

Lorna Finlayson, *An Introduction to Feminism* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

In this engaging and galvanising text, Lorna Finlayson provides a critical introduction to feminist theory as well as applying a special emphasis on the practice and activism of feminism as a movement.

She presents a refreshing account of the history of feminism, which stretches centuries prior to, and denounces, the conventional ‘story’ told in introductory texts. She decisively condemns John Stuart Mill (too often, for Finlayson, credited as the founding father of feminism), the overly represented white middle-class liberal feminists, and the classification and limitations of the ‘waves’ of feminism, which tend to neglect the fluid and continual work of feminists by reducing feminism down to a few exceptional spurts of action and influence. Instead, she points out that twelfth-century Islamic scholars endorsed gender equality; the first female published work of a praise and defence of women dated back to the fifteenth century; in the sixteenth century, British feminist Jane Anger produced pamphlets opposing the dominance of men over women; and she reminds us that Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in the eighteenth century.

Finlayson introduces not only the mainstream theories and salient features of feminism for newcomers, but also attempts to vindicate some of the often overlooked or under-explored facets of feminism today, including radical, anarchist and Marxist feminist theories. She raises some compelling and controversial questions, in particular her discussion on the co-option of feminism, which she argues is a serious challenge for feminists in the twenty-first century.

The process of co-option involves absorbing and converting a separate entity which stands against a system ‘into something which [becomes] a functional component of that system’ (203). Co-option occurs where the incorporating body is in some way opposed, hostile or indifferent to the body being absorbed. This is the inverse of alienation: to alienate is to isolate something that ought to belong and deem it as strange, whereas to co-opt is to seize something that is separate and stands apart from a particular thing and make it part of that very thing. Tokenism is one form of co-option; for instance, white Western groups co-opting a number of non-white people to defuse the challenges raised by, for example, cultural sadness or anger towards oppression. The election of Barack Obama as president in the United States can be understood as a tokenistic decoy to assuage ‘black anger’ (205).

Finlayson explains that when feminism is co-opted, bought and sold, it reduces it to something ‘cheerful’ (222). Obvious examples of this are beauty campaigns such as L’Oréal’s ‘Because you’re worth it’ slogan, which co-opts the empowering sentiments of feminism and reduces them to something simplistic and available for purchase and consumption. In the more serious case of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (in which women have been able to fight alongside men on the frontline), it takes the efforts of feminists to gain equal rights and validation and uses it as a gagging device to stop feminists highlighting and opposing the harm done to women (and men) through these wars.

Importantly, practices, ideas and language can also be co-opted, which Finlayson argues is the case for contemporary feminism; its name, theory and practice have become appropriated by the very systems it actively opposes with hostility or is at least indifferent toward. This has been the case for justifying an unjust war. By affording female soldiers the right to fight alongside men in combat, the moral debate about whether the war is indeed just becomes diverted into an ostensible concern for women’s liberty. In fact, women in combat do not actually achieve much for women’s

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liberation: neither for the soldiers nor for the women and girls of the invaded countries. In this instance, the sentiment of equal political and employment representation has been co-opted and muddled. Not only are women not represented as military leaders, they risk sexual assault and losing their lives to fight in an unjust war under the guise of 'feminism'. Moreover, many of the women and girls from the war torn countries have also lost their lives and their autonomy has not been improved by Western military involvement. Finlayson emphasises that the strongest forms of feminism involve a focus on challenging and transforming existing social structures of patriarchy and oppression, which cannot be achieved through a simplistic approach of inserting more women into those structures (210-11). Thus, she explains, by co-opting feminist theory, Western leaders have been able to make claims about the liberty being achieved for women by invading countries under the guise of a feminist or democratic cause. But in fact, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have not benefited or liberated women and have instead worsened their lives in a myriad of ways.

Finlayson links this to Susan Moller Okin's prominent thesis that there is a conflict between a commitment to women's rights and multiculturalism, specifically a conflict between liberal tolerance of cultural diversity and feminist ideals of equal worth and autonomy for women. For Okin, many minority cultures are illiberal, more patriarchal and incredibly harmful for women (for example, religious 'honour killings' and forced and under-age marriages), than are the majority cultures in Western democracies. But, Finlayson argues, liberals such as Okin fear being labelled as 'cultural imperialists' but fail, so Finlayson thinks, to gain even a basic understanding of the cultures they are criticising (218-9).

Finlayson thinks this debate comes down to asking 'are we doing "ideal theory", or are we arguing about what should happen in the world as we know it?' (219). If it is a case of 'ideal theory', then she advises us to abandon it, as it is 'decadent' and nonsensical, for we cannot properly understand the kinds of minority cultural practices that would exist in an ideal just society without being influenced by effects of racism and colonialism.

If it is a question of 'non-ideal theory', the response should be to highlight the fact that women are harmed by not only racism and social exclusion but also by the act of being 'rescued' by policies bolstered by racist or colonial principles. In fact, Finlayson argues, liberal feminism is harmful for the women from non-Western minority cultures that Okin seeks to liberate, but also for white Western women as well. This is due to the way it shifts feminists' attention away from the facets of their own cultures which are misunderstood as liberal rather than oppressive (219).

Finlayson's discussion of co-opting is a compelling account of the state of things as they are, and a real challenge for contemporary feminist theory. As a cautionary tale of how feminism is 'absorbed, hijacked, twisted and betrayed by the world it seeks to change' (198), it alerts us to the ways our struggle to achieve political representation, employment and economic equality, non-discrimination, and so on, has been blurred and 'achieved' in ways that have further cemented our oppression. Representation in the frontline of war has not liberated women, just as telling women to buy into conventions of beauty because it 'empowers' us does not help us to be viewed by men as political equals. Co-opting seems, then, to be a good way to disarm and gag the oppressed.

Finlayson's aim seems to be to raise the alarm and consciousness of feminists to the threat of co-option, but she stops short, admittedly, of offering a solution. How ought we respond to the threat of co-option and reclaim and control feminist theory once more? Finlayson appears to suggest we resist co-option, but does not provide an alternative. Resistance to social and political inclusion is not a strong political strategy. Would Finlayson prefer women to retreat altogether and reject an attempt at non-discrimination in the workplace because it risks feminism being co-opted? Is she suggesting that African Americans would prefer not to have had an African American president elected? A strong political strategy cannot take the form of digging your heels in to stay separate

and resisting all efforts of social reform. It seems Finlayson may be doing her own form of ideal theory here by refusing to accept moderate and sporadic improvements and wanting to begin in the achievement of an ideal egalitarian society.

Finlayson does not think women are worse off now than they were 200 years ago, but her concern over the subtle and crude nature of patriarchy today, and her dislike and scepticism of liberal feminism's capacity to respond to it, says that she is refusing to recognise how powerful liberal feminism is. Even though this may allow for some co-option, by participating in the non-ideal patriarchal structure, liberal feminists could be in a strong and conscious political position. Liberal feminists, who Finlayson underestimates, may be responding with the same subtlety that is being used against them. Reclaiming and retrieving feminism from the inside to achieve equal representation, rather than standing on the outskirts, may be a powerful strategy, instead of a passive one. This is an advantage because it makes it harder for the 'enemy' to resist real feminist policy suggestions, for the enemy needs to at least sound coherent by engaging with and using feminist language to justify their practices. Thus, this strategy works, and important gains are achieved, despite occasional co-opting.

Overall, Finlayson's bright, challenging, inclusive and humorous introduction to feminist theory will be engrossing for female and male philosophy students alike, and enjoyed by more experienced feminists.

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