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Book Review - Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics (b. hooks)

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Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics. 2000

hooks, bell. Cambridge, MA: South End Press. 123 p., \$12.60, paperback. ISBN: [0896086283](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0896086283).



"Everything we do in life is rooted in theory" (19).

Taking a decidedly radical feminist position, bell hooks, the writing voice of Gloria Watkins, promotes the learning of feminist theory and history as essential parts of the process of self-actualization and the practice of freedom. In *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, hooks provides an overview targeted to readers new to interdisciplinary feminism. Importantly, hooks argues in strong opposition to the anti-feminist public voice in contemporary culture. In particular, she speaks to young female readers who know little about feminism, many of whom falsely assume that sexism is no longer a problem or is "no longer relevant since women now have equality" (49). hooks also speaks to male readers, assuring them that we too can play a positive role in the feminist movement. The bottom line is that "feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression" (6). hooks argues that if people adopt her definition, and know more about feminism and feminist history, then they would no longer fear it.

Feminism is for Everybody provides an introduction to the work of bell hooks, a prolific writer about popular feminist theory and cultural criticism. hooks considers herself a social activist and a revolutionary feminist, though her work has had a significant impact in the academic world. This book's initial interest stems from hooks' argument that sexism, racism, classism, capitalism, and colonialism in America promote oppression by idealizing oppressive values and characteristics. In order to liberate, hooks interrogates cultural assumptions supported by oppression. She prompts readers to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of women, to raise awareness about the world in which they live; she respects and encourages readers to find their own voices, and helps them critically reflect on and analyze their place in society.

The historical background included in this book provides useful information about earlier days of the feminist movement, especially to readers new to feminism. While, at times, hooks' tone may seem confrontational to some readers -- for example, when she demands alternatives to patriarchal, racist, and homophobic aspects of popular culture -- hooks asks readers to participate in what she calls true liberation. Some readers may feel shocked when she critiques the increased entry of bourgeois women into the workforce; she points out that this is not, in fact, a sign that women as a group are gaining economic power. Rather, this phenomenon is related to a process whereby women's interests are divided along class and racial lines, and feminism itself -- when measured by corporate accomplishment -- is co-opted by capitalism.

In this regard, one particularly strong chapter is on feminist class struggle (chapter 7). This chapter links class and behavior -- how women are taught expectations about behavior, and how women understand and resolve problems. Drawing from work by Rita Mae Brown, Betty Friedan, Mary Barfoot, Charlotte Bunch, and Nancy Myron, as well as her own previously-published work (e.g., *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*), hooks critiques the notion that economic gains of affluent females is a positive sign for all women. Instead,

hooks argues "that freedom of privileged-class women of all races has required the sustained subordination of working-class and poor women" (41). She asks readers to consider how "feminist liberation is linked to a vision of social change which challenges class elitism" (43). In this sense, she suggests that we rethink the meaning of work. "When women work to make money to consume more rather than to enhance the quality of our lives on all levels, work does not lead to economic self-sufficiency. More money does not mean more freedom if our finances are not used to facilitate well-being" (53).

hooks connects theory with practice and sees commitment to feminism as connected to political action. For example, she argues that "one cannot be anti-choice and be feminist" (6). She believes that when women do not have the right to choose what happens to their bodies, they risk relinquishing rights in other areas. Missing the organized, radical feminist, mass-based political movement, she calls for a renewed commitment to political solidarity.

Although hooks clearly argues for the notion of inclusion in feminism, what makes this book indeed valuable to readers more advanced in feminist thinking is her critique of power struggles within the women's movement, struggles among highly literate, well-educated, and materially privileged white women and materially disadvantaged women who do not have access to class power. hooks does not shy away from pointing out that females can be sexist. She illustrates this point with a critique of "lifestyle feminism" and "power feminism," two contemporary co-optations of feminist thinking that, according to hooks, shape the feminist movement toward competitiveness and away from a clearly-defined goal of ending sexist oppression. hooks argues that the current feminist movement lacks a strong sense of sisterhood due to this focus on competition (sexually, economically, physically) concurrent with a lack of participation in consciousness raising groups. In making this argument, she discusses some of the differences between "reform" and "revolutionary" feminism, and explains why knowing about this distinction is so important for women today.

hooks realizes that learning about feminism takes place both inside and outside academic settings. She passionately argues for taking feminist theory from the academy and giving it back to the communities from which it sprang. She calls for feminism without divisive barriers but with rigorous, yet non-hierarchical, discussion and debate. She also argues that feminism cannot succeed without men's participation in the movement, that men can exist as "worthy comrade[s] in struggle" because feminism is anti-sexism, not anti-male. The enemy, then, is sexist thought and behavior by men or women. She concludes that "enlightened" feminists see that men are not the problem, that the problems are patriarchy, sexism, and male domination (67).

Some critics contend that hooks' work offers no practical suggestions regarding the feminist struggle. However, hooks does apply her philosophies and suggests specific solutions. For example, she argues for the creation of housing co-ops with feminist principles (43). She also suggests programs of job sharing, and an increase in pay for teachers and service workers. She argues for equal access to welfare for men, so that it would no longer carry the stigma of gender (52). In doing so, hooks asserts that we all live in chaos, because capitalism defines the ways in which we can care and love. But feminism can help society and individuals by creating a rhetoric of belief, to help us learn about and participate in the struggle of the marginalized.

Only by doing this can humans celebrate life and love, working against dehumanization and domination. hooks espouses the belief that true revolutionaries must anchor their efforts in an act of love of people and of life.

hooks' writing often includes personal stories, and her use of emotion and confessional tones often draws criticism from scholars for being non-academic. In *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks uses a mere 123 pages to present some of her concepts and philosophies in a simple, readable way. Its language and tone are accessible and clear. The book consists of concise chapters (about 7 pages), each covering a specific topic such as consciousness-raising, education, neocolonialism, spirituality, anti-violence movements, male feminism, and marriage & child-rearing. Readers familiar with feminist theory, and especially hooks' other work, may find this book to be a simplified, and perhaps even recycled, version of her other texts. Nevertheless, at a cost of just over \$10, this book serves as an excellent introduction to feminism. I also find it to be an excellent gift to male friends who are just learning about feminisms or for "power feminists" to help them reflect on their "feminism" in relation to others. hooks has served as a professor at Yale University and Oberlin College, and currently is the Distinguished Professor of English at City College, CU-New York.

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