

Generations of feminism

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Politics makes comics of us all. Or we would weep.
Sheila Rowbotham¹

I have been thinking for some time now about political generations.² Indeed, I began my last book, *Straight Sex*, with a reflection upon the enduring impact of those formative moments which first enable us to make some sense of the world, and our place within it – an unjust and shabby world, whatever our personal circumstances. Such moments remain all the more powerful if, like many of my own generation who became students in the 1960s, you have hoped – with whatever levels of scepticism and self-mockery – to participate in the making of history. They leave their mark, even as changing times cause one to rethink, perhaps even to renounce, one's formative political presumptions. Yet, what often leaves erstwhile political crusaders with little more than mournful and confusing feelings of loss and regret – whatever our capacities for irony – is the way in which new narratives emerge as collective memories fade, writing over those that once incited our most passionate actions.

So it has been with Women's Liberation, that second wave of feminism which arose out of the upsurge of radical and socialist politics in the late 1960s. It grew rapidly as a mass social movement, peaking in the mid-seventies before dissolving as a coherent organization by the end of that decade. If only indirectly, it affected the lives of millions of women. Now, however, a quarter of a century later, the sparse amount of thoughtful scholarship analysing the distinctiveness of that movement struggles for attention amidst a glut of texts delineating its contemporary academic progeny – largely scornful of its rougher parent, and the motley basements, living rooms, workplaces and community centres in which it was hatched. This is not just a female Oedipal tale, as disobedient daughters distance themselves from their mothers' passions, seeking recognition for themselves. It is also a sibling affair, as feminists contend with each other: fearful, perhaps, of

being overlooked should we fail to keep abreast of new theoretical fashions; or unable to admit the tensions and contradictions of past attachments.

A small band of feminist historians, mostly in the USA, who *are* trying to recapture the diversity of the movement in which they participated, declare that they cannot recognize themselves, or others, in what they see as the distorting accounts of Women's Liberation circulating in contemporary feminism. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, for example, are gathering material for a multi-volume collection of literature from the movement in the United States. They are joined by others interested in archiving the local histories of Women's Liberation, such as Patricia Romney, documenting a group of fifty women of colour based in New York and Oakland, California, who – with other Black activists in the sixties and seventies – became the forgotten women who 'fell down the well' (as Carolyn Heilbrun puts it) in subsequent rewritings of Women's Liberation as exclusively white.³

These historians are aware of the dangers of their proximity to their own research, of how memories are muted or reshaped by subsequent perspectives and interests – whether one's own, or those of younger recorders. At a recent symposium on the history of Women's Liberation in the United States, Margaret (Peg) Strobel recounted that even when rereading her *own* diaries and letters she is amazed at their failure to match her current recollections of the events she has recorded there.⁴ Reading our histories through the interpretations of others can be more unsettling again. Contemporary texts reviewing recent feminist history provide sobering examples of how the past is inevitably read through the concerns of the present, often invalidating earlier meanings and projects and erasing their heterogeneity. The displacement of former struggles and perspectives, however, is all the more disconcerting when contemporary theorists start off

from a critical fascination with problems of ‘experience’, ‘memory’ and the ‘silencing’ of other voices, alongside a formal abhorrence of binary logics and apparent scepticism about generalization of all kinds. Yet, it is precisely the reckless generalization and false contrasts which astonish me when I read accounts of the distance self-proclaimed ‘nineties’ feminism has travelled from Women’s Liberation, and what now appears newly homogenized as ‘seventies’ feminism.

Dubious contrasts

A recent British collection, edited by Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, *Destabilizing Theory*, was put together to highlight what it refers to as ‘the gulf between feminist theory of the 1970s and 1990s’. It opens with the conviction: ‘In the past twenty years the founding principles of contemporary western feminism have been dramatically changed, with previously shared assumptions and unquestioned orthodoxies relegated almost to history.’⁵ Perhaps so. But just what is being dispatched here? Was it all of a piece? And is it equally anachronistic for contemporary feminists?

‘Seventies’ feminism is criticized for its ‘false certainties’; its search for structural causes of women’s oppression (indeed for its very notion of ‘oppression’); its belief in women’s shared interests (and its very attachment to the notion of ‘women’ or ‘woman’); and so forth.⁶ ‘Nineties’ feminism, in contrast, has replaced what is seen as the naive search for the social causes of women’s oppression with abstract elaborations of the discursively produced, hierarchical constitution of an array of key concepts: sexual difference in particular, binary oppositions in general, and the hetero/sexualized mapping of the body as a whole. However, it does tend to have a few generalizations of its own, not least its totalizing dismissal of ‘seventies’ feminism, and the reduction of dissimilar projects to common ground.

