Introduction:
The Diversity of Feminist Thinking

Since writing my first introduction to feminist thought nearly a decade ago, I have become increasingly convinced that much of feminist thought resists categorization, especially categorization based on the "fathers" labels. Believe me, it would be a tragedy if these labels persuaded readers that liberal feminism is only a variation on John Stuart Mill's thoughts, Marxist-socialist feminism only an improvement on Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's writings, psychoanalytic feminism only an addendum to Sigmund Freud's speculations, existentialist feminism only a further articulation of Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas, postmodern feminism only a recapitulation of Jacques Lacan's and Jacques Derrida's musings. It would also be a misfortune if these labels detracted from the efforts of radical feminists or ecofeminists, for example, to do philosophy de novo without relying on any patriarch's thought—a daunting, even perilous task, but one that has much to recommend it.

Yet despite the very real problems that come with categorizing thinkers as "x" or "y" or "z," feminist thought is old enough to have a history complete with its own set of labels: "liberal," "radical (libertarian or cultural)," "Marxist-socialist," "psychoanalytic," "existentialist," "postmodern," "multicultural and global," and "ecological." No doubt feminist thought will eventually shed these labels for others that better express its intellectual and political commitments to women. For now, however, feminist thought's old labels remain useful. They signal to the broader public that feminism is not a monolithic ideology, that all feminists do not think alike, and that, like all other time-honored modes of thinking, feminist thought has a past as well as a present and a future. Feminist thought's old labels also serve as useful teaching tools. They help mark the range of different approaches, perspectives, and frameworks a variety of feminists have
used to shape both their explanations for women's oppression and their proposed solutions for its elimination.

Because so much of contemporary feminist theory defines itself in reaction against traditional liberal feminism, liberalism is the obvious place to begin a survey of feminist thought. This perspective received its classic formulation in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* John Stuart Mill's "Subjection of Women," and the nineteenth-century woman's suffrage movement. Its main thrust, an emphasis still felt in contemporary groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), is that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints blocking women’s entrance to and success in the so-called public world. Because society has the false belief that women are by nature less intellectually and physically capable than men, it excludes women from the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. As a result of this policy of exclusion, the true potential of many women goes unfulfilled. If it should happen that when women and men are given the same educational opportunities and civil rights, few women achieve eminence in the sciences, arts, and professions, then so be it. Gender justice, insist liberal feminists, requires us, first, to make the rules of the game fair and, second, to make certain none of the runners in the race for society's goods and services is systematically disadvantaged; gender justice does not also require us to give prizes to the losers as well as the winners.

But is the liberal feminist program drastic and dramatic enough to completely undo women's oppression? Radical feminists think not. They claim the patriarchal system is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition. It cannot be reformed but only ripped out root and branch. It is not just patriarchy's legal and political structures that must be overturned on the way to women's liberation. Its social and cultural institutions (especially the family, the church, and the academy) must also be uprooted.

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I was both impressed and overwhelmed by the diverse range of views within the radical feminist community. Although all radical feminists focus on sex, gender, and reproduction as the locus for the development of feminist thought, some of them favor so-called androgyny, stress the pleasures of all kinds of sex (heterosexual, lesbian, or autoerotic), and view as unmitigated blessings for women not only the old reproduction-controlling technologies but also the new reproduction-assisting technologies. In contrast, other radical feminists reject androgyny; emphasize the dangers of sex, especially heterosexual sex; and regard as harmful to women the new reproduction-assisting technologies. Not until I read the works of Linda Alcoff, Ann Ferguson, and Alice Echols more carefully did I realize there were at least two kinds of radical feminists, whom I have respectively labeled in this edition "radical-libertarian feminists" and "radical-cultural feminists."

With respect to gender-related issues, radical-libertarian feminists tend to reason that if, to their own detriment, men are permitted to exhibit masculine characteristics only and if, to their own detriment, women are required to exhibit feminine characteristics only, then the solution to this problem is to permit each and every person to be androgynous—to exhibit a full range of masculine and feminine qualities. Men should be permitted to explore their feminine dimensions and women their masculine ones. No human being should be forbidden the sense of wholeness that comes from combining his or her masculine and feminine dimensions.

Disagreeing with radical-libertarian feminists that a turn to androgy is a liberation strategy for women, radical-cultural feminists argue against this move in one of three ways. Some anti-androgyans maintain the problem is not femininity in and of itself but rather the low value patriarchy assigns to feminine qualities such as “gentleness, modesty, humility, supportiveness, empathy, compassionateness, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, unselfishness,” and the high value it assigns to masculine qualities such as “assertiveness, aggressiveness, hardness, rationality or the ability to think logically, abstractly and analytically, ability to control emotion.” They claim if society can learn to value the feminine as much as the masculine, women's oppression will be a bad memory. Other anti-androgyans disagree, insisting femininity is the problem because it has been constructed by men for patriarchal purposes. In order to be liberated, women must give new gynocentric meanings to femininity. Femininity should no longer be understood as those traits that deviate from masculinity. On the contrary, femininity should be understood as a way of being that needs no reference point external to it. Still other anti-androgyans, reverting to a "nature theory," argue that despite patriarchy's imposition of a false, or unauthentic, feminine nature upon women, many women have nonetheless unearthed their true, or authentic, female nature. Full personal freedom for a woman consists, then, in her ability to renounce her false feminine self in favor of her true female self.

