

# The Radical Feminist Attack on Reason

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It is fashionable in some feminist circles to argue that the struggle for freedom from male oppression is, in part, a struggle for freedom from rationality and intellectuality. Julia Kristeva, for example, attacks women writers who value "science, philosophy, [and] professorships," calling them valorizers of "phallic dominance" (1974, in Marks and de Courtivron, 1980, 166). For Kristeva, a truly revolutionary woman who wishes to succeed in exploding existing social codes must flee everything phallic, and this means that she must reject everything that is "finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning."

In the same vein, Helene Cixous, in her influential essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (Cixous, 1976, in Marks and de Courtivron, 1980, 245-264), challenges women to forge for themselves, through writing, the "antilogos weapon." This weapon, supposedly the product of writing that "inscribes femininity," will be used to liberate women from the "phallogocentric tradition," that is, the tradition of "male writing," which is the "effect" and "support" of the "history of reason."

Views such as these are very much alive today. That there is at present tremendous interest in Cixous' writings, for example, is made evident by the listing of no fewer than 160 citations of them in the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* for the years 1990-2. To what extent do these views deserve our support?

It cannot be denied that some women are still oppressed today, treated unjustly and denied their rights, if not in the US, then at least in the Arab world, in other Moslem countries such as Pakistan, and in much of the rest of the Third World. We can agree that, from a "Eurocentric" viewpoint, many women are in need of liberation. Does this mean that women ought to fashion the "antilogos weapon" in order to liberate themselves from *reason*? Should women follow Cixous's advice to take up "the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus," to speak, in contrast, in a way that is "never simple or linear or 'objectified', generalized," to not deny their drives "the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking," and thereby to become free of the phallogocentric tradition, that is, the history of reason? (Marks and de Courtivron, 1980, 251).

Since the elimination of oppression is an eminently reasonable goal, Cixous's attack on reason is more apt to be destructive than helpful to the feminist goal of eliminating oppression. After all, the enormous success that feminism has already enjoyed is largely due to the fact that many people have become rationally convinced that the oppression of women is wrong.

Reason ought not to be identified with any sort of oppression; it is unreasonable, not reasonable, for example, for men to oppress women. Nor ought reason, or truth, to be identified with masculinity. The important nineteenth-century feminist Frances Wright

saw the matter rightly when she denied that "truth had any sex" (Wright, 1834, in D'Arusmont, 1972, 15).

In advocating a form of speaking that is not guided by the constraints of rationality, Cixous remarks that a woman who speaks in such a way "supports the 'logic' of her speech" with her body. "Her flesh speaks true." Consequently, feminists of this stripe encourage women to be irrational, to not think, but simply feel. Yet to put yourself into your cause, to speak with conviction and passion, does not guarantee that what you are saying is true, or that what you are advocating is any more rational than astrology.

How might Cixous have arrived at her misguided and self-defeating attack on rationality? The most obvious explanation is that rationality makes refutation possible, so that by embracing irrationality, she makes her views immune from refutation in the sense that nothing could possibly count as a refutation for her. She is thereby able to justify her failure to defend her views. Like any true believer, a "New Woman" like Cixous doesn't want to have to worry about her responsibility to provide reasons for her opinions. Only the "woman of yesterday" allows herself to be intimidated by "the builders of the analytic empire," she says (262).

But a male supremacist who advocates the enslavement of women has equal motive to attack rationality and abandon reason, thereby making his own view on women immune to refutation in the same way. Whose advice should be taken, Cixous's or the male supremacist's? Neither of the two could be presented with a rational refutation that he would accept. But in the same way, neither of them could give us a reason for preferring his own view, since in abandoning rationality, each abandons the giving of reasons.

Cixous wants women to write in a new way that will advance their "struggle against conventional man" (245). But since she gives them no reason for doing so, why should they? The "antilogos" or anti-rational stance is not a sensible one to adopt if someone is proposing change. Rather, the skeptical view that reasoning leads nowhere, that one should stay out of the intellectual battlefield, refusing either to accept or reject doctrines, leads naturally, as it did for Sextus Empiricus, to taking the path of least resistance and living in accordance with the customs of one's country, for one has, in this case, no reason to do otherwise.

