

#1618 Forget Equality, Embrace the Feminism of Freedom Members

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [00:00:00] Welcome to this episode of the award-winning *Best of the Left* podcast in which we look at the idea that, although equality has been at the heart of civil rights movements for decades, what we have failed to see is that, in striving for equality, we cannot help but reinforce the unquestioned preexisting structures of society, which themselves may be at fundamental odds with true freedom for all. So maybe we should forget about equality, and focus on freedom.

Sources today include *Politics and Prose*, *The Overpopulation Podcast*, *The Majority Report*, and *Chair in Transgender Studies*, with additional members-only clips from *The Majority Report* and *The Overpopulation Podcast*.

Marcie Bianco — Breaking Free - with Charlotte Clymer - Politics and Prose - Air Date 9-23-23

MARCIE BIANCO: Equality is a lie. It is a myth perpetuated to coax women into complicity with their oppression. Women are not equal to men. No two people are equal. We are not born equal or with equal advantages. We do not experience [00:01:00] life equally.

And while we all eventually die, we do not encounter death on equal terms. We each come from different backgrounds, possess different qualities and talents, cultivate different knowledges and expertise, accrue unique experiences, have distinct desires and needs, and have been systematically advantaged or disadvantaged based on the social identities we have either willingly chosen or had imposed upon us by others.

It is not simply that we are not equal because we are different. Rather, we are not equal because our differences have been manipulated by a society intent on justifying and preserving its traditions and norms. Our differences have been systematized and moralized over generations, such that we have been

conditioned to believe, for example, that men are superior to women and that white people are superior to all black and brown and indigenous people.

In the United States, what [00:02:00] we designate as inequalities -- political, economic, or social -- are nothing but the measured effects of the discrimination of difference in relation to the white supremacist heteropatriarchy.

US social movements fighting against racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ discrimination have found more success in redressing measurable inequalities in laws and policies than in eradicating the pervasive oppressions at the root of this nation and its values -- oppressions that have inflicted incalculable pain and trauma on generations of people.

The feminist movement is one such movement that has measured women's progress in terms of equality. To be clear, the movement is not a monolith. Parallel and often intersecting versions of feminism have coexisted for decades, distinguished by their particular ideologies and players, from single issue to multi issue feminism, liberal to radical feminism, black to White feminism.
[00:03:00]

Despite the plurality of feminisms, the unfortunate fact is that equality feminism has had a stranglehold on the movement's values, political strategies, and agenda for more than a century, while not without some resistance. Equality feminism has been embraced across sectors: government, industry, and media, and commercialized to the point of cultural saturation.

Equality signs everywhere: on billboards and t shirts and mugs and dog collars. The sign, in fact, says it all. Equality's broad acceptance is due in part to its perceived logical simplicity, rendered as equal rights under the law, equal representation in government and industry, and equal participation in society. And American feminism has long held this idea as the solution to systemic misogyny.

But equality will not free us. Women's liberation cannot be achieved through assimilation into patriarchal [00:04:00] institutions. Plenty of radical Black and lesbian feminists have told us this for years. And the current political moment, the unyielding assault on civil rights and the criminalization, imprisonment of people seeking health care proves the lie of equality.

This moment reinforces to us that equality is contingent upon the whims of the people in power. Affirmative Action, case in point.

It's a cruel joke because despite various rights, laws, and legal mechanisms, from voting rights to equal protection and due process, promised as correctives to societal oppression and systemic discrimination, equality remains elusive.

Even worse is how the language of equality is weaponized to protect the status quo, either to assert that equality really exists because it is written into the law or to stymie justice efforts intended to help society's most marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Examples abound from the "separate but equal" clause of Plessy v. Ferguson to the [00:05:00] equal right to vote of the 15th and 19th amendments, to the most recent efforts by conservatives, arguing that "equality begins in the womb," as part of their oxymoronic argument about fetal personhood, which is like my referring to living persons as undead corpses.

Equality as sameness is easily fabricated by collapsing difference. Here the differences in stages of life constituted by time.

Equality feminism proposing that inclusion can lead to a reformation of our misogynist and racist institutions is nothing less than White feminism, which amounts to little more than the white supremacist heteropatriarchy in a dress because these institutions cannot bend. The capitalism undergirding them has proven inescapable because it is an economic system that incentivizes exploitation for profit.

Plenty of feminists have debated equality as our end game. Black and radical feminists in particular have called out [00:06:00] equality as a principle of sameness that relies on the erasure of our differences and a centering of whiteness and patriarchal values. And yet equality has persisted. Feminist scholars have reached a kind of ideological detente with a vague and uninspiring definition of equality as a "negotiation of differences," which ultimately calls for a third entity to determine how to account for people's differences while ensuring their equal value, equal rights and equal opportunity to participate in society.

This commitment to equality demands too much complicity and affords too much grace to white supremacist heteropatriarchal institutions to do the right thing. I mean, we only need to turn to the US Supreme Court to see who has historically set the conditions for the negotiation of our civil rights, and by extension, our humanity.

Equality is both the wrong ideal and the wrong endgame if we truly desire to end systemic racism and misogyny. Feminists cannot smash the patriarchy by [00:07:00] fortifying its walls. Revolution and inclusion are at odds here.

Seeking equality within our existing institutions means desiring to join the very institutions that have depended on women's subjugation.

Angela Saini The Patriarchs 'How Men Came to Rule' - The Overpopulation Podcast - Air Date 2-6-24

ANGELA SAINI: In your research for *The Patriarchs*, you go as far back in history as the current archaeological evidence might allow, and it took you several years of traveling and research to write this book, so we appreciate the depth of work that's gone into this.

What can we learn from archaeological evidence about the existence of gender inequality in prehistoric times?

NANDITA BAJAJ - CO-HOST, THE OVERPOPULATION PODCAST:

It's such a fraught question because we project onto the past, obviously, and we do that even with the recent past, but we do it even more so with prehistory because there's so little we know.

The archaeological data is ambiguous, and especially when you go as far into prehistory as I've had to go, which is more than 9,000-10,000 years—this is pre writing, or as far as we [00:08:00] know, pre writing—so we can't know what people were thinking, we have to infer so much. And that inference involves, of course, a lot of guesswork on the part of the researchers, and when researchers are biased or loaded in the way that they're looking at history, then it can give us a vastly different perspectives on what is happening. And I was conscious of that throughout when I was researching this.

And in fact, I had to keep checking myself to make sure that I wasn't falling into the trap of drawing these big brash narratives about history based on what I would like to be true. And as soon as I stopped doing that and just taking more of a sober look at what we do know, and how ambiguous that evidence is, then the picture you get is one of huge social variation, so many differences in the way people lived and could live. Changes even within settlements over generations. So they would decide on [00:09:00] something, they wouldn't work for them, and then they would choose something else.

A variety of different ways of producing food. So, for example, even hunter gatherers and farmers living with each other, or choosing whatever systems work for them depending on the local environment at the time or the seasons,

and also in gender relations. So the oldest settlement that I was looking at was Çatalhöyük southern Anatolia. So this is in Turkey near the border with Syria, near the Fertile Crescent. So a very famous and well studied part of the world in terms of understanding prehistory. And Çatalhöyük, when it was first excavated in the 1960s caused waves, understandably, because here was a Settlement where thousands of people must have lived, which is very sophisticated. You see houses of the type that we might recognize with walls and windows and, or not windows as we might recognize it now, because actually [00:10:00] people entered and left their homes through holes in their roofs. So they had ladders and that's, that would be how they got in and out of their homes. But there were big frescoes on the walls, beautiful, vivid frescoes of hunting scenes and vultures picking over dead bodies, bull horns embedded in the walls, quite elaborate burial rituals that also involved people sometimes disinterring the dead, plastering their skulls, and then those skulls being passed around.

So much we can recognize, so much that we don't recognize. But in terms of gender, what is very clear, and has only become clearer over time, is that there doesn't seem to have been a huge difference in how men and women lived. As far as we can tell, from the evidence that we have, and it's not exhaustive, It may well change as more of the site is excavated, but from what we can see so far, men and women did pretty much the same kind of work. They ate the same kind of foods. They spent the same amount of time [00:11:00] indoors and outdoors. Children didn't necessarily live with their parents, so we can see that children aren't buried with their biological parents always. And even the height difference between men and women was slight, which I think is important because I write a lot about biology, sex difference, and how that's mediated by how we live, and I think we sometimes underestimate how much sex differences are made more profound by the ways in which we live, in the food we're expected to eat, the quantity of food we're expected to eat.

Even to this day, sometimes I'm surprised that nutrition guidelines... just today I was reading how much water you should drink is divided by men and women. So women should drink this amount, men should drink that amount without any real consideration to the size of the human being. Surely that would be the most important factor. So we live in an age in which we think about this very binary way of imagining gender, but as far as [00:12:00] we can tell in Çatalhöyük, people just didn't think about it that much because it doesn't seem to have been a big part of their lives.

ANGELA SAINI: Yeah. The one that fascinated me the most was this non blood tie notion of family. That family was just kin and biological children were brought up by lots of people, and you weren't necessarily related to be living together. And that's something you talked about also is seen as a really futuristic

notion, but people were living like this thousands of years ago for such a long time. I wonder if it's a way of patting ourselves on the back to believe that we're somehow on the leading edge of some kind of feminism that has never existed before and we're much more futuristic than past societies have been.

NANDITA BAJAJ - CO-HOST, THE OVERPOPULATION PODCAST:

Yeah. And history shows us again and again, increasingly that so much of what we think of as novel now in terms of [00:13:00] equality is not novel at all, because you can see it in different societies throughout time at various moments and various geographical locations, and even into the present, which is why I was so keen to open *The Patriarchs* with mention of matrilineal societies, because I think there is still this widespread misunderstanding that patriarchy is universal, that we all live this way, that there was some single moment in history at which everything changed and now we're just living with the effects of it.

The existence of so many matrilineal societies, which we can't, with any conviction, say are truly patriarchal because generally in these societies, power and authority are shared between men and women and often run along age lines rather than gender lines. We know that there are non patriarchal societies out there. There are some societies that are less patriarchal than others, and patriarchies take on so many different tones and tenors, and they're still being reinvented.

In Afghanistan right now, under the [00:14:00] Taliban, patriarchy is being reinvented for the 21st century. Some of that is drawing on religious ideology or conservative ideology, ideas about tradition in the past, but a lot of that is a manipulation of what we imagine history and tradition to be in order to be suited to the 21st century.

The Fraud Of 'White Feminism' w Kyla Schuller - The Majority Report - Air Date 1-20-22

EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: We have talked about— it's the favorite topic of mine— talking about the perils and pitfalls of White feminism and what it represents, and we've talked about it on the show before, but your book described it in such a succinct way and I loved this definition: 'White feminism is theft disguised as liberation'. Can you explain what you meant by that? And we can start there.

KYLA SCHULLER: Yeah I really wanted to understand the details and contours of what White feminism is and does when I wrote this book. And I think it's so useful the way that people are using this term widely to understand the kind of [00:15:00] feminism that is putting gender above all and then ends up as a result actually leaning in to other forms of inequality like structural racism and capitalism and climate change because of...

EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: ...you lean in there, did you do that on purpose?

