

Feminism

'The personal is political' debate

Moyra Grant

Moyra Grant reviews the changing language and focus of feminist theory

Exam links



The AQA and Edexcel specifications focus on debates about the nature of feminism, core feminist values and feminist ideas and thinkers.

Ayree

Feminism, broadly, is the belief that women are systematically disadvantaged because of their sex and gender, and that these disadvantages can and should be overcome. As a political creed it goes back at least to the first wave of the eighteenth century, when liberal writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft campaigned for equality of property rights, the franchise and educational access.

For many twentieth-century second-wave feminists, this did not go far enough, and new strands of thinking emerged, notably socialist and radical feminism. Second-wave radical feminism conceptualised 'the personal is political' debate.

Radical feminism

Radical feminism emerged in the 1960s, and went beyond liberals and socialists to argue the primacy of gender divisions over all other social schisms, including class and race. Radical feminism differs from previous feminist theories, which sought to

Half a century on from its initial coinage, the slogan was used as part of a protest over the confirmation of Justice Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court in 2018

the male is 'head of the household', has always been the first and most important power relationship in the human social system. Their slogan, 'the personal is political', therefore refers to private patriarchal power. Millet describes this as a social structure where 'that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male' (1968, *Sexual Politics*).

Radical feminists argue that, because of their shared experiences of oppression, all women are united in a common 'sisterhood'. They argue that a transformation of relationships in the private sphere of home and family is the prerequisite of wider social and economic equality. For them, the priority is consciousness-raising among women about topics such as women's personal relationships, their roles in marriage, their feelings about childbearing and childrearing, sexist language and behaviour, pornography and domestic violence. This will lead towards a sexual revolution that will transform gender roles and eliminate private, and hence public, patriarchy.

Made not born – Here Gilman + De Beauvoir are radical. Although 'the personal is political' was conceptualised in the 1960s, earlier writers had commented on how women's private lives were fundamental to their oppression. Half a century earlier, Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that marriage was akin to prostitution (as women were reliant on their sexual assets to gratify their husbands, who in turn would support them financially). Gilman also argued that gender roles were constructed at a young age and proposed solutions such as gender-neutral toys. Simone de Beauvoir developed this idea, declaring that 'women are made, not born', which asserted that women were socialised into gender roles.

Counter-arguments
Liberal feminism
Liberal feminists focus only on pursuing reforms in the public sphere, such as enacting laws to prevent discrimination and promote equal opportunities. They believe that encroaching on the private sphere may amount to creeping totalitarianism.

Patriarchy in the private sphere creates the 'housewife' role, which confines many women to the home and therefore largely excludes them from equal access to the public sphere of work, economics and politics. Patriarchy is therefore the root of sexual inequality throughout the whole of society and, indeed, throughout human history. Male domination in both the private and public realms is institutionalised, systemic and pervasive.

Liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan were influenced by liberal thinkers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, who were wary of the state encroaching on the private life of the citizen. Liberal feminism therefore focused on discrimination in the public sphere of society.

extend largely male-made and male-centred political ideologies to address the issue of female inequality. Patriarchy is a key concept in all feminist theories, but above all in radical feminist theory. Patriarchy literally means 'rule by the father'. It is usually taken to refer to a system of male domination and female subordination throughout society as a whole.

'The personal is political'

Radical feminism believes that patriarchy derives from the traditional family system, i.e. the way in which economic responsibilities and domestic duties have been separated between men and women. Radical feminists point to the division between 'public man' and 'private woman' — that is, between the male as breadwinner in the workplace and the female as mother and housewife in the home. They argue that this domestic arrangement is, crucially, a power relationship, since it makes the woman economically dependent upon the man — hence 'the personal is political'.

Radical feminists have, therefore, crucially redefined the concept of 'politics' away from the conventional meaning of public governance, to embrace private and personal power relationships.

Writers such as Carol Hanisch, Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone have argued that patriarchy in the personal and private sphere of home and family, where

Therefore radical feminists — unlike liberal feminists — reject the public-private split, arguing instead that the private and public spheres of society are inextricably linked because private patriarchy creates public patriarchy. They also argue strongly that the social segregation between 'public man' and 'private woman' is unnatural, unnecessary and undesirable.

The personal is the political

Many radical feminists prefer to stress that 'the personal is the political' to emphasise that the conventional meaning of the word 'political' (governments, policies, laws) is secondary or even irrelevant to them. What their slogan emphatically does not mean, therefore, is the idea of bringing the state, laws or government policies into shaping or dictating domestic family relationships and arrangements, such as 'wages for housework'. This is a common misunderstanding. Nor does it mean individual or personal solutions to collective problems, such as deciding whether to shave one's body hair or wear make-up.

Table 1 Differences within second-wave feminism

Liberal	Socialist	Radical
Individualist	Collectivist (class)	Collectivist (sisterhood)
Public sphere	Public and private	Private and public
Reformist	Class revolution	Sexual revolution

personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.

Hanisch, C. (1970) 'The Personal is Political', Notes From the Second Year: Women's Liberation

Agree with socialist feminists.

Disagree with socialist feminists.

Disagree.

Agree

Disagree.

Disagree.

Feminism

David Tuck provides exam-based advice and support to accompany Moyra Grant's article on pp. 18–20

Edexcel-style Paper 2

To what extent do feminists reject the public-private divide? You must use appropriate thinkers you have studied to support your answer and consider any differing views in a balanced way. (24 marks)

Introduction

It is important to define what is meant by 'feminism', briefly explaining its various branches. Key thinkers mentioned in this 'Exam eye' are highlighted in bold.