A somewhat similar tension can be found in a parallel American collection aiming ‘to call into question and problematize the presumptions of some feminist discourse’: *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan Scott, which, like the British text, was published in 1992.⁷ Its introductory essay shows greater caution in drawing comparisons between different phases of feminism, and it is more aware that contrasting ‘postmodern’ feminism with an earlier ‘modernist’ feminism buys into precisely the conceits of modernity itself, sharing all its enthusiasm for identification with the ‘new’ and overconfident renunciation of the ‘old’. (Although it is surely a hostage to fortune to insist, on the opening page, that “‘post-

structuralism” indicates a field of critical practices that cannot be totalized.’⁸) Circumspect and equivocal as Butler characteristically is, always preferring the interrogative to the more vulnerable affirmative mode, her influential writing is always *read* as primarily deconstructive, privileging regulatory semiotic or semantic issues around ‘subjectivity’, ‘identity’ and ‘agency’, in insisting, as she does here, that: ‘To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorize or safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman and in this sense to condition and enable an enhanced sense of agency.’⁹ Butler is certainly right to stress that ‘what women signify has been taken for granted for too long’. But, in calling for ‘the conditions to *mobilize the signifier* in the service of an alternative production’, she delineates a project that is distinctly distanced from the close attention to social *structures, relations* and *practices* which an earlier feminist project prioritized in pursuit of political-economic restructuring, and the transformation of public life and welfare. Butler even suggests here: ‘Paradoxically, it may be that only through releasing the category of women from a fixed referent that something like “agency” becomes possible.’¹⁰

Only? However ‘fictitious’ or ‘fixed’ the category of women, feminists did once manage successfully to mobilize *them* (and not just signifiers) onto the streets and into campaigns in support of demands for nurseries, reproductive rights, education and skill training; to assist women fighting discrimination at work, violence at home, militarism world-wide; to work within Third World development projects; found the women’s health movement, and so on and so forth: just as if ‘something like “agency”’ – women’s agency – was there all along. A feminism that seeks *primarily* to re-theorize subjectivity is one that is incommensurate with, as well as distanced from, the perspectives and practices of Women’s Liberation. It is simply *not* the same project, however sympathetic to those earlier goals someone like Butler may be. As others have noticed, the commitment to heterogeneity, multiplicity and difference underlying recent feminist theorizing can anomalously disguise a hegemonizing dismissal of theoretical frameworks not *explicitly* informed by poststructuralism.¹¹ Joan Scott exemplifies this form of exclusion of theoretical diversity when attacking ‘resistance to poststructuralist theory’ as resistance to ‘theory’ itself: ‘Since it is in the nature of feminism to disturb the ground it stands on, even its own ground, *the resistance to theory* is a resistance to the most radical effects of feminism itself.’¹²

Here is the problem. Contemporary feminist theorizing rarely acknowledges the time and the place of political ideas. It addresses only abstract *theories* and their refutation. It operates with an idea of the history of feminism as the evolution of academic theory and debate. Tellingly, both the British and North American feminist collections I have mentioned offer their readers a full index of *names* – in which, incidentally, extraordinarily few of the influential feminist names of the 1970s appear – but no index of *topics*. In the recent Blackwell textbook *Feminist Thought*, by Patricia Clough, dedicated to ‘Women Around the World Resisting Oppression, Domination, and Exploitation’, there *is* a context index, but interestingly neither hint nor whisper of abortion or reproductive rights, housework, childcare, nurseries, welfare provision, immigration, marriage, the family, poverty, the state, employment, trade unions, health-care or violence against women. There *is* pornography, autobiography, film theory, literary criticism, Woman, Native, Other. However you cross-reference it, just a few aspects of women’s actual resistance ‘around the world’ seem to have gone missing.¹³ Almost no effort is made in these texts to refer back to the activities and goals of Women’s Liberation, only an attempt to contrast theoretical positions as ideal types.

The reason is, of course, that this is an easy way to *teach* feminism as an academic topic. But you cannot translate the time of theory and its fashions into political history without absurd caricature. Thus early Women’s Liberation becomes, for example, a ‘feminism of the subject’, when it was not a theory about subjectivity at all. It is almost always described as a theory of equality rather than of difference, when it was neither of these things – the one usually presented as merely an inversion of the other. Both of these descriptions miss the point. Women’s Liberation in its heyday was a *theory and practice of social transformation*: full of all the embroiled and messy actions and compromises of political engagement. It endlessly debated questions of priorities, organization and alliances in the attempt to enrich women’s lives (heatedly discussing the varied – often opposed – interests of different groups of women). In the process, it transformed the very concept of the ‘political’, giving women a central place within it.

My sense of the recent history of feminism, in particular of the socialist-feminist strand of Women’s Liberation flourishing in the early seventies, conflicts with Julia Kristeva’s often cited stagist mapping of three generations of feminist thought, in her famous essay ‘Women’s Time’, first published in 1979. There

she depicts the first wave of feminism as a time when women, using a ‘logic of identification’, pursued liberal, egalitarian ends, followed by the emergence of a militant second phase, which rejected all ‘patriarchal’ thought and practice, attempting to create ‘counter societies’ constructed around mythical notions of womanhood. This is the now familiar account of ‘equality’ feminism *followed by* a strictly alternative, ‘difference’ feminism: with women first seeking inclusion in, and later exclusion from, the masculine symbolic order. Drawing on Derrida, Kristeva proposes a *third* generation of feminism which is critical of the binary of sexual difference itself. Yet, as I hope to show, although they never used the rhetoric of deconstruction, this is precisely where many second-generation feminists came in. The contrasts are not as significant as recent re-tellings suggest.