KYLA SCHULLER: Exactly. Exactly. And because I'm putting gender above all. But I found that one of the most common ways that we talk about White feminism doesn't actually fully grasp the full extent of the problem. And that is that one of the most common definitions is, White feminism is a kind of feminism that ignores women of color, poor women, and other marginalized folks. And I thought that that idea that White feminism ignores more marginalized people actually is too benign. It underestimates the threat, the extent of the problem, which is that the trouble with White feminism is not that it is committing a sin of omission. It's actually an act of dispossession. [00:16:00] It actually ends up reinforcing other forms of inequality in the struggle to get women to the top. And Sandberg, Sheryl Sandberg being a perfect example of working so hard, as she argues, to get women to be corporate CEOs in contemporary capitalism. The problem is that if the goal is getting women to the top of our current structures, you actually end up reinforcing some of the other inequalities that have created that hierarchy in the first place.

EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: So it creates, it redefines White feminism as an action, as active, as opposed to the more passive exclusion in the way that it had been currently previously discussed.

KYLA SCHULLER: Yeah, exactly. That's a good way of putting it. And then it also means that the solution to it needs to be more active also. The solution to White feminism is not only including people of color, the poor, trans people. It needs to be more active than that. The solution is actually to [00:17:00] dismantling the idea that we can't have a feminism that is ever separate from the fights against racism, wealth inequality, and many of the other structural inequities we have today.

EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: So would you say that White feminism has defanged and depoliticized the feminist movement to a degree? I know that's not a direct process and often that's just sometimes what happens. Over time, like I feel like we saw an example of that

with MLK on Monday, right? Every brand is tweeting out quotes from MLK and every Republican politician has no problem using his name. And I feel that there's a very similar thing that has happened with feminism that you describe.

KYLA SCHULLER: I think it probably might be a little worse than that, though, which is that it's less that it has depoliticized a feminism that fights for real equality, and more that there have always been two distinct different kinds of [00:18:00] feminism that actually have competing politics. And one of those is White feminism that is quite cozy with empire, et cetera. And the other is intersectional feminism, which fights for a broad based structural equality for all.

So, for example, one of the most shocking details I found when I was researching this book was that, according to a recent poll, 42 percent of women who vote Republican in the most recent elections consider themselves feminists. So, it's actually that there is a strong, active, conservative, even sometimes explicit White supremacist feminism alongside this other form of feminism that supports things like Black Lives Matter and police reform or abolition. And recognizing that there is different kinds of feminism, I think actually is one of our central struggles.

EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: So what does White supremacist feminism look [00:19:00] like? Often online you see tiki torches and men, right?, in Charlottesville, if you're thinking of that in like the past five, six years but what you're saying makes total sense. It's not incompatible. It's just maybe that it's not represented in the way that we think about White supremacy in our cultural eco....

KYLA SCHULLER: Yeah. But in a less obvious way, it looks like Ivanka Trump in 2016 on the campaign trail saying 'my dad is a feminist'. In a more explicit way, it looks like the work that sociologist Jessie Daniels has found in researching online platforms like Stormfront and other White supremacist sites that there are actually active groups of women on these... feminist sub threads on these sites, people who support pay equality, people who support some kind of gender balance at home in terms of sharing [00:20:00] workload, and even people who support abortion in these White supremacist sites but often with a caveat that they support abortion for people of color, because they want to prevent more births by people of color, but they don't support abortion for White women because they want to protect a White majority.

Julia Serano Moving Trans History Forward 2023 - Chair in Transgender Studies - Air Date 7-17-23

JULIA SERANO: So, in the 15 years since *Whipping Girls* come out I still sometimes write about cissexism and transmisogyny, but in those years, a lot of my attention has been turned to adjacent matters that grew out, post [Whipping Girls] coming out, that I've been thinking about and grappling with, so I'm going to talk about these two main things.

So the first one was, I was struck by all the parallels that exist between these phenomena and other forms of marginalization. So as but one example, transness and femininity are both routinely mischaracterized as artificial, irrational, superficial, frivolous, and manipulative relative to their cisgender and masculine counterparts, which are typically [00:21:00] seen as sincere, serious in comparison. In *Whipping Girl*, I made the case that these overlapping stereotypes associated with both transness and femininity help drive transmisogyny and also the disproportionate attention that the media has historically played to those of us on the trans feminine spectrum because we're easier to sensationalize and to depict as fake.

Similarly, there are all sorts of parallels between cissexism and heterosexism. Since the latter concept was familiar to a lot of people when I was first giving talks about *Whipping Girl*, I would often make comparisons when I was doing talks about the book. I would make direct comparisons between the two. So I would point out, for example, that both heterosexism and cissexism are centered on the assumption that all people must be heterosexual and cisgender by default. This is what creates the ideas that we are in the closet, that we have to come out, and that we pass.

Furthermore, when we are known to others, heterosexism and [00:22:00] cissexism are what lead people to view us as inherently remarkable. That is, people will comment about the fact that I'm bisexual or transgender in ways that they would never comment about me if I was heterosexual or cisgender. They also lead people to view us as questionable. That is, they may ask, how do you know that you're really bisexual? Or when did you first know that you were transgender? Which are questions that heterosexual and cisgender people never experience.

Basically, both heterosexism and cissexism lead people to project ulterior motives onto us. So, for example, they might say, "you're not bisexual or

transgender, you're just confused", or "you're looking for an alternative lifestyle", or "you're out to sexually deceive other people", and so on.

So notably, the parallels that I've just described between heterosexism and cissexism aren't specific to those two, and actually pop up over and over again with a lot of other forms of marginalization. In [00:23:00] fact, marginalized groups are often viewed as remarkable, questionable, irrational, artificial, and manipulative. So, I wanted to better understand why these recurring features of marginalization happen. But then second, and this was strange being that there are all these parallels that were really obvious to me, is that it struck me that despite these parallels, many people seemed reluctant or incapable of recognizing these connections.

So for instance, back when I was giving early *Whipping Girl* talks, and I would draw comparisons between heterosexism and cissexism, a few people would act baffled, or sometimes incredulous, sometimes even arguing that heterosexism was a real form of oppression, whereas cissexism was a fake concept that was invented by trans activists. Now of course, you could make the exact same argument about heterosexism, which was invented by gay activists in the 1970s.

Here's an even more pertinent [00:24:00] example. So just before *Whipping Girl* came out, I had a chance to talk at an Association for Women in Psychology conference, which is basically, it's a feminist psychology conference. And I was at the plenary talk, and there's this woman who was giving a talk about how feminism informed her experiences as a therapist. And in the middle of the talk, she talks about two trans clients of hers. One on the transmasculine spectrum, one on the transfeminine spectrum, both of whom were considering transitioning.

And when she talked about the transmasculine spectrum client, she was very serious, she referred to the person's gender presentation simply as very butch, and basically the audience listened very seriously and attentively. And then, out of the blue, when she starts talking about the transfeminine person, she became really animated, and she's like, "this person walked into my office, and her hair was like this, and she was wearing this, and she had her makeup done like this", and everyone in the [00:25:00] audience was giggling, and I was like, "Oh my god, I can't believe this is happening at a feminist psychology conference".

And it seemed really obvious to me that if we were at a regular psychology conference and a cis man got up and talked about one of his female clients entering the office and her hair was done like this and she was wearing this, people would be like, oh my god, that's so sexist. And I think that they just

couldn't see the connections because the person who was being described didn't fit their imagined view of who is the victim of sexism.

So, It would have been easy for me to dismiss that all these attendees were transmisogynists through and through, but I don't believe that was the case. And in fact, later in the day, I gave my talk, and I looked it up, because this is a history conference, my talk that day was, The Psychiatric Sexualization of Male to Female Transgenderism. That's very old school talk. And, many of these same audience members came to my talk. So they obviously wanted to hear what a trans woman had to say. [00:26:00] And, since my talk touched upon trans misogyny I decided to use the plenary experience, not in a gotcha sort of way, but in a teachable moment sort of way.

And after my talk, many of these people came up to me afterwards, said they liked my talk, and a few of them expressed their embarrassment that they were one of the people who giggled during that session. And, in talking to them, they were really sincere about the fact that they didn't pick up on how sexist, that comment was. And again, I think this is because that person didn't fit their stereotypical image of who is affected by sexism, well women, aka cis women.

So to be clear, I still think it's really useful to talk about cissexism and transmisogyny and sometimes I write about those things, but it seems to me that there was a really foundational problem that was going on here. One that not only contributes to trans exclusion, but also to the exclusion of other marginalized groups from social justice movements. Basically, even those of us who are dedicated activists are [00:27:00] often not very good applying what we already know and understand about some forms of marginalization when it comes up with somebody who's a new group, who faces obstacles that seem new to us.

Angela Saini The Patriarchs 'How Men Came to Rule' Part 2 - The Overpopulation Podcast - Air Date 2-6-24

ANGELA SAINI: And speaking of the different ways in which that tension exists, the anxiety exists in trying to keep certain people in their place, you discussed specifically the role that patriliney and patrilocality have played throughout history in creating patriarchy. You've shared several personal examples of how patriarchy shows up in India, many of which rang true for me, having grown up there, and seeing it firsthand within my own extended family.

Of course, India's just one example, there are so many across the world. Can you describe the power of those in entrenching and maintaining patriarchy?

NANDITA BAJAJ - CO-HOST, THE OVERPOPULATION PODCAST:

Well, as I said before, there's not one single explanation for why patriarchy exists. The rise of the state is not a [00:28:00] necessary condition, and it's not a sufficient condition either. I think patriliney and patrilocality combined with those other pressures led to the development of patriarchal societies. Because what is patriliney and patrilocality really? It's about saying to women that when you get married, you will no longer live with your childhood kin, you will live with your husband's family. That's the case in modern day patrilocal societies.

And immediately that creates an imbalance of power. Necessarily. It has to. There's no way that it can't, because if you're being taken away from your natural sources of support and becoming alienated in a community or a society in which you have no more natural sources of support, you are immediately vulnerable.

And that's what we see. We see in India famously, but also across the region, across the Middle East and Asia. This is less true, I think, in the West, because people tend to live in nuclear families, but certainly in [00:29:00] societies where extended families are still common, not as common as they used to be, but still common, the in laws are an incredibly important vehicle for the perpetuation of patriarchy, especially mothers in law. We neglect this, I think, the role that women play in the perpetuation of these deeply damaging ideologies, I think because it doesn't fit well into the way that we imagine gender depression. We tend to flatten it out. We think that all men are oppressing all women, but it doesn't really work like that. There are layers to this, and they operate in different ways.

But as the sociologist Denise Candiotti wrote in the 1980s, what you see within the patriarchal family are these bargains happening, these patriarchal bargains, where the older women know that in order to make it the best for themselves out of the situation that they're in, their only real source of authority is over the new younger women coming into the family. They [00:30:00] exercise that control over them in the same way that would have been done to them. And as Candiotti writes, the daughters in law endure this in the knowledge that one day they will have sons, their sons will marry, and then they will be the mothers in law, and then they will exercise the authority and power over that next generation. And that power can be immense.

Fatema Mernissi, the Moroccan sociologist wrote, this is many decades ago, how in traditional Moroccan families, the mother in law was such an important

figure, such a figure of authority in her household, that the mother was like the only person a man is allowed to love at all. He's not really allowed to love his wife because that would mean splitting loyalties. It would mean exchanging that power, giving her more power than his mother might have. Daughters in law were expected to kiss their mother in law's hand and call her Lala, which means mistress, which is again the language of slavery, of [00:31:00] ownership.

So that dynamic, I think, is important for us to understand how within patriarchal societies in which women are disadvantaged, women can still lobby and negotiate for power, knowing that it disadvantages them at certain stages in their life, but really having no other choice.

ANGELA SAINI: You give the example of female genital mutilation, that is instigated often by mothers and aunts onto these young women. And that's, I think, also another really great example of how layered the oppression is.

NANDITA BAJAJ - CO-HOST, THE OVERPOPULATION PODCAST:

Yeah, and it's wrapped up in, like I said, age. Age is a very important axis of power that we sometimes don't think about that much, because we all age, I guess, so we all acquire that sense of authority or respect as we get older, or to some degree we do. But also tradition is wound up in so many different aspects of our life that become interlinked. And tradition is a very [00:32:00] powerful one. This is part of the reason that FGM continues, is because it seems a traditional practice, and just be seen as an authentic or traditional person, you have to be seen to keep doing that over generations. So these mothers and aunts who are encouraging their girls to get cut, knowing how painful it is, knowing how traumatizing it can be, are doing it because it will be easier for them to get married then, because they are then fitting into society.

But to some extent, don't we all do that all the time? Don't we all instill things in our children that we know are maybe not the very best for them, but we know will help them fit into society, that will smooth their passage through life, given the society that we're in? The fact that until relatively recently, people were so dismissive and judgmental of gay people, mothers and fathers themselves would disown their own children for being gay, because they wouldn't fit into society, because then they [00:33:00] wouldn't fulfill the pattern that was required in order to be part of the world in the way that they needed them to be part of the world.

And all of this, for me, it comes back to this fundamental question of who do we exist for? What the patriarchal state has done is made us believe that we exist for the state, that we exist for an entity that doesn't really ultimately care for us that much, necessarily. I mean, it may, depending on the state, be more

benign or less benign, but we will forgo our own relationships with the people we love, we will sacrifice those relationships because of the sense of duty to the state. And that psychologically is why patriarchy continues to have so much power, because it has wheedled its way in to our minds to make us believe that we owe the world a version of ourselves that may not be true to who we are at [00:34:00] all just because we've been told by the state that that's how we should live.

Marcie Bianco — Breaking Free - with Charlotte Clymer Part 2 - Politics and Prose - Air Date 9-23-23

CHARLOTTE CLYMER: You make a point early in the book that knocked me over sideways, because -- that happened several times in the book, by the way. But this really blew me away. Because it's not just laypersons who don't know how to define equality. You talk about the University of Chicago Social Survey. Tell us about this, because this blew me away.

MARCIE BIANCO: Okay. This is wild. This is another moment in time where I thought, I need to write this book. I was writing an article about a new general social survey report based on 40 years of GSS data that a scholar at the University of Chicago, Newark, was doing. And the end product that came out in the report, the running headline was like, More people want equality in the workplace and in the home.

And I was tasked as a freelance writer to write an article about this survey. So of course I tracked down the survey, dug around. There was no [00:35:00] definition of equality provided, not just in that report or the most recent survey, but I asked The GSS folks, the staff, I emailed them and I said, Have you ever provided any respondent a definition of equality? Because if I'm answering questions about equality, I would like to have, for level setting purposes, I would like to have a set definition so that we all are operating on a shared understanding of what this huge term is, the operational term of the study.

And they emailed me back saying, No, we don't give anyone a definition of equality. Which blew my mind because I thought equality means different things to different people, depending on your ideological beliefs. If I came from a particular background, I could believe that equality literally means my wife stays at home and raises the children. There are very strict gender roles in accordance with my ideological beliefs, and therefore she has her equal domestic space, [00:36:00] and I have my workplace space. Therefore, we are

equal, one and one, half of a whole. That is one way, possibly, someone could define equality.

So really, to me, the definition is subjective, but it just blew me away that there was an actual survey that did not provide respondents from all across America, just a set definition, because how are you supposed to come to any conclusion about cultural understandings of equality without providing just a definition?

So that, yeah, that really blew me away. That was something else that I locked away and, said, Oh this has to come back later somehow.

CHARLOTTE CLYMER: It's crazy because we're both nerds, right? We're both very steeped in nerdiness. And the folks who did the survey are nerds. The folks who read those kind of surveys are nerds.

And yet this is the first time I've ever seen anyone point out with one of these surveys, by the way, did you define this term for people?

MARCIE BIANCO: But you know what? And apologies to every [00:37:00] sociologist out there. So my background, I studied politics and I love politics. And then I went into literature because a Shakespearean blew up in my mind. And I was like, wow, language and words and how we communicate and share our space with each other and grow and make culture, right? This is in college because I didn't have books as a kid. It was just so earth shattering to me.

Oh my God, what was I saying? Remind me of what I was saying. I lost my train of thought.

CHARLOTTE CLYMER: Social survey.

MARCIE BIANCO: Oh yes. So a couple of years ago I took up a job at a gender research institute run by sociologists, and they would run these similar surveys. I was the communications editorial director. And I would ask them if they would have actual definitions of major terms that they were operating upon, that they were drawing conclusions for. And there was no attention to definition or language or just even like cultural differences in how language was being used, because they were sociologists; they weren't linguists. They weren't [00:38:00] really involved in the word play, like the language play, the culture play, of language.

So I actually don't think it's unique for sociologists, but then, someone's going to come and strike me down. Let me preface this by that's just my personal experience.