As difficult as it is fully to reflect the range of radical feminist thought on gender, it is even more difficult to do so with respect to sexuality. Radical-libertarian feminists argue that no specific kind of sexual experience should be prescribed as the best kind for a liberated woman. Each and every woman should be encouraged to experiment sexually with herself, other women, and men. As dangerous as heterosexuality is for a woman within a patriarchal society—as difficult as it can be for a woman to know when she truly wants to say yes to a man's sexual advances, for example—she must feel free to follow the lead of her own desires.

Radical-cultural feminists disagree. They stress that through pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, and woman battering, through foot binding, suttee, purdah, clitoridectomy, witch burning, and
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gynecology, men have controlled women’s sexuality for male pleasure. Thus, in order to be liberated, women must escape the confines of heterosexuality and create an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, autoeroticism, or lesbianism. Alone or with other women, a woman can discover the true pleasure of sex.

Radical feminist thought is as diverse on issues related to reproduction as it is on matters related to sexuality. Radical-libertarian feminists claim biological motherhood drains women physically and psychologically. Women should be free, they say, to use the old reproduction-controlling technologies and the new reproduction-assisting technologies on their own terms—to prevent or terminate unwanted pregnancies or, alternatively, to enable them to have children when they want them (premenopausally or postmenopausally), how they want them (in their own womb or that of another woman), and with whom they want them (a man, a woman, or alone). Some radical-libertarian feminists go farther than this, however. They look forward to the day when eugeneic (extraorporeal gestation in an artificial placenta) entirely replaces the natural process of pregnancy. In contrast to radical-libertarian feminists, radical-cultural feminists claim biological motherhood is the ultimate source of women’s power. It is women who determine whether the human species continues—whether there is life or no life. Women must guard and celebrate this life-giving power, for without it men will have even less respect and use for women than they have now.

Somewhat unconvinced by the liberal and radical feminist agendas for women’s liberation, Marxist and socialist feminists claim it is impossible for anyone, especially women, to achieve true freedom in a class-based society, where the wealth produced by the powerless many ends up in the hands of the powerful few. With Friedrich Engels, Marxist and socialist feminists insist women’s oppression originated in the introduction of private property, an institution that obliterated whatever equality of community humans had previously enjoyed. Private ownership of the means of production by relatively few persons, originally all male, inaugurated a class system whose contemporary manifestations are corporate capitalism and imperialism. Reflection on this state of affairs suggests that capitalism itself, not just the larger social rules that privilege men over women, is the cause of women’s oppression. If all women—rather than the “exceptional” ones alone—are ever to be liberated, the capitalist system must be replaced by a socialist system in which the means of production will belong to one and all. No longer economically dependent on men, women will be just as free as men are.

Socialist feminists agree with Marxist feminists that capitalism is the source of women’s oppression, and with radical feminists that patriarchy is the source of women’s oppression. As they see it, therefore, the way to end women’s oppression is to kill the two-headed beast of capitalist patriarchy or patriarchal capitalism (take your pick). Following this outlook, Juliet Mitchell claimed in Women’s Estate that women’s condition is overdetermined by the structures of production (as Marxist feminists think), reproduction and sexuality (as radical feminists believe), and the socialization of children (as liberal feminists argue). Woman’s status and function in all of these structures must change if she is to achieve anything approximating full liberation.

Another powerful attempt to achieve a synthesis between Marxist and radical feminist thought has been made by Alison Jaggar. Conceding that all feminist perspectives recognize the conflicting demands made on women as wives, mothers, daughters, lovers, and workers, Jaggar insisted that socialist feminism is unique because of its concerted effort to interrelate the myriad forms of women’s oppression. Jaggar used the unifying concept of alienation to explain how, under capitalism, everything (work, sex, play) and everyone (family, friend) that could be a source of woman’s integration as a person instead becomes a cause of her disintegration. Like Mitchell, Jaggar insisted that there are only complex explanations for female subordination. Once again, the emphasis of socialist feminism is on unity and integration both in the sense of interrelating all aspects of women’s lives and in the sense of producing a unified feminist theory.

