

Antifeminism

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ABSTRACT

Antifeminism is the countermovement of thought and action that is opposed to feminism. Its thematic range is as extensive as the fields of feminism's intervention, and has evolved over time to oppose the rights gradually won by women. The ramblings of tortured minds? Isolated voices bringing age-old misogyny into modernity? Political discourse rooted in counterrevolutionary thought? An on the whole logical reaction by the "class of men" mobilized to conserve power? The scope of the subject calls for a periodization that logically follows the history of feminism, whose "first wave" extended across Europe from the late nineteenth century to the early 1960s.



Poster for the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, circa 1910, United Kingdom. Source : [wikimedia commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_Suffragette's_Home.jpg)

“Antifeminism”: the word dates from the late nineteenth century, at a time when “feminism” entered common usage. On the political level, antifeminism was well integrated within the body of European rights, although it also attracted other families of thought. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Frenchman Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), the “father of anarchism,” revealed himself to be simultaneously misogynistic, antifeminist, and a supporter of male domination. While as a whole antifeminism found its justification in the defense of tradition, it was flexible enough to also become an aspect of modernity: the Italian futurists from the early twentieth century wanted to “glorify war—the only cure for the world—militarism, patriotism [...] and contempt for women” (Manifesto of Futurism, 1912).

What brought the antifeminists together was a fiercely differentialist discourse regarding the sexes, whose hierarchical and complementary social functions were, according to them, prescribed by nature and/or divine will. Any change was interpreted as a danger for the social order and the future of humanity. An intense pessimism sustained this declinist form of thought. The devirilization of the white man castrated by the gynecocracy is one of its central themes. The sexual metaphor served as a patriarchal call to order based on the heterosexual norm. This discourse took inspiration from centuries-old misogyny; it revived *topoi* such as the “battle of the trousers” that inspired the entire West during the Middle Ages, an avatar of the “battle of the sexes” present in Europe from the late nineteenth century onward in antisuffragist caricatures, which depicted men being dominated and beaten by their liberated wives. This male anxiety shows how much “the private is political,” for the transformations underway jeopardized the traditional social relations between men and women.

On the philosophical level, the thought of modernity was tinged with antifeminism, for instance with the German philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and especially Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Hans Blüher (1888-1955), a defender of male homosociality and even of (virile) homosexual emancipation, who was fascinated by the mystique of the *Männerbund* (male bond), opposed feminism and sought to limit the role of women to the strictly familial sphere. *Sex and Character* (1903) by Otto Weininger, a young Jew from Vienna who converted to Christianity, served as “bible” for antifeminists through its presentation of the fear of weakness, which was doubly personified by women and Jews. More generally, the literature of the period produced an intersectionality of hatred, which targeted women, Jews, and homosexuals. Antifeminism also found expression in the theater and novels, either directly in *œuvres à thèse* (thesis works), such as those by Théodore Joran (1858-1942) of France, August Strindberg (1849-1912) of Sweden, or in the criticism of progressive authors and revolutionaries, whose works circulated in Europe: Ellen Key (1849-1826) of Sweden, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) of Norway, Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) of Russia, and Sibilla Aleramo (1876-1960) of Italy, among others.

While such ideas were broadly diffused, the creation of antifeminist movements did not necessarily occur, as most existing male organizations—or ones that relegated women to separate branches—already offered a warm welcome to these conservative positions. The United Kingdom nevertheless saw the emergence, amid the mobilization of suffragettes, of two associations opposing women’s suffrage, one female and including up to 42,000 members (Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League, 1908), the other male (Men’s League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, 1909). The National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, which grew out of their fusion, disappeared in 1918 when women (over the age of 30) won civil rights.

In Germany, the League for the Struggle Against Women’s Liberation (Bund zur Bekämpfung der Frauenemanzipation) was created in 1912. Based on recruiting among elites, the association had less than 5,000 members, of which approximately 20% were women, and especially sympathized with the ideal of women’s return to the household and the notion that their mission was to glorify German traditions. Its discourse was nationalist, pan-German, and anti-Semitic.

With the right to vote being seen, in the words of Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914), as the “keystone for all other rights” (education, work, civil equality), each of these struggles prompted opposition and fueled fear of the “new

woman,” independent and freed from the norms of her time. The opposition to women’s suffrage was central during the 1910s, with one of its arguments being to minimize the number of people who supported it. For example, the Bund zur Bekämpfung der Frauenemanzipation asserted that the *mannweiber* (“women-men”) demanding the vote were only a tiny minority (of 10,000 women), while German feminists announced that the number was a half million. Despite this opposition, the economic, social, cultural, and political emancipation of women advanced in Europe during the first third of the twentieth century. Post-1917 Russia even offered the example of a country that wanted to liberate women, and that legalized abortion.

For all that, antifeminist ideas scored an immense political victory during the 1930s and 1940s with the coming of dictatorships, which imposed a traditional gender order and glorified virility (Portugal, Italy, Germany, Spain, Vichy France). At the end of the Second World War, women were shorn throughout Europe, a way of reaffirming male control over their bodies. The expansion of the right to vote to women in the last European countries denying it—France, Italy, and Switzerland—still sparks fiercely hostile reactions. A conservative moral order persists, although it is increasingly contested. The emergence of women’s liberation movements in the late 1960s prompted a recomposition of antifeminism, which was henceforth polarized around the refusal of women’s rights over their bodies. Associations were founded in a number of countries, such as the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children in the United Kingdom (1967), Laissez-les vivre (Let Them Live) in France (1971), or Aktion Lebensrecht für Alle in Germany (1977). In Catholic countries, traditionalists were highly mobilized following the *Humanae Vitae* encyclical, promulgated by pope Paul VI in 1968.

During the 1980s, with the help of the conservative revolution (symbolized by Margaret Thatcher’s victory), antifeminist ideas found new vigor in Europe. The backlash was underway. The new movement of “masculinism” emerged in this context, with the goal of defending the “rights of men” in a society henceforth dominated by women.

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