Rowbotham’s ‘seventies’ feminism

In my view, the most useful – and perhaps the only meaningful – way to think about the similarities and differences between different generations of feminism is by reflecting upon what defines a political generation and what smashes its hopes and dreams. On an International Women’s Day march in the early seventies, Sheila Rowbotham carried a placard that read: ‘Equal Pay is Not Enough. We Want the Moon.’ (File under equal-rights feminism? Perhaps not. Is the moon here a symbol of female difference? I think not.) We got neither, as she wrote a decade later; but the radical heritage of Women’s Liberation continues, she argued, whenever feminists work to realize the dream ‘that all human beings can be *more* than present circumstances allow’.¹⁴ That vision is not one of equal rights. It was called ‘socialism’ and it was being reshaped to service feminism.

I want, for a moment, to focus on Sheila Rowbotham’s writing, as she has been one of the most careful chroniclers (and continuing exponents) of Women’s Liberation in Britain, in the hope that it may be, as she puts it, ‘neither falsely valued nor undervalued’, but that feminists might reflect back upon ‘the hurly-burly of battle, draw clarity from real muddles and learn from our mistakes’.¹⁵ (Dream on!, one might feel, in these new mean-spirited times.) Since memories only find resonance at certain times, Rowbotham adds, if you ‘ignore the humdrum you fall into arrogance’.¹⁶ It was Rowbotham, one of the many inspirational voices of seventies’ feminism, who proposed the very first Women’s Liberation conference in Britain at Ruskin College in 1970; importantly for my purposes here, her books were read by tens of thousands of feminists in

the 1970s. They were hugely influential in the initial years of Women's Liberation. Rowbotham would be criticized, early on, as representing a seventies' feminism, unformed by psychoanalysis or structuralism.¹⁷ Today, of course, her failures would be seen as an inattention to poststructuralism or 'postmodernity' – that paradoxical twist of modernity, contrarily repudiating linear narratives while depending on one.

Joining the game of textual analysis, I recently re-read some of Rowbotham's books from the seventies and early eighties: something I do often to prevent my own long-term memories from dissolving (there seems nothing to be done about the crashing of short-term memory). Ironically, what is extraordinary about Rowbotham's writing is usually quite the reverse of what critics of seventies' feminism imagine. It conveys an openness, a chronic *lack* of certainty, an almost infuriating tentativeness, reiteratively asserting: 'What we have developed through action and ideas has always to be subject to reassessment'; or 'I am too encumbered by the particular to move with grace and delicacy between subjective experience and the broad sweep of social relationships.'¹⁸

From her earliest reflections, Rowbotham describes the search for the roots of women's subordination as a 'perilous and uncertain quest'.¹⁹ Her texts always stress what she calls 'the differing forms and historically specific manifestations of the power men hold over women in particular societies'.²⁰ They focus sharply on the diversity and situational specificity of women: whether of class, race, employment, domestic situation (although not at first, as she herself soon notes self-critically), sexual orientation: 'Our own indications are only tentative and incomplete ... Women's liberation is too narrow in social composition to comprehend the differences between middle class and working class, black and white, young and old, married and unmarried, country and townswomen.' Moreover, she writes in 1972, 'it is clear that most of the isolated gains we can make can be twisted against women and that many partial gains are often a means of silencing one group at the expense of another.'²¹ She emphasizes the role of language as one of the crucial instruments of domination:

As soon as we learn words we find ourselves outside them ... The underground language of people who have no power to define and determine themselves in the world develops its own density and precision ... But it restricts them by affirming their own dependence upon the words of the powerful ... There is a long inchoate period during which the struggle between the language of experience and the language of theory becomes a kind of agony.²²

Ignorant of 'poststructuralism' Rowbotham may have been (writing these words in the early 1970s, in her mid-twenties), but not so ignorant, I would suggest, of the issues it addresses.

She tussles (a favourite word) endlessly with the problems of relying on direct experience, seeing it as both a strength and a weakness – again not so unlike, but less theoretically fine-tuned than, the recent essay by Joan Scott on the same topic in the collection from the USA mentioned above.²³ She continuously affirms the pointlessness of attempting to pin down the nature of either 'women' or 'men', adding that, 'All revolutionary movements create their own ways of seeing ... But this is a result of great labour.'²⁴ Her writing, like the forces which drew many women together in the early years of Women's Liberation, reflects the radical Left (largely Marxist) thought of the day: 'An emergent female consciousness is part of the specific sexual and social conjuncture, which it seeks to control and transform.'²⁵ So, while questions of subjectivity and identity are not ignored (and, when they appear, they are quite as shifting, provisional and contingent as any postmodernist might desire), the goal is always to transform society, to make it a better place for all its members, especially the neediest, and, in her words, 'gradually accumulate a shared culture of agitation'. She writes:

There is democracy in the making of theories which set out to rid the world of hierarchy, oppression and domination. The act of analysis requires more than concepts of sex and class, more than a theory of the subject, it demands that in the very process of thinking we transform the relations between thinker and thought about, theory and experience ... Analysis is not enough alone, for we enter the beings and worlds of other people through imagination, and it is through imagination that we glimpse how these might change.²⁶

Many seventies' feminists have recalled, like Rowbotham, the imaginative leap when they first began to turn outwards to other women, generating an almost open-ended desire for solidarity with just those women they had hitherto distanced themselves from: 'The mainspring of women's liberation was not a generalised antagonism to men but the positive assertion of new relationships between women, sisterhood.'²⁷ Socialist feminists argued that while capitalist societies had changed the relative power and privileges of men, they had also consolidated women's inferior status, along with that of a multitude of other historically subordinated groups – predominantly along racialized and ethnic lines. So while it was not *inconceivable*

that women might gain equality with men in existing capitalist societies, this would require such deep levels of cultural, economic and political change that they would already have become societies which were fundamentally different from any we have known.²⁸

The state, in socialist-feminist analyses like those of Elizabeth Wilson or Mary McIntosh, was seen as not strictly 'patriarchal', but serving to regulate, and occasionally to restructure, the often contradictory and conflicting needs of a male-dominated market economy and the still intrinsically patriarchal arrangements of family life.²⁹ It was from such analyses that they set about shaking out and making visible the separate and distinct needs and interests of women (kept hidden by familial rhetoric); campaigned against state policies and discourses which defined and enforced women's dependence on men; demanded an end to social neglect of women and children at risk from men's violence; fought for more and better social provision and community resources – all the while seeking alliances with other oppressed groups. Strategic priorities were usually paramount, whether making demands on the state or the trade unions, and even when elaborating utopian visions of communities and workplaces compatible with choice and flexibility, where the needs of all dependent people would not hidden away in idealized, yet neglected and isolated, often impoverished, family units.³⁰

This socialist-feminist strand of Women's Liberation, chronicled in books like Rowbotham's *The Past Is Before Us*, remained until the mid-eighties an active and influential source of ideas and strategies for promoting women's interests, usually working in diverse radical and reformist coalitions with other progressive forces.³¹ However, the frustration and defeats of a second term of Conservative rule (1983–87), which targeted and weakened precisely those nooks and crannies in local government, resource centres and collective spaces that feminists (and other radicals) had managed to enter, gradually exhausted not only the political hopes, but even the dreams of many. In recalling the early achievements of the women's movement in re-launching femi-

nism, we also need to consider its limitations. But the precarious presumptions and faltering visions of the seventies' feminism I knew have, as I see it, little to do with dogmatic certitudes, conceptual closure, binary thinking, identity politics or false universalism, and much more to do with the floundering fortunes of grassroots or movement politics in harsh and unyielding times.

And I am *not* forgetting the many painful clashes, at the turn of the 1980s, as a strengthening Black feminism challenged Eurocentrism in the priorities of much white socialist-feminist analysis, which privileged sexism over racism and ignored the particularities of ethnic difference. But trying to learn to listen to, and act upon, Black feminist perspectives was not initially a decisive factor in the fading away of socialist-feminism. On the contrary, Black feminists then occupied the same political spaces, and pursued largely similar or parallel strategic campaigns for expanding the choice and resources open to Black women and their families. The political limitations they saw in what they defined as 'Euro-American' feminism, at that time, as Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar made clear in 1984, was that it has 'contributed to an improvement in the material situation of white middle-class women often at the expense of their Black and working class "sisters" ... The power of sisterhood stops at the point at which hard political decisions need to be made and political priorities decided.'³²



The death knell of the seventies' feminism I dwelt within was not simply the fall-out from internal conflict and divisions, whether over race or sexuality – much as they turned feminist political spaces into stressful combat zones. Rather, coming together as agitators, of whatever sex, race or ethnic specificity, to pursue goals which require, among other things, a more egalitarian and caring world, brought us up against a ferocious, if contradictory and erratic, political opponent – something a new generation of officially licensed theorists, turning inwards rather than outwards, often prefer to ignore altogether. Over the last two decades, the ever more deregulated, ever more universalized, interests of capital have produced deepening social inequalities, nationally and internationally. In the process, they have ensured a significant increase in women's poverty. Meanwhile the fickle, unintended effects of market forces and new technologies, alongside the arduously pursued, intended consequences of feminist thought and campaigning, have ensured more paid work, autonomy and choice for *other* women, at least in the First World (as well as more insecurity for some men).

Twenty years ago it would have been hard to find a single self-respecting feminist in Britain who had not trekked out to the Grunwick factory in West London, in support of the predominantly Asian women on strike, or at least considered such action. In the nineties, as Melissa Benn has noted, it would be hard to find a self-respecting feminist who had even *heard* of the predominantly Asian women on strike at Burnsall in Birmingham over an almost identical set of issues: refusal of union recognition, low pay, and the use of dangerous chemicals; or who would have contemplated supportive action, if they had.³³ For sure, Rowbotham and like-minded socialist-feminists, working to help organize support for women in struggle against the harshest effects of global market forces, had for a while a certain naiveté about the nature and potential of 'revolutionary' movements. The legacy of seventies' feminism, seen as a movement of social transformation aiming to increase the power and self-determination of women everywhere, is contradictory and diverse. But serious consideration of its full significance is grievously absent in recent appraisals.

