

# Against Argumentative Definitions: The Case of Feminism

Suppose I define socialism as, “a system of totalitarian control over the economy, leading inevitably to mass poverty and death.” As a detractor of socialism, this is superficially tempting. But it’s sheer folly, for two distinct reasons.

First, this plainly isn’t what most socialists mean by “socialism.” When socialists call for socialism, they’re rarely requesting totalitarianism, poverty, and death. And when non-socialists listen to socialists, that’s rarely what they hear, either.

Second, if you buy this definition, there’s no point studying actual socialist regimes to see if they in fact are “totalitarian” or “inevitably lead to mass poverty and death.” Mere words tell you what you need to know.

What’s the problem? The problem is that I’ve provided an *argumentative definition* of socialism. Instead of rigorously distinguishing between *what we’re talking about* and *what we’re saying about it*, an argumentative definition deliberately interweaves the two.

The hidden hope, presumably, is that if we control the way people use words, we’ll also control what people think about the world. And it is plainly possible to trick the naive using these semantic tactics. But the epistemic cost is high: You preemptively end conversation with anyone who substantively disagrees with you – and cloud your own thinking in the process. It’s far better to neutrally define socialism as, say, “Government ownership of most of the means of production,” or maybe, “The view that each nation’s wealth is justly owned collectively by its citizens.” You can quibble with these definitions, but people can accept either definition regardless of their position on socialism itself.

Modern discussions are riddled with argumentative definitions, but the most prominent instance, lately, is feminism. Google “feminism,” and what do you get? The top hit: “the advocacy of women’s rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes.” I’ve heard many variants on this: “the theory that men and women should be treated equally,” or even “the radical notion that women are people.”

What’s argumentative about these definitions? Well, in this 2016 *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation survey, 40% of women and 67% of men did *not* consider themselves “feminists.” But over 90% of both genders agreed that “men and women should be social, political, and economic equals.” If Google’s definition of feminism conformed to standard English usage, these patterns would make very little sense. Imagine a world where 90% of men say they’re “bachelors,” but only 40% say they’re “unmarried.”

What would a non-argumentative definition of feminism look like? Ideally, feminists, non-feminists, and anti-feminists could all endorse it. If that's asking too much, all these groups should at least be able to accept the proposed definition as a rough approximation of the position they affirm or deny. My preferred candidate:

*feminism: the view that society generally treats men more fairly than women*

What's good about my definition?

First, the definition doesn't include everyone who thinks that our society treats women unfairly *to some degree*. In the real world, of course, every member of every group experiences unfairness on occasion.

Second, a large majority of self-identified feminists hold the view I ascribe to them. Indeed, if someone said, "I'm a feminist, but I think society generally treats *women* more fairly than *men*," most listeners would simply be confused.

Third, a large majority of self-identified non-feminists *disbelieve* the view I ascribe to feminists. If you think, "Society treats both genders equally well," or "Society treats women more fairly than men," you're highly unlikely to see yourself as a feminist.

At this point, you could declare, "Given all the #MeToo revelations, it's obvious that society *does* treat men more fairly than women." Or, "Men are vastly more likely to be violently killed than women, so it's obvious that society treats women more fairly than men." Similarly, you could declare, "Since women earn x% less than men, society treats men more fairly than women" or "Since men are jailed nine times more often than women, society treats women more fairly than men." (In both cases, naturally, someone else could respond, "After a basic statistical corrections, these gaps go away.")

And you know what? Despite their overconfidence and impatience, all of these statements are on point. They're real arguments, not semantic trickery. If you calmly collect and carefully quantify a few hundred such arguments, you won't just know whether feminism is true. You'll know how close the other side is to being right.