

Feminist social theories put to the test

April 27 2009

A dissertation at Örebro University in Sweden brings to light major weaknesses in feminist social theories. They are untenable, far too undeveloped, and laden with insoluble internal problems of logic.

“Feminist social theories provide us with an ideologically colored picture of society,” maintains Helen Lindberg.

"As social scientists, we are duty-bound to follow a scientific ethos, otherwise no one benefits, not even women. Instead it hurts the struggle for gender equality. I am writing this dissertation in the hope that it will further the struggle for gender equality in society."

The dissertation examines four comprehensive theories that each claims to address the issue of how we should be able to understand and explain gender inequality and the unbalanced power relations between the sexes today. The theories - Anna G. Jónasdóttir's Theory of Love Power, Catharine M. MacKinnon's radical feminism, Luce Irigaray's gynocentric distinctivist feminism, and Judith Butler's queer feminism - are very different from each other and offer different answers to the question.

Helen Lindberg feels it is unfruitful to use the theories for social scientific research on gender relations, since they rest on starkly ideological foundations and evince faulty internal coherence.

The theories offer little or no scope for the individual to be able to change or develop society and have difficulties accomodating empirical

evidence. The dissertation also discusses the political goals that the theories can be seen as leading to.

“Some of them are clearly utopian and others are vague and quite undeveloped,” says Helen Lindberg.

Helen Lindberg points to the splintering within the Swedish political party Feminist Initiative as an example of what happens in politics when the various feminist ideological positions meet.

It was not only that the party consisted of different strong-willed individuals. The members also based their convictions on different feminist ideologies, and when they were not compatible, strife ensued.

Instead, feminist social theories, like other normative and ideologically based social theories, such as Marxism and Liberalism, should be regarded as aids in establishing what problems need to be addressed. Helen Lindberg also points out that there is a parallel between Marxism and feminism regarding their development as scientific and ideological projects in that both have always had a close relationship with liberation-oriented political action.

Helen Lindberg also points to the development from feminism to postfeminism. Post feminism rejects the fundamentals of feminist theory and the previous foundations. Postfeminism shifts and expands the feminist focus from the relation between women and men to also include gender identities regardless of sex, for example, as urgent both as a research focus and for political attention.

In her youth Helen Lindberg was fascinated by Marxist-oriented radical feminism, but she found it wanting when it came to dealing with the experiences of different women.

“Writing the dissertation has been like plunging into a fierce wrestling match with my own convictions,” says Helen Lindberg.

Source: The Swedish Research Council

Citation: Feminist social theories put to the test (2009, April 27) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-04-feminist-social-theories.html>

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