Theoretical assaults

There is another twist in this tale of two generations of feminism. In terms of the later writing over of earlier feminist narratives, the painful irony is that just as deconstruction and other forms of poststructuralism imprinted themselves on the academic feminism which had graduated from its lowly seventies' birthplace in

adult education into professional status in the universities – promoting conceptual uncertainty, political indeterminacy and subjective fluidity – opposing forms of feminist fundamentalism, moral certainty and psychic essentialism now really were entrenching themselves as the wisdom of the more accessible activist feminism of the eighties. The voices of feminism – like those of Robin Morgan and Andrea Dworkin – which survived and intensified in the new decade were no longer analysing the specific historical contexts, shifting institutional arrangements, particular social practices or multiple discourses securing women's inequality and marginality. Instead, they denounced the ageless dominance of 'masculine' values over 'feminine' ones. A new and complacent romance around the feminine took precedence as essentially nurturing, non-violent and egalitarian; there was an accompanying condemnation of men and masculinity as ineluctably dominating, destructive and predatory, rooted in the performance of male sexuality.

It was this form of so-called 'cultural feminism' that I criticized in *Is the Future Female?* in the late 1980s. The original subtitle of my book, 'Arguments for Socialist Feminism', was rejected by my publisher, Virago Press, as already too unpopular to promulgate, leading to the more neutral 'Troubled Thoughts' of its published subtitle.³⁴ Politically, Dworkin and MacKinnon ushered in the simplistic and reductive anti-pornography campaign as the single most visible and highly funded feminist struggle in recent years. The pessimistic corollary of the rejection of historical specificities in this feminist discourse is the dismissal of the significance of women's political struggles and victories: 'Our status as a group relative to men', MacKinnon declared, 'has almost never, if ever, been much changed from what it is.'³⁵ Without buying into backlash anti-feminism, or the howls of anguish we currently hear from and about men, I think we might agree that this is not a very accurate picture of the gender changes and turmoil that have occurred throughout this century, and especially of the shake-ups over the last three decades. Meanwhile, as the 1980s progressed, it was either those, like Catharine MacKinnon, who offered some version of an increasingly totalizing and sanctimonious feminism (clinging to the moral high ground of women's marginality and helplessness), or others, like Camille Paglia, with equally totalizing inversions of this position (caricaturing feminism as prudish and puritanical) who found favour with the media. Neither offered any challenge to traditional gender discourses.

It is hard to summarize the illuminations and provocations of academic feminism's current embrace of poststructuralist critiques of universalizing thought

and emancipatory narratives without courting the danger of homogenizing contemporary theorizing, much as it has erased the complexities of seventies' feminism. The appropriation of poststructuralist priorities would inspire what has become known as 'feminist postmodernism' – although this conceptually confused and confusing label would not be accepted by all those placed under its banner. At least three separate strands of thinking are usually lumped together under this heading – deriving from Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, respectively – despite their very different implications for feminism.

The first and for a while the most influential post-Lacanian strand, often simply called 'French feminism', restricts its focus to the idea of sexual difference effaced by the spurious unity or wholeness of the Western 'subject' (Man): the white, male bourgeois subject of history who hides behind the abstract universals of the philosophical tradition. It stresses the need to fracture the universal or humanist self through attentiveness to its repressed or marginalized other: 'feminine' difference. Subversively imagined and rewritten as positive, the decentred side of the silenced and repressed 'feminine' is thought to enable women to 'foresee the unforeseeable', and escape the dichotomous conceptual order in which men have enclosed them.³⁶ This new focus upon images of female corporeality has been seen by its exponents as presenting a fresh purchase on the old essentialism debate, transcending earlier forms of historical, sociological or psychoanalytic anti-essentialist arguments. The 'feminine feminine', Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous suggest, can emerge only once women find the courage to break out of the male imaginary and into a female one; once women begin to speak and write their sexuality, which is always plural, circular and aimless, in contrast to all existing singular, linear and phallogocentric, masculine forms of symbolization.³⁷ Such feminist reclaiming of the body unfolds here as always culturally and psychically inscribed female experience, not anatomical destiny, and is perhaps best seen as a form of aestheticized, high modernist, 'avant-gardism'.³⁸ It is nevertheless still narrated in terms of a *universal* corporeal subjectivity for women.

The attraction of such difference theory, which allows the feminist to speak 'as a woman', is obvious. The revaluing of those aspects of women's lives and experiences previously ignored or demeaned in male-centred theorizing was, and remains, crucial to feminist research and practice. But there is still a problem which it cannot easily tackle (even if we

ride with its own cheerfully embraced contradictions), once we turn from the academic to the political realm. As I have argued elsewhere, it is precisely ideas of sexual difference encompassing the experiences supposedly inscribing our distinctive 'femaleness' which most dramatically *divide*, rather than unite, feminists attempting to fight for women's interests.³⁹ It is easier for women to join forces around issues on the currently unfashionable economic front (demanding parity in wages and training), or social policy (demanding more and better publicly funded welfare resources), than it has ever been for women to unite around issues of sexuality and the meanings we attach to the female body. Creatively exciting as the project of re-imagining female corporeality has proved to be to some feminists,⁴⁰ its neglect of issues of class, race, ethnicity and other forms of marginality as equally constitutive of women's subjectivity and destiny has seemed exclusionary and disempowering to other feminists. Such criticism has been most forcefully expressed by Black and ethnic minority feminist theoreticians – from Gayatri Spivak to Barbara Christian or Deborah McDowell.⁴¹ Some academic feminists like to quote Gayatri Spivak in support of their view that women today must 'take "the risk of essence" in order to think really differently'.⁴² Spivak herself, however, has reconsidered her earlier suggestion for a 'strategic' use of a positive essentialism. Since such a move is viable only when it serves 'a scrupulously visible political interest', she now warns: 'The strategic use of essentialism can turn into an alibi for proselytizing academic essentialisms'.⁴³ And it has.

