

Radical Feminist Hate, Fear, or Loathing?

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Abstract

Typically, when reading about radical feminists on various blogs, it's an "us verses them" type of debate. I've been thinking a lot about that, as witnessed by my last post, Michfest Music Melodrama I've been thinking a lot about the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival lately. So much anger and divisiveness occurs between radical feminist and [...]

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lately. So much anger and divisiveness occurs between radical feminist and transgender bloggers, it really turns my stomach. Very few posts on either side attempt to understand each other. so much so, it ends up being like the Hatfields vs the McCoys. Every time I studied that feud in high school, I could never understand why two groups of people could be so idiotic.

Now I do. A few days ago I happened upon this entry over at Cassandra Says that really smacked me in the face. She mentioned that she had looked at pictures of a well known radical feminist blogger, Heart, on a road trip. She said:

"... and you know what jumped out at me? Other than Heart herself almost every woman pictured falls into a certain stereotype, and that stereotype is intimately tied up with how we conceptualize gender as an issue.

This is a tricky area, discussing people's sexual personae. What I'm trying to say is that there's a certain type of woman that I encounter over and over again in feminist circles, and that that type of woman has a very distinct gender identity. It's sort of butch, but there's more to it than that, I think. I'm not even sure what descriptive term to use for that particular gender identity, but I'm willing to bet that everyone who has any familiarity with feminism knows the "type" I mean. It's probably the most common "type" of woman that you meet at feminist events, along with the hippy earth mother "type" (ie. Heart, or our buddy Daisy). I'm going to call this "type" radfembutch, for lack of a better term, although if there already IS a better term let me know and I'll use it instead. The fact that the English language doesn't seem to have a word for that "type" is interesting to me, and I think that it's significant. It's a basic principle of linguistics that anything a culture considers worth thinking or talking about, it has a word for. So why don't we have a word for that

particular female gender identity? It's not like that identity is all that uncommon. I'm willing to bet that everyone here can point to a woman they know, even if only peripherally, who has that identity. So why the gap in the language?

I think it's because our culture doesn't much like those women. It doesn't know what to do with them, how to classify them. They confuse a lot of people, because most people see gender as a binary and so they don't tend to deal very well with people who don't fit easily into the categories "masculine" and "feminine".

Neither do transpeople, and I think this may be where the grudge match comes from. I looked at those pictures from Heart's road-trip, and I remembered Qgrrl's comments a while back about how the language used by transpeople made her uncomfortable because it made her feel erased. From what I can tell, she very much of the radfembutch type - not at all comfortable with being "feminine" but not identifying with "masculine" either. Not quite sure where she fits, feels as if she had to figure it all out on her own.

That has to be a scary position to be in. I'm not sure that those of us who have always felt more or less comfortable with our gender identity can really understand just how unsettling that might be, to feel like society was determined to slot everyone into neat little gender categories and not feel like you fit into any of those available. For a teenager that could be terrifying.

So, I started thinking about that, and wondering how many women involved in radical feminism had to go through something like that. And then something clicked in my mind, and I finally saw WHY those women are so protective of their "space" and why so many of them are so very hostile to anyone they see as an interloper. If you'd spent most of your life feeling like you didn't belong, and then you found a place where you DID feel like you belonged, wouldn't you be protective of that? Wouldn't you want to hold on to it?"

I have to admit, if this is the case, then I can understand why they are so angry and defensive. I've always thought that there was just something ingrained in radical feminism that was anti trans. I've never considered that that these women could be considered "gender variant" as well, and feel like Michfest is a place of unity for them. I remember the first time I found a virtual space that dealt with transgender issues online. I went from feeling totally alone, isolated, and odd, to feeling like there were others that understood and lived my plight.

She continues:

"Qgrrl's point seemed to be that trans language, particularly the word 'cisgender', left her feeling discomfited because she felt like it excluded her experience (and I'm not her, so if she happens to come across this and I'm misunderstanding what she mean then please, jump in and correct me). I'm guessing she's not the only one. It seems to me that there are TONS of women who fit that mold, and that many of them feel like they found a home within feminism. I wonder to what extent that may be what's really going on with the trans issue. The way that I see some radical feminists reacting looks as if they feel threatened in some way, and other than Heart most of those women do seem to be kind of on the butch side. How does that play into this whole issue? Is that where the root of the conflict lies, with one group feeling like their home and their identity that they worked hard to create is under attack, and the other group (transwomen) feeling like those women are attempting to exclude them from places that SHOULD feel like home purely out of spite? In some cases it does look like spite, but in others it honestly looks more like fear, or confusion, and in an odd way that's kind of

encouraging. Spite or malice are hard things to get around, but fear and confusion?”

This does make sense to me. I see the same type of thing in the “crossdresser verses transsexual” wars. One side wants to be included because of their similarities to a group, the other side wants to exclude them because of their differences.

She ends this line of thought by saying:

“In some cases it does look like spite, but in others it honestly looks more like fear, or confusion, and in an odd way that’s kind of encouraging. Spite or malice are hard things to get around, but fear and confusion? Those can be addressed. Compromises can be made. People can become more comfortable with things that once disturbed them.”

I hope so. I hope it is fear. I’ve overcome so much fear in my life, I know that’s doable. It gives me hope for tomorrow, that we may be able to turn an enemy into an ally. The Christian right hates us both and regularly lumps us in together. I hope at some point we can learn to understand each other and fight together, instead of fighting each other.

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