To the degree that liberal, radical, and Marxist-socialist feminists focus on the macrocosm (patriarchy or capitalism) in their respective explanations of women’s oppression, psychoanalytic and gender feminists retreat to the microcosm of the individual, claiming the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of women’s oppression are embedded deep in her psyche. For psychoanalytic feminists, a focus on sexuality’s role in the oppression of the individual claims the roots of wo...
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Because the Oedipus complex is the root of male rule, or patriarchy, some psychoanalytic feminists speculate it is nothing more than the product of men's imagination—a psychic trap that everyone, especially women, should try to escape. Others object that unless we are prepared for reentry into a chaotic state of nature, we must accept some version of the Oedipus complex as the experience that integrates the individual into society. In accepting some version of the Oedipus complex, Sherry Ortner noted, we need not accept the Freudian version, according to which authority, autonomy, and universalism are labeled "male," whereas love, dependence, and particularism are labeled "female." These labels, meant to privilege that which is male over that which is female, are not essential to the Oedipus complex. Rather, they are simply the consequences of a child's actual experience with men and women. As Ortner saw it, dual parenting (as recommended also by Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow) and dual participation in the workforce would change the gender valences of the Oedipus complex. Authority, autonomy, and universalism would no longer be the exclusive property of men; love, dependence, and particularism would no longer be the exclusive property of women.

In the first edition of this book, I did not make a distinction I stress in this edition. There are, I believe, important differences between psychoanalytic feminists who focus on pre-Oedipal and Oedipal themes on the one hand and so-called gender feminists who focus on the virtues and values associated with femininity on the other hand. Although gender feminists as well as psychoanalytic feminists probe women's psyches, gender feminists like Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings also pursue the relationship between women's psychology and morality. They ask whether feminine caring or masculine justice is the true path to human goodness and whether the key to all human beings' liberation is to embrace the values and virtues traditionally associated with women. For Gilligan and Noddings, femininity is women's blessing, not women's burden.

Looking into women's psyches more deeply than even the psychoanalytic and gender feminists, Simone de Beauvoir provided an ontological-existential explanation for women's oppression. In The Second Sex, one of the key theoretical texts of twentieth-century feminism, she argued that woman is oppressed by virtue of her otherness. Woman is the other because she is not-man. Man is the free, self-determining being who defines the meaning of his existence; woman is the other, the object whose meaning is determined for her. If woman is to become a self, a subject, she must, like man, transcend the definitions, labels, and essences limiting her existence. She must make herself be whatever she wants to be.

Postmodern feminists take de Beauvoir's understanding of otherness and turn it on its head. Woman is still the other, but rather than interpret-
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their subjects not to aspire to “whiteness.” Realizing that such an aspiration threatened their people’s souls, many indigenous African leaders rallied their kith and kin to rebel against white colonizers’ ideas and armies. But even when such rebellions were successful politically, they were not always successful culturally. Once a mind is “colonized,” it is very difficult to liberate it.

Although most schools of feminist thought favor a relational view of the self, ecofeminists offer the broadest and also the most demanding conception of the self’s relationship to the other. According to ecofeminists, we are connected not only to each other but also to the nonhuman world: animal and even vegetative. Unfortunately, we do not always acknowledge our responsibilities to each other, let alone to the nonhuman world. As a result, we deplete the world’s natural resources with our machines, pollute the environment with our toxic fumes, and stockpile weapons of total destruction. In so doing, we delude ourselves that we are controlling nature and enhancing ourselves. In point of fact, said ecofeminist Ynestra King, nature is already rebelling, and each day the human self is impoverished as yet another forest is “detreed” and yet another animal species is extinguished. The only way not to destroy ourselves, insist ecofeminists, is to strengthen our relationships to each other and the nonhuman world.

Clearly, it is a major challenge to contemporary feminism to reconcile the pressures for diversity and difference with those for integration and commonality. Fortunately, contemporary feminists do not shrink from this challenge. I am particularly encouraged and delighted by developments in multicultural, global, and ecofeminism. It seems we are on the verge of truly understanding the sources of women’s oppression, how sexism is and is not related to all the other isms that plague human beings (racism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism, ableism, heterosexism, and naturism).

I have tried as much as possible to discuss the weaknesses as well as the strengths of each of the feminist perspectives presented here. In doing, I have aimed not so much at neutrality as I have at respect, since each feminist approach has made a rich and lasting contribution to feminist thought. Readers looking for one winning view at the end of this book, a champion left standing after an intellectual free-for-all, will be disappointed. Although all of these perspectives cannot be equally correct, and my own views and preferences will show along the way, there is no need here for a definitive final say. There is always, and there will be here, room for growth, improvement, reconsideration, expansion—for all those intellectual processes that free us from the authoritarian trap of having to know it all.

Even though throughout this book I aim to speak on behalf of women, in so doing I remain painfully aware that I do not speak for “woman,” for feminists, or for anybody besides myself. I speak out of a specific background of experience, as do we all, and I have tried very hard to avoid either accepting or rejecting an analysis simply because it resonates or fails to resonate with my own ideas and experiences. Whether I have largely succeeded or mostly failed in this attempt is something I must leave up to my readers, however.

Finally, although this introduction to feminist thought is more comprehensive than my introduction of ten years ago, it is still partial, provisional, and suggestive in nature. Anyone steeped in feminist theory and practice will immediately recognize this fact. Limitations of time and space often forced me to sacrifice depth and/or breadth, and my own scholarly background and interests undoubtedly imposed other limitations. I hope that my shortcomings will spur others to do the job better someday. But my overriding hope is that this book will prompt its readers to think themselves into the fullness of being feminism intends.