



The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society

Walby, Sylvia



Key Concepts: Patriarchy, Gender, Feminist Social Theory



Influential Work: *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990)

Sylvia WALBY

(1953 to Present)



Walby in Context

Among the many strands of feminism there exists a sole common theme - patriarchy. This concept, accepted by many to mean a male dominated and self-perpetuating society, is what is most central to the work of Sylvia Walby. Although Walby's writing is not confined to the parameters of gender studies (other areas of contribution include Political Science, Social Theory, Industrial Sociology, and Globalisation), she is perhaps most recognised for her contribution of a gender conscious analysis of the social world. So much so, that it was Walby who won the first UNESCO chair of Gender Research in 2008.

The Waves of Feminism

Since its emergence in Western thought in the eighteenth century, feminism has, like most social and political ideologies, undergone complex fluctuations, and been re-cast in many different moulds. The most prominent of these have been Liberal Feminism, Socialist and Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism, Black Feminism, and Postmodern Feminism. Subsequently, as these evolved over time, they can often be seen to fall into the following 'waves':

First Wave Feminism: 19th and early 20th century:

- Concerned with achieving suffrage

Second Wave Feminism: 1960s onwards:

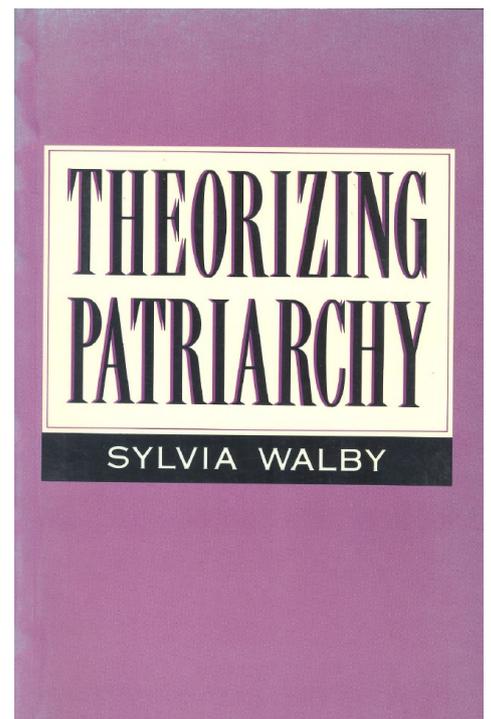
- Concerned with emancipation in all spheres of life
- *'The Personal is Political'*
- Pervasiveness of patriarchy leads to gender domination/discrimination

Third Wave Feminism: 1990s onwards:

- Formed as a response to perceived failure of second wave
- Women cannot be seen as having one common experience.
- Links race and global consciousness with feminist analysis

The Forms of Feminism

Liberal Feminism is most closely associated with **First Wave Feminism**. It focuses on issues of suffrage, and democratically attaining equal opportunity through political and economic participation. Liberal Feminism takes a more optimistic view and argues that all will gain (man as well as women) if society is based on principles of justice and equal competition. It doesn't recognise the vested self-interest of patriarchy in maintaining inequalities.



Socialist and Marxist Feminism is closely aligned to **Second Wave Feminism**. For them gender issues cannot be separated from economics. Much like how socialists believe that there exists an oppressive owning class of bourgeoisie, Socialist and Marxist feminists apply a gendered analysis to the world and conclude that a system of deliberate *'profit'* from oppression exists which is maintained by patriarchy. For them, patriarchy is oppressive in the same way as the bourgeoisie. They believe that capitalism strengthens patriarchy, defining women as consumers, and, in doing so, perpetuates the oppression of the woman as the *'domestic slave'*. Adherents to Radical Feminism (Second/Third Waves Feminism) believe that the woman's role in a family, her utilisation as a sexual object, and male violence are all accommodated by patriarchy and an inherently sexist code of social norms. Radical feminists assert that it is the patriarchy – the deliberate and systemic subjugation of women by men – that is the fault of the woman's woes. Thus, they attest that it is only when the patriarchy is overthrown that all can enjoy equal personhood.

Black Feminism is generally associated with **Third Wave Feminism**. It argues that the above forms of feminism have done little for black and non-white woman, believing instead that they are biased toward white, middle-class, women.

Postmodern Feminists (also Third Wave Feminism), much like followers of Black Feminism, believe that it is fallacious to assert one all-encompassing experience of women across societies and times. They fundamentally reject an over-arching theory of Feminism, arguing instead for the need to recognise context and complexities when considering the female experience in a male dominated world. Women's experience is diverse and this must be reflected in a feminist analysis of the world. Their discipline encompasses diversity, non-binary thinking, and a critical evaluation of the social norms, language, and attitudes which are detrimental to those who are seen as *'other'* by the male dominated world.

Walby and patriarchy

Addressing Socialist and Marxist Feminism (and its detractors), Walby asserts that the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy is not to be examined in a binary, *'black and white'* manner, but rather through lateral thinking which serves to facilitate the complexities and nuances of the relationship.

For Walby, even though capitalism does benefit from patriarchy (sexual division of labour), this is not always the case. For example, she draws our attention to women entering the workforce during the First and Second World Wars – here, it is clear that the patriarchy did not benefit, albeit capitalism did. Thus, the relationship is much more complex than originally believed.



'Liberated from the home, women now have the whole of society in which to be exploited'.

Sylvia Walby



'When patriarchy loosens its grip in one area it only tightens it in other arenas'.

Sylvia Walby

The Six Structures of Patriarchy

Walby defines patriarchy as a *'system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women'*. Rather than ascribing to the controversial view that there exists one over-arching form of patriarchy, Walby argues that patriarchy operates in a more complex manner through six unique structures:

- 1) Production relations in the household
 - In the home, a woman must work for free under the expectations of her husband
- 2) Paid work
 - In the working world, women suffer from discriminatory pay, unfair treatment, and often find themselves in less demanding roles than their male counterparts.
- 3) The patriarchal state
 - States can be inherently oppressive to women through policies and laws. Society is fundamentally biased toward the man.
- 4) Male violence
 - This is not random or individual as it might appear. Instead, it operates under patterned and systemic criteria. When states do little else other than condemning male to female violence, they effectively perpetuate it via non-interference.
- 5) Patriarchal relations in sexuality
 - Different rules apply to both genders in social norms and expectations regarding sexual behaviour.
- 6) Patriarchal cultural institutions
 - Many facets of society, namely media, religion, and education, produce and perpetuate portrayals of women through a patriarchal viewpoint. These viewpoints then contribute to women's own understanding of femininity.



'Women are not passive victims of oppressive structures. They have struggled to change both their immediate circumstances and the wider social structures'.

Sylvia Walby

Private and public patriarchies

Finally, Walby argues that there are two distinctive forms of patriarchy that exist in the social world: private patriarchy and public patriarchy.

Private Patriarchy: This form of patriarchy can be found in the household. It sees one individual patriarch (the dominant male) dominate and oppress the subjugated female. Walby believes this acts as an exclusionary tactic as women are prevented from taking part in public discourse.

Public Patriarchy: As inferred from its name, this patriarchy operates in the public world. Most often associated with the working world, public patriarchy is the existence of oppressive factors that still function. In public life, Walby argues, women are more collectively separated from power, wealth, and influence than men are.

Walby asserts that, in the west, there has been a shift in patriarchies. She believes that where private patriarchy was once far more common than its public counterpart, domination of women through a male-orientated world is now more prevalent in the public realm.

In summary

- There are many differing forms of feminism
- Most discuss the role of patriarchy in maintaining female inequalities
- Walby has brought all forms of feminism together and offered her unifying analysis
- She believes that the patriarchy operates in six forms: in the home, in the workplace, via state policies, through male violence, sexuality, and in institutions such as religion and the media
- Walby asserts that there are two main forms of patriarchy: private and public. She believes that women have overcome private patriarchy to a great extent but public patriarchy continues to operate.

Material Consulted

Giddens, A. (2009) *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Walby, S. (1990) *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell