

# What *Do* Radical Feminists Want?

*by Betty McLellan*

**Brisbane International Feminist Conference  
Paper given on 3 September 2008**

The title of my paper is: WHAT *DO* RADICAL FEMINISTS WANT? In a nutshell? We want the neoliberal, postmodern madness to stop! And a focus on ethical issues like justice and human rights to be reinstated. That's what we want. Because it's the only chance women will ever have of being given a fair go.

So, first, a couple of definitions --

**Neoliberalism** - what does it mean?

Neoliberalism has been defined as "the worship of the 'market' and subordination of (everything else)... to its demands..." (Accion Zapatista de Austin, quoted in Clarke 2004).

Again - another quote: "The ultimate goal of neoliberalism is a universe where every action of every being is a market transaction, conducted in competition with every other being and with every other transaction..."

(Paul Treanor, quoted in Clarke 2004).

That's the philosophy of neoliberalism.

## **Postmodernism** - a definition.

Postmodernism is the belief that truth as we knew it has ended, that society is based, instead, on the decline of absolute truths and the rise of relativity. In other words, there is no truth. There are no 'answers', only perspectives (Hewett,

<http://www.hewett.norfolk.sch.uk/curric/soc/POSTMODE/post11.htm>).

No ethical positions, only theories about multiplicities of identities.

Everything is relative.

Catharine MacKinnon explains that the target of postmodernism is reality. "Postmodernism ... derealizes social reality by ignoring it, by refusing to be accountable to it ...", in fact, claiming that 'it' is not there (2006, p. 49). There is no such thing as reality!!

Now, is that weird or is it weird? If you find postmodernism hard to understand, join the club. Even postmodern academics can't understand it because it's always in flux. Everything keeps changing.

You see, what WE know is that the thing that is real is *reality* and if they honestly believe that reality doesn't exist, then they're left with nothing but word-games. Catharine MacKinnon accuses postmodernism of "pretending to be profound while being merely obscure ...", using lots of difficult words and concepts but "fairly often ... (not saying) much of anything" (p. 49). Just a couple of weeks ago on Radio National's *Big Ideas* program, Clive Hamilton referred to the "...empty chatter of postmodernism" (Hamilton, 2008).

Now, this is the world we live in and, weird as it might be, we must do all that we can to understand what we're dealing with. Why is it so difficult to get governments and community leaders to listen to what we're saying about the oppression of women, about men's violence against women, about rape, the harms done to all women by the existence of

prostitution and pornography? Because we live in a world which is saturated with neoliberal and postmodern ideas, and politicians and their advisers are peddling really hard to get up to speed with those ideas because they don't want to be seen as yesterday's men and women. It's cool to be seen to be operating according to neoliberal and postmodern imperatives.

So, why do we radical feminists call it madness and why do we want it all to stop? Because when the market is all that matters, as in neoliberalism, when greed and competition and profit are raised as the be-all and end-all of life, it means that people can be treated as commodities. And when human life is commodified, experience shows that it is WOMEN who are bought and sold, women who suffer, and women's experiences of injustice that are ignored. And postmodernism adds to the injustice by suggesting that the reality of violence against women and exploitation of women doesn't actually exist! There is no such thing as women's reality. Indeed, there's no such category as "women".

Diane Bell and Renate Klein, in their book *Radically Speaking* added: When women "... no longer exist as a social category ... women's on-going multifaceted oppressions by men ... are deemed at best irrelevant, at worst non-existent" (1996, p. XX).

So, you see, we who care about women's human rights are fighting an uphill battle. We and our issues are deemed irrelevant and we are silenced.

BUT, the thing is - we keep on speaking! That's the good news. No one can render us silent if we keep on speaking out! And in terms of sexual exploitation of women and girls, we *do* keep on demanding an ethical response. Look at prostitution.

A market response to prostitution is that it's an industry, and feminists have no right to interfere with a legitimate, legal business. Yes, it's true that Labor governments in several States have legalised prostitution. Left-leaning men and women, left-leaning governments, are often apologists for the prostitution industry - and that's really disappointing. De Clarke, in her excellent article in the book *Not for Sale* [by the way, you'll find some of the books I've mentioned at the Spinifex book stall. Be sure to take a look.] De Clarke points out that "Left-leaning apologists for prostitution" echo the neo-liberal stance. They say, and this is a quote from De Clarke, "(p)rostitutes ... choose their line of work in a free market; they are rational agents. To criticise the industry which exploits them, or even to say that they are exploited, is to deny their agency. To attempt to regulate or restrict it is only to deny them 'opportunities' and 'choices' (2004, p. 170).

