

**Alison Jaggar's Feminist Politics and Human Nature:
Topics and Questions**

1 Several characteristically "liberal" tenets and presuppositions conclusively discredit "liberalism" and "liberal feminism" in Jaggar's view, as potential allies of the "socialist feminism" which she later endorses in Chapter 5.

Among these are attitudes or dispositions which she calls

1.1 **"normative dualism"** (29), which "leads to political solipsism and political skepticism" (42), and

1.2 **"abstract individualism"** (28-29), an "a prioristic" view (44) that "essential human characteristics are properties of individuals and are given independently of any social context" (42);

1.3 a marked tendency to overvalue (narrowly 'instrumental') **"rationality"** (29-31, 44-47); and

1.4 an **"assumption of universal egoism"** (31-33, 45).

In her actual consideration of these conceptual failures, she acknowledges (in effect) that their shadings range widely in historical as well contemporary texts.

In class, for example, I argued that 1.3 and 1.4 would simply be wrong as characterisations of Kant's views, and that it would require a number of tendentious interpretations to attribute 1.2-1.4 to Rawls, much less Wollstonecraft and Mill-Taylor (They do fit Nozick quite well, if he is a "liberal").

Beliefs in the **"social construction"** and **"social constitution"** of human personality, moreover, were warmly endorsed (in different language, of course) by assorted "liberals", as well as utopian socialists such as Robert Owen. But Marx and Engels tended to denounce and/or patronise Owen, Saint-Simon and Fourier (and ignored their 'utopian' socialist-feminist contemporary, William Thompson), in terms that often anticipate the ones Jaggar applies to "liberal feminists".

In any case, it is also somewhat unclear to me how Jaggar's (correct) **"radical"/"socialist"** assertions that gender is **"socially constructed"** differ from assertions that (equally correct) **"liberal"** claims that gender emerges from (repressive) processes of **"socialisation"** -- especially if one holds in suspension Chapter 5's incantatory repetitions of words like **"historical"**, **"historically specific"**, **"historically determined"** and the like.

(There often seems to me little 'historically specific' in left-Hegelian exhortations to 'historical specificity'. One might argue that the more doctrinaire "liberals" reify **"the individual"**, and the more doctrinaire Marxists 'hypostasise' **"History"**. Both attempts usually fail, and often become vacuously 'theoretical' and 'ideological'.)

Might, therefore, some of the distinctions Jaggar draws between **"(left-)liberal feminism"** and **"socialist feminism"** be less substantial than the nuances of her rhetorical claims to **"feminist historical materialism"** suggest?

Might the threefold distinctions Jaggar sketches, moreover, be **reinterpreted**, as a somewhat different (and not quite mutually exclusive) **trichotomy**, of

1.5 feminists who are more **'systemkonform'**, as the Germans put it (the meaning seems obvious); and

two classes of more 'radical' feminist **dissidents**:

1.6 **'sexual-political radical feminists'** (who see women as a **culturally** oppressed class, often **the** culturally oppressed class), and

1.7 **'left-political radical feminists'** (who see women as one of several

economically and culturally oppressed classes, but one whose labor is conspicuously more 'invisible' and exploited than that of any other group)?

(A concluding unscientific postscript, about the words "radical" and "socialist". Jean Jaurès once remarked that there is no one so 'radical' as not to be someone else's 'opportunist'. Someone else -- I've forgotten who -- said that that **Marxism/'scientific socialism'** is an ideology, but **socialism** an ethic.

Both observations seem to me correct.)

2 A cognate question to 1, but **much** shorter.

On page 71, Jaggar pointedly (and accurately) observes that "Marxist functionalism. . . never really explains why it is **women** who do 'women's work'" (emphasis mine).

Using Jaggar's text, other sources of interest to you and your own sense of things (including current social patterns and events), what do **you** think an "explanation" of this oppressive 'coincidence' would require?

Do Jaggar's own arguments in the chapter on "socialist feminism" actually provide such an account?

Are there patterns and influences to which **none** of the three main views listed in Jaggar's 'trichotomy' gives due consideration, in your view?

Do complex forms of internalised '**false consciousness**' reinforce this dreary but near-universal pattern? Does outright **intimidation** enforce it?

3 On page 132, Jaggar writes that

The one solid basis of agreement among socialist feminists is that to overcome women's alienation, the sexual division of labor must be eliminated in every area of life. Just as sexual segregation in nonprocreative work must be eliminated, so men must participate fully in childrearing and, so far as possible, in childbearing. Normative heterosexuality must be replaced by a situation in which the sex of one's lovers is a matter of social indifference. . . . we must remember that the ultimate transformation of human nature at which socialist feminists aim goes beyond the liberal conception of psychological androgyny to a possible transformation of "physical" human capacities, some of which, until now, have been seen as biologically limited to one sex. . . .

These developments may seem farfetched, but in fact they are already on the technological horizon. . . .

Gayle Rubin writes: 'We are not only oppressed as women, we are oppressed by having to **be** women or men as the case may be. . . .

Whereas one version of radical feminism takes the human ideal to be a woman, the ideal of socialist feminism is that women (and men) will disappear as socially constituted categories.

(This is the passage in the text that I glossed in the margin with the pythagorean dictum "σῶμα σῆμα" ("body tomb"), as I mentioned in class).

Recall, by contrast, that Jaggar criticises Shulamith Firestone for her "belief that advanced technology is a prerequisite for women's liberation" on page 93, and remarks that ". . . for both Freud and Firestone, anatomy determines destiny" on page 92.

Recall also that at one point in class, someone observed that the 'technocratic' aspects of some radical feminist utopias -- Firestone's, for example -- seemed to him the only consequential path to liberation for women who honestly confront "the facts".

Is this Jaggar's view also, in the long passage from 132 quoted above (whose 'biologism' is not anticipated in her earlier characterisations of "socialist feminism"), despite the apparent reservations expressed on 92-93?

Or does she partially endorse such counterfactual uses of "advanced technology" ("so far as possible") to distance herself as much as she can from the (merely) "liberal conception(s) of psychological androgyny" she has depreciated passim, and on page 132?

When questioner mentioned above persisted, and asked (appropriately enough) whether it would **not** seem to me better for us somehow, if we were not "sexed", I hesitated for several long seconds.

One reason for my hesitation was that the completely **counterfactual** nature of the question obviated several obvious 'ethical' responses I had in mind (parallel to the ones most people made to the proposals of Firestone):

3.1 that any (surgical) interventions which might **realise** the more thoroughgoing aims Jaggar mentions on page 132 would have to draw massively on the limited resources we have;

3.2 that the results might well "**worse-better**" their intended beneficiaries (another useful Germanism) in unanticipated ways (like a number of other well-intended technological interventions);

3.3 and, finally, that such interventions would be utterly and inherently **elitist: irrelevant** to all of us now, and probably to the poor forever.

For what it's worth, my answer to the other, more explicitly **counterfactual** question remains vaguely Kantian.

What **other** "reasonable beings" we **might** have been, or **would** be, is not **morally** relevant to 'us", so long as 'we' believe 'we' have the capacity to act **now**, as we are.

A drastic change in 'us', in other words, allegedly effected or imposed on us to improve 'our' moral nature(s), would amount to something between an thinly-disguised admission of failure, and a contradiction in terms.

However 'social" the collective "construction" of 'our' identities may be, in short, it seems to me that at some point(s), these identities become ineluctably 'ours'. And 'we' are morally responsible for (changing) them as they are, if 'we' are morally responsible for anything.

(A deconstructing feminist critic, by the way, might well construe such speculations themselves -- both the student's question and my answer -- as instances of a typically "male" desire for "transcendence". What the critic would make of Jaggar's "goal" to "abolish the social relations that constitute humans not only as workers and capitalists but also as women and men", I'm not sure.).

We **are**, however, erratically gentle, heedless, cruel, and wistful forked animals, and this is a great pity. All of us feel this, I think, in moments of empathy and reflection.

But (if I may paraphrase that religious zealot and earnest sexist Pascal) we are also **thinking** and **feeling** forked animals.

And if I may also borrow another well-known line (this time from the Vietnam war), it would also be a great pity, I believe, if 'we' **really** had to **destroy** significant aspects of 'our' physical and moral identities

--including the botch 'we' have made of it "as women and men" (mostly as men) -- in order to 'save' them.

'We' **ought**, in other words, to be able to 'think' and 'feel' our way out of these patterns, or so, at least, I would hope. And if we cannot, so much the worse for 'our' conceptions of social and sexual justice -- and therefore, for 'us'.

What do you think?