Spivak leads us to the second, more rigorous, Derridean strand of feminist poststructuralism, which is critical of the monolithic Lacanian version of difference theory. It questions all universalizing or totalizing theoretical tendencies, deconstructing every discursive patterning of the self, including that of 'woman'.⁴⁴ Here, in tune with the input of Black, Third World, lesbian, and other feminisms, every generalization about women, including the feminist search for the causes of women's subordination or any generalized expressions of women's difference – whether seen in terms of responsibility for child-rearing, reproductive and sexual experience, men's violence, phallogocentric language, a female imaginary, or whatever – is regarded with suspicion. This position is summed up by Donna Haraway:

There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and

social practices ... The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of a perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialistic one.⁴⁵

Haraway wants to replace this dream with her own one of 'a powerful infidel heteroglossia ... building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories', seeking a place for women in a future 'monstrous world without gender'.⁴⁶ Her dream is full of playful optimism about the future. For other more strictly deconstructive feminists, however, there is no theoretically defensible affirmative position, but only a reminder of the limits of concepts, as Spivak explains: 'the *absolutely* other cannot enter into *any* kind of foundational emancipatory project'.⁴⁷ Such a deconstructive feminism certainly avoids the perils of generalizations about female subjectivity. But it courts the danger that its own interest in endlessly proliferating particularities of difference, and the partial, contradictory nature of women's identities, endorses a relativity and indeterminacy which works to undermine political projects.

The third, Foucauldian, strand of poststructuralist feminism returns us to the body – to its 'sexuality' rather than to sexual difference – but only as a site or target of ubiquitous technologies of classification, surveillance and control. Foucault's warning that oppositional discourses are inevitably caught up in the relations of domination they resist has been important in highlighting the traps facing emancipatory movements: of reproducing rather than transcending traditional frameworks of subjection. And his arguments about meaning and representation have proved particularly productive for lesbian and gay theorists. Here, feminists can learn much from Foucault's insights about the genealogy of discursive regulation, but next to nothing about how organized resistance might impinge on such all-encompassing regimes of power, other than through the discursively disruptive, micro-political strategies favoured by some lesbian theorists.

Judith Butler, for example, suggests ways of making 'gender trouble' by subverting the masculine/feminine binary producing sexuality as heterosexuality. Emphasizing the multiplicity of sexual acts which occur in a non-heterosexual context can, she concludes, disrupt and disturb dominant heterosexual/reproductive discourses, 'through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion and proliferation'.⁴⁸ But despite its influence on some feminists, others respond with sheer bewilderment or exasperation at what they see as the staging of battles at a strictly semiotic level.⁴⁹ And while some

'queer theorists' have understood Butler to be suggesting a type of individual transgressive 'performance' as the most relevant way of undermining existing gender dynamics, it is an interpretation she herself now rejects.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, some feminists have used Foucault to reject earlier feminist analysis of power in relation to key structural and institutional sites. Again, as often noted, the problem here is that it discourages analysis of *where* and *how* women are best placed to combat the authority and privilege men commonly wield over them – by entering those sites which are most expedient or have proved receptive to change, and supporting strategies to undermine or transform those which remain most rigid and resistant to change.⁵¹

Political agendas

Poststructuralism, especially in its Derridean and Foucauldian forms, has provided feminists with fresh (if not unique) conceptual tools for problematizing identities and social differences. It usefully emphasizes their hierarchically imposed and coercive nature, and the multiplicity of intertwining, destabilizing and exclusionary discourses or narratives in which subjectivities are historically enmeshed. It suggests the possibility (however difficult) of categorial re-significations or reconfigurations, as well as the need for acceptance of paradox and contradiction in conceptualizing change. Feminists need to pay heed to the normativities and exclusions of discourse, especially as they construct differences between women. But in a world of intensifying inequality, any concern with either gender justice or the fate of women overall must also direct us to issues of *redistribution*, alongside issues of identity and recognition.⁵² It is a socialist imaginary, combined with feminism, that has always stressed the sufferings caused by the material exploitation, deprivation and social marginalization of women and other oppressed groups around the world. These cannot be either superseded or replaced by battles over discursive marginalization and invalidation. The two objectives, though relatively distinct, are also intricately interwoven: the one turning feminists *outwards* towards women in struggle; the other directing us *inwards* towards refiguring a hitherto abjected 'femininity'. Once we address both sets of issues, then some differences will matter more than others in generating political interventions.