You see the market language of neoliberalism used to justify the exploitation of women in prostitution? It's "work" in a "free market". They're called free "agents" and the market frowns on any attempt to deny their "agency". They must have "opportunities" and be allowed to make their own individual "choices".

All of this language of neoliberalism excludes, makes no room for, frowns on, ethical analysis of any kind. But, we radical feminists insist that nothing involving people's lives can escape ethical analysis. Questions **MUST** be asked, like:

- . Who benefits from prostitution?
- . Who is being harmed by prostitution?
- . How does the existence of prostitution affect relationships between women and men? How does it affect the family unit?

. What does it say about any hope of equality between the sexes when one sex can be used and exploited and, in many instances, abused by the other sex - simply because they are said to have entered into a market transaction?

. To what extent does the existence and the legalisation of prostitution entrench the subordinate status of women in general?

These are the ethical questions which must be asked - and we will keep asking them.

Of great concern, too, are all the other "enterprises" spawned by or, at least, encouraged by the prostitution and pornography industries. Is there any Brisbane feminist who could forget the Nude Car Wash enterprise a couple of years ago - another novel business enterprise in which young women were exploited and degraded? Men were invited to bring their cars in and watch as semi-naked or fully naked young women washed their cars. [Naked or semi-naked depended on how much the patron was willing to pay.]

In response to the demonstrations and angry protests by feminists and other women in Brisbane, the man at the centre of it all who hoped to make a tidy profit complained that it was his right in a free market and that none of the young women were being forced to do it.

A similar enterprise has recently been in the news in New Zealand where a local government politician in Auckland sought court action to ban an annual Boobs on Bikes event. A parade of topless women riding bikes. The District Court judge's ruling was that the by-law under which the councillor brought her action was unenforceable, so the event was able to go ahead. The "innocent" entrepreneur - a man who, I am told, pimps a group of prostitutes and is also an active pornographer - is now

threatening to sue the councillor for interfering with his right to pursue a market opportunity.

The world has gone mad!! And it's women and girls, all of us, who are being demeaned.

These are examples of neoliberal madness. But, let me finish with a recent example of postmodern madness which I know stirred up a lot of division in the Australian community, including division among feminists. I refer to the controversy around the seizure by police of the works of artist Bill Henson during a raid on the gallery where they were being shown. The works that were seized are photographs in varying poses of a fully naked 12 year old girl as the central figure. When our Prime Minister was asked what he thought of the photographs, he said very honestly that he was appalled by them, that children should be allowed to be children and that, regardless of the mother's permission, posing nude and being seen by everyone who goes to the gallery or on the Internet, will have a negative effect on that 12 year old child - if not now, then later.

On the one side of the controversy were the artists and others (including some feminists) who insisted that this was a freedom of speech issue. An artist must be allowed to express himself/herself. Viewed as art, they say, these photographs are not pornographic. They are sensitive depictions of a girl's body at an interesting stage in her development.

On the other side were radical feminists, right-wing Christians, the Prime Minister and lots of concerned parents. We, radical feminists, said: This is child pornography dressed up as art. They said - everything is relative in a postmodern age. Everything is in the eye of the beholder.

There is no right or wrong in art. Now, I only saw two of the photos that were doing the rounds on email lists -

. one was of the naked girl taken at a distance and somewhat misty, thereby increasing the titillation value.

. the other leaves nothing to the imagination in terms of pornography.

The young, naked girl is bending right over while a young naked boy (about the same age) is standing behind her, right up against her, holding her hips as if having sex with her, and possibly anal sex.

. another one I heard described in this way: "a naked girl is restrained by a naked boy, with both arms around her throat, while another naked girl takes hold of her legs..." (Devine, 2008).

Well, you be the judge of whether or not some of the photos are pornographic.

The world has gone mad!

Our task as feminists who care about social justice and, in particular, justice for women and girls, is to be steadfast in our determination and continue to insist that our society, indeed, that the world replace the current market obsession, the current postmodern emptiness and meaninglessness, with an obsession about ethics and justice and human rights for all.

## References

- Bell, Diane and Renate Klein, eds. 1996. *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*. North Melbourne: Spinifex.
- Clarke, D.A. "Prostitution for everyone: Feminism, globalisation, and the 'sex' industry". In Stark, Christine and Rebecca Whisnant, eds. 2004. *Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography*. North Melbourne: Spinifex. pp. 149-205.
- Hamilton, Clive. "The freedom paradox". ABC Radio National - Big Ideas. 24th August 2008.  
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bigideas/stories/2008/2340913.htm>
- Hewett School, Norfolk, UK. "Sociology at Hewett... Post modernism - a definition?"  
<http://www.hewett.norfolk.sch.uk/curric/soc/POSTMODE/post11.htm>
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. 2006. *are women human? and other international dialogues*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard.