power can stay out of sight too easily, and it's to the credit of the feminist movement that these kinds of hidden mechanisms are analysed.

[9] KLPD (Korps Landelijke Politiediensten) – Dienst Nationale Recherche (July 2008). *Schone schijn, de signalering van mensenhandel in de vergunde prostitutiesector*. Driebergen, Nederland; Karin Werkman, 2009. *Sex trafficking in Europe: Prostitution regimes and trafficking victims* Thesis voor MSc Humanitarian Action, University College Dublin.

[10] Meagan Tyler, <http://feministcurrent.com/8347/10-....>

[11] Een kritische historisch blik op campagnes tegen vrouwenbesnijdenis en het recht op interventie, An Van Raemdonck, juli 2013, Uitgelezen (Rosadoc)

[12] See also bell hooks, who wrote about this e.g. in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*.