However plural and irreducibly complex our characterization of the social, any politics seeking the most inclusive transformation of socio-economic and cultural marginalization must seek to challenge the major systems of domination. This means seeking

to understand just what they are at this historical moment: uncovering why, and how, they persist, as well as their interaction with whatever specific location we occupy. Fearful of totalizing generalizations we may be, and cautious we must be, but the central global axes of economic exploitation and cultural oppression continue to construct and reconstruct themselves in the interrelated terms of 'gender' (tied in with sexual orientation), 'class' (tied in with nationality and ethnicity), and 'race' (tied in with nationality, ethnicity and religion), within what is currently the ever more totalizing control of a transnational capitalist market. The invocation of specific differences can only serve broadly based transformative ends as part of some wider political project seeking to dismantle these basic structures of domination.

The Anglo-American reception of poststructuralism, with its central place in nineties' feminist theory, came to prominence at a political moment far removed from that which generated the confident hopes Women's Liberation took to the streets. (Ironically, some explanations and critiques of 'postmodernism' present it as *responsible* for putting feminism on the political agenda, as in Eagleton's recent *The Illusions of Postmodernism*;⁵³ while others would see its influence as quite the reverse.) Distrustful, when not dismissive, of traditional forms of collective action and reformist political agendas, especially when class-based, feminism faces inhibiting dilemmas in describing how either attention to the discursive specificity of 'feminine' difference, or the proliferation of categorial heterogeneity and transgressive display, might ever again bring women together in any transformative feminist project.

We need to remember that the word 'feminist' has a history. Sometimes feminists have focused directly on issues of sexual difference; at other times feminism has been more a movement for the transformation of the whole of society. At the close of the nineteenth century, 'feminism' first appeared in English to describe the movement of women campaigning for the right to vote, but within a few decades the concept had expanded to include a variety of different types of moral, economic, social and political campaigns waged by women. The second wave of Western feminism has similarly drawn upon different meanings, at times stressing social transformation (especially in its early days), at others emphasizing gender-specific issues.⁵⁴ The difficulties of generalizing from women's experiences (or 'corporeal existence', through whatever mode of representation) are not hard to document. Nevertheless, it is premature to downplay the signifi-

cance of gender in favour of a plurality of differences. The tenacity of men's power over women means that feminists must just as tenaciously seek to emphasize the diverse and multiple effects of gender hierarchy on the lives and experiences of women. But if feminism is to address the problems of the many women who need it most, it must see that the specificities of women's lives do not reduce to gender, which means working in alliance with other progressive forces combating class, racialized, ethnic and other entrenched social hierarchies.

Interestingly, one of the continuing threads between seventies' and nineties' feminisms (and there are many such threads, although we may not read about them in a significant number of nineties' feminist texts) is the continuing growth and vision of the international human-rights movements, now often in the form of NGOs.⁵⁵ Even there, however, as Suzanne Gibson and Laura Flanders have described, it has proved far easier for women to get their demands taken seriously by the United Nations when they have addressed gender-specific, apparently fashionable, issues like rape and violence against women, than when they have addressed employment rights, illiteracy or poverty.⁵⁶ Back in Britain, there will be little significant change in the situation of the women who are worst off until public resources are shifted to provide far greater welfare provision, without the constraints of market considerations. Yet today's Foucauldian-informed feminists who write about the state reject earlier feminist analysis of its structures and functions, claiming, like Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson, that '[i]n poststructuralist accounts of the state, "discourse" and "subjectivity" rather than structures and interests become the key terms.'⁵⁷ But such re-theorizing only leads us further away from any analysis of the state itself, and the way in which it has been changing in recent years. The state now embraces market forces in most of the areas from which they were previously excluded, and precisely against the interests of, in particular, women, children and all dependent people.

Britain, like North America, has been moving as fast as it can in quite the opposite direction to that which might assist those women in greatest need of economic and social support. This is why I remain a socialist-feminist: still hoping for more dialogue than I find at present between different generations of feminism. Sometimes, as one of my colleagues writes, recalling his own formative moments in Northern Ireland, you need to have the 'courage of your anachronisms'.⁵⁸