Define what is meant by the 'public-private divide' and be clear that different branches of feminism have differing views on this concept. You may wish to signal what your final judgement will be in the introduction, but if you do, be careful not to be drawn into a detailed explanation.

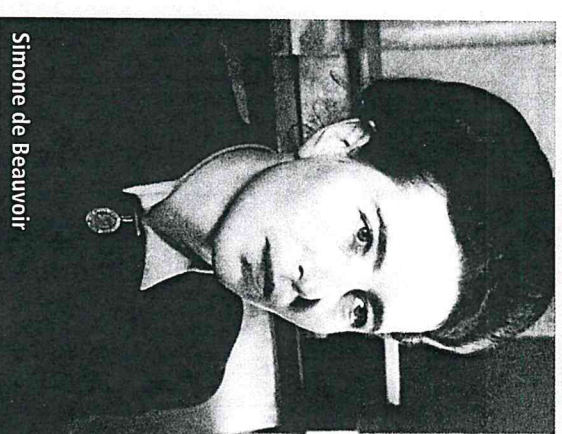
Main body of essay

As the article explains, second-wave radical feminists such as Kate Millet reject the public-private split, arguing instead that the private and public spheres of society are inextricably linked because private patriarchy creates public patriarchy. Be clear to define what you mean by private and public, and make sure that you give a definition of patriarchy.

Liberal feminists support the public-private split, as they are wary of the state interfering in individual private lives. Instead they focus on the reform of the public sphere of society. The article gives examples of proposed reforms by first-wave feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. Second-wave liberal feminist Betty Friedan also argued for public sphere reform, principally workplace equality of opportunity.

The specification does not list any liberal feminists as key thinkers, but the examiner will be impressed if you can mention Wollstonecraft and Friedan.

Although the public-private debate began in earnest in the 1960s, earlier



Simone de Beauvoir



Sheila Rowbotham

writers had commented on how women's private lives were fundamental to their oppression. The article discusses the ideas of key thinkers Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Simone de Beauvoir. A* answers will demonstrate that the ideas of Perkins Gilman and de Beauvoir informed second wave radical feminism.

Socialist feminists, such as Sheila Rowbotham, argue that gender inequality is rooted in the public sphere of the capitalist economy, which benefits from perpetuating the traditional nuclear family structure. Socialist feminists think radical feminism's solution of raising awareness among women of their oppression is too passive, and prefer the raising of a revolutionary class consciousness for both women and men.

Third- and fourth-wave feminism, inspired by bell hooks and intersectionality, acknowledge the general validity of the public-private divide but argue that it is too narrow in its scope. There are now a plethora of contemporary feminist strands that examine the public-private divide from intersectional viewpoints (race, class, sexuality etc.) rather than the more generic definitions of second-wave radical feminists such as Kate Millet.

Conclusion

Try and evaluate which strands of feminism are most defined by 'the personal is political', and which are not. In order to be analytical and evaluative, you should ensure that you consider how feminism has changed over time. Try to mention all the different branches of feminism and the key thinkers in your conclusion.

Your conclusion must demonstrate evidence of evaluation and address the question. Do not sit on the fence: come to a judgement and explain how you reached this view. If you find yourself running out of time on an essay, make sure you still write a conclusion so that you can demonstrate analysis and judgement.

Exam tips

- Write an introduction to establish the debates of the essay.
- Define the different types of feminism.
- Mention key thinkers and their ideas.
- Demonstrate that you understand how/why feminism has changed over time.

David Tuck is head of politics at Stamford School and an experienced author.



Many feminists argue that gender stereotyping assigns roles such as 'housework' as a 'natural' female occupation

PoliticsReviewExtras

For an AQA Exam eye on feminism, see: www.hoddereducation.co.uk/politicsreviewextras

discuss their own oppression) as mere 'personal therapy' or 'navel-gazing'. Instead, socialist feminists advocate the promotion of revolutionary class consciousness for both women and men.

After the second wave

Feminist theory has progressed to 'third wave' and even 'fourth wave' — emphasising, in the 1990s, the intersectional inequalities of gender, class, religion, race, age and disability (stressed, for example, by the radical black American feminist bell hooks). In the twenty-first century, the opportunities for feminist campaigning and collaboration have grown through social media, blogs and online forums. However, these movements often embrace and advance the second-wave schools of feminism. A multiplicity of other strands have also emerged, including black, eco,

difference, lesbian, anarchist, atheist, fat, rainbow, lipstick, trans, post-modern and many others.

Radical feminism deliberately echoed Marxist theory in its revolutionary aspirations and language of 'consciousness raising' and 'seizing control of the means of reproduction'. However, in the 1970s it was unique in putting sexual inequality front and centre within political philosophy, and in redefining the concept of 'politics' itself. Despite its many opponents — both feminists and anti-feminists — the radical feminist slogan that 'the personal is political' has done much to shift the language and focus of feminist theory over the last 50 years.

Activities

Class debate
Are the roots of sexual inequality mainly biological, economic or cultural?

Class activity

- In one paragraph each, write a summary of:
- the liberal critique of socialist feminism
 - the socialist critique of radical feminism
 - the radical critique of liberal feminism

Moyra Grant is an experienced writer and teacher of politics.

Exam-style questions

- 'Feminism is defined by the belief that "the personal is political"'. Analyse and evaluate this statement with reference to the feminist thinkers you have studied. (25 marks, AQA-style)
 - To what extent do feminists reject the public-private divide? You must use appropriate thinkers you have studied to support your answer and consider any differing views in a balanced way. (24 marks, Edexcel-style)
- See p. 21 for guidance on how to answer Question 2.