On the other hand, when a sensible feminist such as Mary Wollstonecraft, in her classic eighteenth-century feminist polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Wollstonecraft, 1792), urged a change in the relations between the sexes, calling upon women not to allow themselves to become slavish prostitutes whose lives are devoted to the pleasures of men, but rather to develop themselves as fully rational persons, she gave them a reason: to become something more than the toy of man, to achieve dignity and virtue, to acquire wisdom and character. When another sensible feminist, Frances Wright, argued for equality for women in her 1829 lectures (Wright, 1834), she gave a reason deriving from Jeremy Bentham's principle of utility: equality for women leads to a greater amount of happiness for society as a whole than inequality. Elizabeth Stanton (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, 1881-6) gave a good reason for equality for women: "The sexes are alike," she wrote; like men, women are moral, virtuous, and intelligent, and therefore they

have the same natural rights that men have. But these rights are violated when unmarried women are taxed without representation, when women die a "civil death" in the eyes of the law upon marriage, when women are not permitted a jury of their peers (1: 597-604). And Sarah Grimke (1838) gave a good reason for altering the balance of power within a marriage, which she regarded as normally a tyranny of the husband: in order to alleviate "the vast amount of secret suffering endured, from the forced submission of women to the opinions and whims of their husbands" (86).

Since those who, like Cixous, refuse to give reasons or to accept anything as a rational refutation of their views, or even to engage in rational discussion, you might wonder why anyone would bother to present them with a refutation. Why not simply ignore them?

The result that can be expected from ignoring irrational radical feminists is that dogmatism will continue to replace intelligent discussion in the universities, and those who shout the loudest, rather than those who have the best reasons, will be listened to, and their views will prevail. Confrontation with irrational feminists may slow the progress of their dogmatic attack on philosophy, science, and other rational pursuits.

Another reason for not ignoring irrational radical feminists is that they attempt to better the condition of women by committing injustices against men. For example, they advocate a hiring policy, known as "affirmative action," of systematic discrimination against men. As perpetrators of injustice, then, irrational feminists must be opposed, rather than ignored.

Irrational radical feminists also seek, by means of anti-pornography legislation, restrictions on one of our most fundamental Constitutional liberties, the First Amendment right of free speech, and to ignore them is to risk the loss of this precious freedom. According to Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, "Pornography is a systematic practice of exploitation and subordination based on sex that differentially harms women . . . The bigotry and contempt pornography promotes, with the acts of aggression it fosters, diminish opportunities for equality of rights in employment, education, property, public accommodations, and public services" (Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988, 33).<sup>1</sup>

The empirical evidence, however, does not support these claims. In a 1990 study (Baron, 1990) Baron found gender equality to be higher in states characterized by higher circulation rates of pornography. In a 1989 study (Padgett, Brislin-Slutz, and Neal, 1989), Padgett found that "exposure to nonviolent pornography had no significant effect on attitudes towards women and women's issues." In a 1988 study (Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod, 1988), Linz found no "significant relationship between exposure to nonviolent pornography and either the tendency to view women as sex objects, or the belief in traditional sex roles." In another 1988 study (Demare, Briere, and Lips, 1988), Demare reported "zero-order correlations between use of nonviolent pornography and attitudes toward women." In a 1986 study (Garcia, 1986), Garcia found that "greater exposure to nonviolent pornography was not related to traditional attitudes toward women" (Cf. Baron, 1990, 365-6).

Dworkin and MacKinnon do not cite even a single competing study in support of their claim that pornography diminishes opportunities for equality of rights. They do cite

studies that purport to show a causal link between pornography and aggression, but they make no attempt to show a causal link between whatever aggression may be directly caused by pornography and diminished opportunities for equality of rights.

A fourth reason why irrational radical feminists must not be ignored is that they promote bigotry, anti-male sexism, and disharmony between the genders by negatively stereotyping men. A recurrent theme in Cixous's "The Laughs of the Medussa," for example, is the notion that men are sick, perverted monsters. She says, for instance, that men "need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard on . . . Not another minute to lose. Let's get out of here" (255).<sup>2</sup> Annie Leclerc writes that "what a man likes about himself and what he's made the object of his respect are the virtues of the conqueror and the proprietor. He needs the strength to conquer and the bulk to possess with impunity. [His virtue] . . . is force . . . There is courage also, but that's the same . . . [Courage] is wretched, hateful, swollen, puffy, deathly, since its mission is to subdue, oppress, and repress all living things" (Leclerc, 1974, in Marks, 82-86). A third example: Madeline Gagnon writes that part of the tragedy of the male sex is that men must become "Master of others. The phallus . . . represents repressive capitalist ownership . . ." (Gagnon, 1977, in Marks, 180).