Notes

1. Sheila Rowbotham, 'Reclaim the Moon', in *Dreams and Dilemmas*, Virago, London, 1983, p. 348.
2. This is a revised version of a talk given at the Radical Philosophy Conference, 'Torn Halves: Theory and Politics in Contemporary Feminism', London, 9 November 1996.
3. Patricia Romney, unpublished notes prepared for round-table discussion, 'Writing about a Visionary Movement in the "Get Real" World of the '90s: The History of Women's Liberation in the United States', at the 10th Berkshire Women's Conference, North Carolina, June 1996.
4. Margaret Strobel, in *ibid.*
5. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, eds, Introduction, *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 2.
6. A few years earlier Michèle Barrett had expressed her reservations about her own 'seventies' thinking in *Women's Oppression Today* – in a new preface – indicating (accurately) that recent feminist debate has problematized the notion of 'women' and 'woman', while suggesting that the notion of oppression 'looks decidedly dated today'.
7. Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge, London, 1992.
8. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
9. Butler, 'Contingent Foundations', in *ibid.*, p. 16.
10. *Ibid.*
11. See, for example, Linda Gordon, 'Review of *Gender and the Politics of History* by Joan Wallach Scott', *Signs* 15, Summer 1990.
12. Joan Wallach Scott, 'Response to Gordon', *Signs* 15, Summer 1990, p. 859. See also the measured and thoughtful account of the erasure of feminist theoretical heterogeneity in Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Making History', in Diane Elam and Robyn Weigman, eds, *Feminism Beside Itself*, Routledge, London, 1995.
13. Patricia Clough, *Feminist Thought*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994.
14. Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, p. 354, emphasis added.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. x, 351.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 351.
17. Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, 'In Defence of Patriarchy', in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981.
18. Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, pp. 353, 2.
19. Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, pp. 66, 34.
20. Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, p. 83.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 75.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–3.
23. Joan Scott, 'Experience', in Butler and Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political*.
24. Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, p. 27.
25. *Ibid.*, p. x. Rowbotham prefers, as she writes in 1972, the idea of 'consciousness moving' to 'consciousness raising', since 'your own perception is continually being shifted by how other women perceive what has happened to them ... The main difficulty, still, is that while the social composition of women's liberation remains narrow it isn't possible to move naturally beyond certain limitations in perspective' (Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, p. 59).
26. Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas*, pp. 74, 208, 218.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
29. Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State*, Tavistock, London, 1977; Mary McIntosh, 'The State and the Oppression of Women', in Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe, eds, *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978. Some later commentators, though sympathetic to the accounts of the state provided in this writing, would suggest, I think correctly, that they diminished the intrinsically male-dominated structures, practices and discourses of the many differing sectors of the state (S. Franzway, D. Court and R.W. Connell, *Staking a Claim: Feminism, Bureaucracy and the State*, Paladin, London, 1989).
30. Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, Verso, London, 1982.
31. Sheila Rowbotham, *The Past Is Before Us: Feminism in Action since the 1960s*, Pandora, London, 1989.
32. Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama, Pratibha Parmar, Editorial of *Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives*, *Feminist Review* 17, Autumn 1984.
33. Melissa Benn, 'Women and Democracy: Thoughts on the Last Ten Years', *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1993, p. 237.
34. Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, Virago, London, 1987.
35. Catharine MacKinnon, 'Pornography, Civil Rights and Speech', in Catherine Itzin, ed., *Pornography, Women, Violence, and Civil Liberties*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 456.
36. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in E. Marks & I. de Courtivron, eds, *New French Feminisms*, Schocken Books, New York, 1981, p. 256.
37. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa'; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1985, p. 32.
38. See, for example, Laura Kipnis, 'Looks Good on Paper: Marxism and Feminism in a Postmodern World', in *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993.
39. Lynne Segal, 'Whose Left? Socialism, Feminism and the Future', *New Left Review* 185, January–February 1991.
40. For imaginative political appropriations of 'French feminism', see for example Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law*, Routledge, London, 1991; Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge, London, 1996.
41. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', in *In Other Worlds*, Routledge, London, 1988; Barbara Christian, 'The Race for Theory', in Linda Kaufman, ed., *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, Basil Blackwell, New York, 1989; Deborah McDowell, 'The "Practice" of "Theory"', in Elam and Weigman, eds, *Feminism Beside Itself*.
42. See, for example, Alice Jardine, 'Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo Or Compagnons de Route?', in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds, *Men in Feminism*, Methuen, London, 1987, p. 58.
43. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching*

- Machine*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 4.
44. See, for example, Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Subject of 'Women' in History*, Macmillan, London, 1988.
 45. Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in L. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, London, 1990, pp. 197, 215.
 46. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
 47. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Remembering the Limits: Difference, Identity and Practice', in Peter Osborne, ed., *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 229, emphasis in original.
 48. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 33.
 49. See Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age*, Routledge, London, 1991.
 50. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 231; see also Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy* 67, Summer 1994.
 51. See, for example, Gregor McLennan, 'Feminism, Epistemology and Postmodernism: Reflections on Current Abivalence', *Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 3, August 1995, pp. 391–401.
 52. See, for example, Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Post-Socialist" Age', *New Left Review* 212, July–August 1995.
 53. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p. 22.
 54. See Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 8–15.
 55. See Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper, eds, *Women's Rights Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1995.
 56. See Suzanne Gibson, 'On Sex, Horror and Human Rights', *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 4, no. 3, Winter 1993; Laura Flanders, 'Hard Cases and Human Rights: C. MacKinnon in the City of Freud', *The Nation*, 9–16 August 1993, pp. 174–7. For an important and stimulating commentary on the challenge of human-rights internationalism to the recent philosophical embrace of a 'politics of difference', see Bruce Robbins, 'Sad Stories in the International Public Sphere: Richard Rorty on Culture and Human Rights', *Public Culture*, vol. 9, no. 2, Winter 1997.
 57. Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson, "'Women's Interests" and the Post-Structuralist State', in Barrett and Phillips, eds, *Destabilizing Theory*, p. 65.
 58. Francis Mulhern (quoting Jonathan Rée) in Francis Mulhern, Introduction, *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Cork University Press, Cork, forthcoming.