CHARLOTTE CLYMER: But that is very worrisome, right? We're trying to get to a point where we do have a society in which all people are liberated. And even the folks who are pushing this and studying it don't even know how to define the terms, or haven't come to a common term that everyone can agree on. That's worrying.

MARCIE BIANCO: And I, there are a few things about that. One, again, equality exists in application. It is an artifice that needs to be constructed. It is not organic. I think there's something that -- even though this is an ideas book and again, it's toothy, but I think people can really feel like, Oh, there are moments in my life when I have felt free, and I know that I understand my capacity for freedom, or that I understand my situation and what I'm capable of through dialogue with other people. [00:39:00] Hannah Arendt said you need to be in intercourse with people to understand your freedom, which I thought was different uses of the word. But I guess you could mean that like how we understand intercourse today.

But equality really depends on the people, again, the people in power who are writing those laws, who are implementing those laws and policies. So it really depends on how, say, a law is applied and practiced within an institution. And I use the metaphor of a Play Doh mold. If you have a white man-made mold, and you squeeze through an amorphous concept like equality, it's gonna come out the other side looking like that mold. And yet we continue to be really disappointed with any kind of equality measure. It just never satisfies. And at the same time, I always think in our daily lives, how does that, if we live by a politics of equality, then what does that mean about how I understand my desires, my dreams, my aspirations? Does it have to be hemmed into an equality mindset? Which feels very [00:40:00] limiting to me.

And something I didn't write about a lot in the book, but something I wrote about for NBC this past year was the Respect for Marriage Act, which was passed and it actually does not codify equal marriage, but it ensures protections for marriages that already exists. The only reason that passed, the only right reason that Republican senators got on board, was that they were able to shoehorn in like a Trojan horse all of these religious liberty protections. And we're seeing them being weaponized now in states across the nation to prevent -- right? I feel like our politics, it's like we're waiting for breadcrumbs, waiting for this equality, and yet we're going to be always disappointed and it's never going to be good enough in order to create a society where we feel we have

meaningful lives, where we respect each other, and where we feel, I don't know, cared for, like care is such an important part of what I'm trying to do and it's integral to my definition of freedom.

So how do we feel cared for by each other [00:41:00] and in our society, but also by our institutions? But that's my own ideological beliefs that we live in society, for better or for worse, even if you put on your little VR glasses and abscond to your metaverse, you still live in society.

So we should actually act like we live in society with each other.

Marcie Bianco — Breaking Free - with Charlotte Clymer Part 3 - Politics and Prose - Air Date 9-23-23

MARCIE BIANCO: Feminists need a new tool, a new guiding idea, that allows us to build a society on something other than patriarchal values and to cultivate lives not circumscribed by them. One that finds dignity in difference, and from that recognition helps us create a society that cherishes independence and interdependence, autonomy and belonging, accountability, care, and justice. And that idea, I believe, is freedom.

And just a little on freedom. I'm gonna give you a little bit more.

In this book, I unpack the lie of equality to show how this long cherished ideal no longer serves the feminist movement. I take up feminist scholar Linda Zerilli's call to action. [00:42:00] What if instead of thinking about and practicing a feminism under the banner of equality, we thought and practiced feminism under the banner of freedom? To propose that freedom is the tool we need to revitalize feminism and cultivate more dignified, caring, and joyful lives. It can usher us beyond visibility, representation, false equivalences, and the harmful expansion and replication of systems of oppression.

I define freedom as an ongoing process of self-creation and world building rooted in accountability and care. Freedom practices are those that foster our authenticity and honor the dignity of all people. They demand the recognition of our mutual coexistence. Freedom means, for example, reorienting our thinking about our health, not as personal health, but as public health; of healthcare, not

as a personal matter, but as a public responsibility; and reconceptualizing our politics to recognize healthcare, not as a personal benefit afforded by our employer, but as a public good provided by our government.[00:43:00]

In this sense, freedom is both a personal ethics and a collective politics. The practices of freedom are grounded in the development of a critical consciousness of how our mutual coexistence necessitates working toward our mutual freedom. The internal work and external practice continuously inform each other and evolve through our encounters and relationships over time.

The political power of this freedom work is that it can build movements that intermingle, deconstruct, and redeem spaces that have been historically exclusionary and toxic, and that generate intersectional frameworks and policies that intend to make all of us feel safer and feel more cared for and enbue us with a sense of belonging.

One freedom practice threaded through this book is the creation of our gender, both in our choice of an identity and in the stylistic expression of who we are and are becoming. Equality feminism, I argue, relies on the gender binary, which binds women to men. [00:44:00] But what if we freed ourselves of the mindset that has conditioned us to understand woman through men's gaze and values? And what if we understood that this liberation did not erase women, but removed the traditional strictures of womanhood? And that woman is not half of a whole, but rather can be a constellation, abundant in its variety? How might this mutual recognition and respect for all women transform our politics? How might it liberate us from a standpoint of oppression and a scarcity mindset that has us fighting each other about who gets to be a woman, and instead allow us to imagine new ways to strengthen and enlarge our freedom to care for ourselves and each other?