This sort of anti-male polemic is rampant within irrational radical feminist literature. To condemn it is not to deny that a few men are sick, perverted monsters. Some men are monsters, and some women too. Lizzie Borden was no angel of mercy, and neither were Salome or Messalina. Sick, perverted qualities are no more a part of male nature than of female, and anti-male sexism is every bit as offensive, pernicious, and intolerable as anti-female sexism. Yet when a female academic stereotypes men in this way, she wins accolade and acclaim, while a male academic who does the same with respect to women risks general disapprobation. Feminists have benefited from men's reluctance to respond in kind to feminist hyperbole, as from other aspects of patriarchy, but have refused to acknowledge this benefit because to do so would be to diminish the bestiality of the beast.

Cixous recognizes that not all men are entirely evil. Her position is that their nature is to be evil. Only insofar as they repress their femininity and allow masculinity to dominate their personalities are they monsters. She allows that "there are men who do not repress their femininity" (Cixous, 1975b, in Marks, 93). This repressed femininity turns out to be "pederastic femininity," for a man who does not let his femininity be repressed, and who is therefore capable of invention, poetry, and fiction, is a man who does not repress his homosexuality (97- 8).

Cixous favors bisexuality; she does not urge an end to heterosexual activity. Neither does Simone de Beauvoir, even when she agrees with her interviewer, Alice Schwarzer, that "frigidity . . . is more prudent and reasonable" than finding great happiness in heterosexual activity, because such happiness makes women become "slaves of men and . . . strengthens the chain that binds them to their oppressor" (Beauvoir, 1976, in Marks, 152). De Beauvoir maintains that for a woman, "The ideal should be the capacity to love a woman as well as a man . . ." (152).

Many prominent radical feminists, however, such as Ti-Grace Atkinson and her group, The Feminists, take the further step of calling for the elimination of marriage, the family, and heterosexual sex (Feminists, 1970). Such feminists regard lesbianism as the "vanguard of feminism" (Wolf, 1980, 171). In her recent study of nine non-lesbian feminists (Silber, 1990), Linda Silber has discussed the manner in which among radical feminists during the mid-1980s, "women were judged by their sexuality, with lesbians seen as the more politically progressive . . . non-lesbians . . . were challenged to examine their own sexual histories and acknowledge their erotic same-sex attractions" (Silber, 1990, 132). Silber found that for the women she studied, "Sexual identity . . . is entwined with their ideological beliefs (radical feminism) . . . And sexual identity was regarded as political by many of the women: they did not want to be seen as being thoughtlessly heterosexual or bisexual" (137-8). These women felt that it was "morally good to be a lesbian, and . . . shameful to be involved with a man" (135).

Here we come to a fifth reason for not simply ignoring irrational radical feminists, for their recommendation that women should become either bisexual or exclusively homosexual is harmful advice. Women who do not have such inclinations should not be pressured to act as if they did. Under such circumstances they would be behaving in a self-demeaning manner, not for the benefit of a man, but this time for the benefit of another woman.

Feminists who advocate homosexuality for all women are in the midst of a flight from biology and genetics. In denying the biological function of female anatomy for the sake of ideology, they find it easy to slide into an opposition to all reason.

The irrational radical feminist, then, makes harmful recommendations and must be opposed. To improve our lives we must create a society committed to intelligent discussion rather than irrational dogmatism, to equality of opportunity for all rather than discrimination against men in the form of affirmative action, to freedom of speech rather than authoritarian censorship, and to tolerance and respect for others as individuals rather than bigotry and conformist pressure. Women will improve their condition not by listening to the voices of irrational radical feminists, but by listening to a feminist such as Wollstonecraft, urging women not to allow themselves to become ornaments, but to develop themselves as fully rational persons, to achieve dignity and virtue, to acquire wisdom and character.<sup>3</sup>

**Notes**

1. This claim is based on statements made in an Ordinance of the City of Minneapolis amending Title 7, Chapter 139 of the Minneapolis Code of Ordinances relating to Civil Rights, and in Chapter 16 of the Code of Indianapolis and Marion County, Indiana.
2. Cixous also alleges that men can't have orgasms unless assured "the old lady is always right behind them, watching them make phallus" (256). This obnoxious vulgarity betrays a murky psychological conception of one half of humanity and says more about Cixous than about the object of her polemic.
3. I am grateful to Michael Enright and George Bailey for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

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