BONUS The Fraud Of 'White Feminism' w Kyla Schuller Part 2 - The Majority Report - Air Date 1-20-22

EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: So I guess let's move a little bit forward. I want to go through a lot of these examples, but let's talk about Harriet Beecher Stowe versus Harriet Jacobs in this time period. Tell us a little bit about the way in which, I guess I don't know how to describe it, but there was a contrast in the way that [00:45:00] White versus Black feminists were owning their own power to a degree. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

KYLA SCHULLER: Yeah, so Harriet Beecher Stowe, of course, wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was the second best selling novel of the entire 19th Century in the United States. And it's a novel that really positions White women as the saviors of enslaved people, that they will be the teachers, trainers, really discipliners of their servants and of the enslaved. And that's part of her vision of abolition. Versus Harriet Jacobs, who is another really compelling figure, you know, extraordinary figure actually. And someone who it's amazing we don't have five movies about Harriet Jacob's life 'cause among many things that she did was when she self emancipated from slavery to run away from her enslaver, she actually hid in a tiny attic [00:46:00] space so small, she couldn't even stand up. And she hid there for seven years until she had the opportunity to take a boat north and escape North Carolina. She wanted to tell her story to support the abolition movement in the 1850s and had a colleague approach Harriet Beecher Stowe to say, Hey, could you write this person's story? And, you know, Harriet Jacobs escaped in part because of the sexual abuse she was suffering at the hands of her enslaver. And they thought, Well, Harriet Beecher Stowe might be the right person to bring that view of the sexual abuse element of slavery into the national eye. Instead Harriet Beecher Stowe said, Thank you for telling me these details of this amazing story of her hiding in the attic for seven years, I'm going to use these details in my next book. And then never replied to any of the increasingly desperate letters afterwards saying, No, we're not asking you to steal this woman's story. And Harriet Jacobs was [00:47:00] so incensed that she actually wrote her own story. She was lucky enough that she was literate from youth. And it is now, you know, deemed the most important woman's slave autobiography. She's the first Black woman to publish her own story, and she actually literally published it herself because she couldn't find a publisher to support it. And it's a brilliant example of the kind of self determination that guided intersectional feminism.

And meanwhile, Harriet Beecher Stowe becomes the sort of patron saint of abolition. And then after reconstruction, she and her husband bought the largest orange plantation in Florida so that she herself could experiment with disciplining and civilizing the formerly enslaved. And there are really dramatic examples of that sort of self-led versus White maternalist version of feminism that tried to enact a literal theft.

EMMA VIGELAND - CO-HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: And that brings us back to what we were talking about with Afghanistan, [00:48:00] and it's, it's just a thread through colonialism, as well. We are going to civilize this population, and it's all inherently very narcissistic, of course. And we had someone write in to ask you a question, and so I don't want to move past that, even though we're going a little bit backwards about Stanton. Margo from Mass writes in, "I had read that Stanton and the early conferences were originally

urged to work for suffrage by Frederick Douglass, and they didn't agree on it as a goal until Douglass encouraged them to fight for it as a means to get other rights. Is that true?"

KYLA SCHULLER: It is absolutely true. I mean, it's really one conference. The conference is often considered the start of women's rights in the U. S., and this is the famous 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. And Stanton had said, We want to support the fight for women to vote. And nobody would support it until Douglass stood up. And Douglass was the only Black person in the entire [00:49:00] many hundred person convention. And he said, I will not fight for my rights without fighting for the rights of women. And then the vote passed, but it wouldn't have passed In 1848 without Douglass, which made her later betrayal of him and of the rights of African Americans, especially poignant.

BONUS Angela Saini The Patriarchs 'How Men Came to Rule' Part 3 - The Overpopulation Podcast - Air Date 2-6-24

ANGELA SAINI: I mean, even in the current political and media narratives that we see how the decline in fertility rates is being reported as a panic because all these older people who are no longer productive are now being seen as burdens to society. And then women are measured in their ability to reproduce. And as you've said the way motherhood has been internalized by so many women because it's been pushed for so many thousands of years as the norm, but then you also talk about the first Roman emperor who actually [00:50:00] legislated marriage under the guise of, Well, that's just what's natural. Women just want to have children and they need to be under the control of their husbands. But the question you posed at the end of that was very interesting: Well,, if it's natural, why do we need to legislate something, unless it's for the state?

NANDITA BAJAJ - CO-HOST, THE OVERPOPULATION PODCAST: Yeah, you're right. I mean, again and again, what you see in antiquity... so antiquity comes after all of this. So, here in ancient Greece and Rome, we see the final effects of a state that is deeply preoccupied by what's happening in the family and really takes it to its absolute limits. And I think in ancient Athens you see, that most of all, the emergence of this idea of the oikos and the polis, that whereas humans before would have just lived in a quite casual communal way, but now there are spaces for women and there are spaces for men. There's a domestic and there's a public, and there's this gendered division in terms [00:51:00] of who occupies which space, at least for certain classes. And of

course, this isn't really true for the working classes who are still living the same way.

But the literature from ancient Greece is deeply misogynistic. It is so, like, dripping with this hatred of women, suspicion, and fear. And we have to ask ourselves why? Why would societies be so afraid of half of their own populations? Why would they have that kind of dripping misogynistic fear or anxiety, which is the way I prefer to see it in ancient Athens, it's as anxiety. And of course, an unequal society is always an anxious one. It has to be because it is predicated on keeping a certain group of people in their place, telling people what to do, knowing deep down that they are imposing rules on people that perhaps they don't naturally occupy, that they're not naturally comfortable with.

Slave owning societies are the same. [00:52:00] They've always been anxious, uncomfortable, you know, wrestling not only with their own moral anxieties, but also the understanding that things could change, that the slaves could uprising and things could be very different. And you certainly see that in ancient Greek literature and ancient Roman literature in, for example, the myth of the Amazons, you know, race of women who are stronger than the men who are more powerful and could easily overtake them.

But you see that in other cultures, too. There are so many cultural myths about the power that women used to have that was then taken away and the need to put women back in their place. Why would you do that unless you were anxious, unless you felt that this was an unnatural way to organize yourself?

ALAN WARE - CO-HOST, OVERPOPULATION PODCAST: And that's interesting. I had no idea, as you mentioned, Egyptians, Spartans, others, were not nearly as strong, gender-defined, and oppressed as the Greeks. And that the Greeks then influenced the Romans, which then influenced [00:53:00] Europe. And then the fact that the polis, the public part, actually you mentioned ends up oppressing women more, right? The division between the oikos, the house, or domestic...

NANDITA BAJAJ - CO-HOST, THE OVERPOPULATION PODCAST: Yeah, it is fascinating. And often in Western societies, at least, we draw on ancient Greece as a kind of template, a model for how a perfect society should be organized. Although we do that selectively, you know, we don't take everything, we only take certain things. And some of those certain things, for instance, are democracy and... famously, ancient Greece was the birthplace of democracy. We choose to forget that these were democracies that deliberately excluded, of course, slaves, certain classes of people, and women. Although

when we recreated democracy later in modern states, we borrowed that. We didn't have to, but we did.

And I think that speaks to the way that power works in every generation, in every society and civilization, is that those [00:54:00] in power almost always try and take from tradition and history, but they're always selective in the way that they do it. Why did they not borrow, for instance, from ancient Egypt, contemporary to ancient Athens, a society in which women had a lot of power, they worked in the professions, they were medics, they were very well educated, very well read. We know that there were famous Egyptian pharaohs, queens, who were women. But no, that's not what we borrowed from. The men deliberately chose to borrow from what was perhaps one of the weirdest societies even by the standards of its time.

Final comments on what the path beyond equality and toward freedom looks like

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: We've just heard clips today, starting with Marcy Bianco at *Politics and Prose* reading from her book, *Breaking Free*. *The Overpopulation Podcast* looked at some archeological evidence for egalitarian societies. *The Majority Report* brought racism into the discussion of historical feminism. Julia Serrano was featured on *Chair in Transgender Studies*, discussing the [00:55:00] sexism infused into discussions of trans identity. *The Overpopulation Podcast* discussed how adherence to expectations of society is strong enough to destroy personal relationships, including family relationships. *Politics and Prose* spoke with Marcie Bianco about the fruitlessness of defining equality. And finally, Marcie Bianco read another passage from *Breaking Free*.

That's what everybody heard, but members also heard bonus clips from *The Majority Report* further discussing some of the embedded racism in early feminism. And *The Overpopulation Podcast* went back as far as ancient Greece and Rome to understand the effects of having the state deeply preoccupied with what's happening within the family.

To hear that and have all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly to the new members only podcast feed that you'll receive, sign up to support the show at bestoftheleft.com/support, or shoot me an email requesting a financial hardship membership, because we don't let a lack of [00:56:00] funds stand in the way of hearing more information.

Now to wrap up. Freedom, I will admit, is not exactly a policy prescription. In fact, the author of *Breaking Free*, in the discussion that we heard parts of today and during a part that I didn't have time to play, was pretty open about being more focused on the big ideas and letting the policy be crafted by other people who are not her. But I do think that freedom is a useful re-imagining of the direction that both advocacy and policy should go. And this might be more easily understood with a negative example.

So, the focus on achieving marriage equality as part of the broader LGBTQ rights movement was both energizing, but also limiting. And I've heard from people inside the movement that once marriage equality was affirmed by the Supreme court, nearly all of the energy and particularly the funding of the movement dried up, [00:57:00] leaving very little left over to continue other related LGBTQ fights, including trans rights more broadly. So, in that example, you can see how the fight for equality created a sort of finish line that, when crossed, felt like an end to many. Whereas a focus on freedom broadens the perspective in multiple directions. It expands the scope of the avenues we may want to take, both policy-wise as well as culturally, and it also lengthens the time horizon we're working on, so that people really understand the bigger picture and don't mistakenly pack up and leave early.

And to be clear, you do need wins along the way. So, you need sort of intermittent goals that you're working to achieve, but it should all be understood as part of a much bigger project that needs continuous effort and funding.

So continuing with the marriage equality example, not [00:58:00] everyone wants to get married. And I think people find that sort of shocking when they first hear it. I actually remember when I first heard that and was sort of shocked by it. Well, not that there were people who didn't want to get married, but that there were members of the LGBTQ community who opposed the fight towards marriage equality. I just remember my mind being blown by that. 'Cause it was like, Why would you not want everything that is the same as what everyone else has? And the answer is just like, Yeah, that's just not what I'm interested in. Like, I just don't want to fight for a thing I don't want, was kind of the answer. As like, I want to fight for my right to do what I want and not be penalized for it.

So, in the marriage equality example I've, I've heard it described - marriage - as coming with 'administrative privilege'. You know, you get all those benefits that married couples get either in the tax code or other things like hospital visitation privileges, et cetera. In a [00:59:00] freedom mindset, we wouldn't force anyone to adhere to traditional marriage ideals just to access these types of what should be basic rights for people. Marriage equality should have been a no brainer,

right? It's just like, Yeah, obviously. Anyway, moving on. Marriage rejection, without penalty for those who want to opt out, that's an example of one of the steps on the path to freedom.

That is going to be it for today. As always keep the comments coming in. I would love to hear your thoughts or questions about this or anything else. You can leave a voicemail or send us a text at 202-999-3991 or simply email me to jay@bestoftheleft.com. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to our Transcriptionist Quartet, Ken, Brian, Ben, and Andrew, for their volunteer work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to [01:00:00] Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic designing, web mastering, and a bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to those who already support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships. You can join them today by signing up at bestoftheleft.com/support, through our Patreon page, if you prefer, or from right inside the Apple podcast app. Membership is how you get instant access to our incredibly good and often funny bonus episodes, in addition to there being extra content, no ads, and chapter markers in all of our regular episodes, all through your regular podcast player. You'll find that link in the show notes, along with a link to join our Discord community, where you can also continue the discussion.

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