

# **Feminism and the Struggle over Meaning**

(Added June 2003): This paper was written for the journal, *Constellations*, in response to a friend's suggestion that I give up sending papers to feminist journals since I was having so little success, and send them to other kinds of journals instead. So I did, only to find I got the same response. The paper was rejected by email with no explanation, so I don't know what the reasons were.

I then sent it to *Women's Studies International Forum*. They didn't reject it outright. There were two reports from readers, both of whom were fairly sympathetic to the paper. But they wanted me to make substantial changes and I couldn't do that. There followed an email exchange where I tried to find out what had happened. Finally, I asked a friend to find out for me, and she told me the paper had been rejected. No one from the journal had told me.

I sent it off again at the end of 2002, one of four I sent off to journals at the same time. (The others were 'What Counts as Feminist Theory?' to *Australian Feminist Studies*, 'Feminism and the Problem of Individualism' to *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, and 'Power and Distaste: Tolerance and its Limitations' to the *Australian Journal of Sociology*). I sent it to a journal called, *Politics & Society* (for no other reason than that I liked the name). This journal rejected it by email too. (The responses from these journals, plus my replies, can be found below the paper).

**Abstract:** In this paper I take issue with the hegemony of one prevalent definition of feminism, in terms of “equality”/“difference”, and suggest that there is another account which rarely appears in the academic feminist literature, namely, feminism as the struggle against male domination. I argue that the feminist project since the late 1960s has crucially revolved around a critique of sexuality as central to women’s oppression, a critique which focused in large measure on pornography as the most extreme and blatant expression of what sexuality means in male supremacist terms. I point out that this radical feminist critique has from the beginning been under siege by a libertarianism which will brook no criticism of sexuality at all, and that, as a consequence, the links between sexuality and male domination have not been made. I suggest that the linking term is the penis and its significance as the symbol of “human” status within the social order of male supremacy.

KEYWORDS: feminism, lesbianism, equality/difference, male domination, Freud, sexuality

There is a marked disinclination among feminists to define feminism,<sup>1</sup> a disinclination which seems to be based on a belief in feminism’s multiplicity and heterogeneity (see, for example, Braidotti, 1991: 147), and which is commonly expressed in the use of the term “feminisms” in the plural. But the issue of what feminism means is not so easily evaded. If there exist very few explicit attempts to say what feminism is, implicit definitions abound, not least in those histories which purport to tell us what happened over the last thirty years of what was initially referred to as the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.

## **“Equality”/“Difference”**

To illustrate this implicit construction of the meaning of feminism, there is the version of feminism presented by Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser in two papers published in *Constellations* in 1996 (Fraser, 1996; Nicholson, 1996). This is not in any way an idiosyncratic or unusual view—on the contrary, it is hegemonic within academic feminism, and not only in the U.S. It appeals to well-entrenched views of what feminism is, views which have rarely, if ever, been challenged within the public sphere of academic publishing. It is, however, only part of the story.

The standard history of feminism which Nicholson and Fraser, and academic feminism in general, reproduce unquestioningly<sup>2</sup> accounts for the women’s liberation movement in terms of, first, a claim for women’s equality with men, followed by a focus on women’s differences from men and a valuing of female specificity and of what women had in common, once it was

realized that claims for equality tended to present women as the same as men. As Nicholson put it, "there was the growing idea that equality with men often translated into women adopting hegemonic conceptions of what it meant to be male"; and as Fraser put it, "getting women included in traditional male pursuits ... uncritically adopted the biased masculine view that only men's activities were truly human, thereby denigrating women's" (Nicholson, 1996: 5; Fraser, 1996: 63). Fraser expands that history to include a subsequent challenge to claims for female commonality largely on the part of "women of color and lesbians", on the grounds that that claim to commonality was spurious because "it privileged the standpoint of the white Anglo heterosexual middle class women who had so far dominated the movement" (Fraser, 1996: 64). Leaving aside for the moment the question of history, I want to say something about the political implications of setting up the feminist paradigm in terms of "equality"/"difference". To accept without question the confounding of "equality" with "sameness" and of "difference" with "inequality" feeds into the conservative argument against egalitarian politics, that social equality is not possible because people are not all the same, and that inequalities are inevitable because people are different. The egalitarian solution to this kind of confusion is not to disentangle the terms, but rather, to shift the ground of the debate altogether. The social problem addressed by an egalitarian politics like feminism (or socialism or anti-racism) is not, at base, inequality, but domination.

By domination I mean those social arrangements which are touted as being in the interests of all, but which actually operate to ensure that the vested interests of the powerful will prevail at the expense of the basic human rights and dignity of others. I also mean something like Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" and Max Weber's "Herrschaft", both of which have connotations of the organized management of the consent of the ruled to relations of ruling. By using the term "domination" to refer to certain social arrangements even within the Western democracies, I fully intend the implication that the distinction between "authoritarianism" and "democracy" is less absolute than most political theory, whether of the left or the right, is prepared to acknowledge. Those authoritarian regimes which litter the history of the twentieth century are distinguished by the overtness of the brutality of their ruling elites. But the self-identified "democracies", too, are hierarchical and unjust and becoming more so as capitalism restructures itself into transnational

corporations and finance capital with the willing connivance of nation states.

In that sense, inequalities, adverse discrimination, disadvantage, poverty, unemployment, exclusion, etc., are indicators of the deeper and more widespread problem of domination, and evidence that it exists. They are the scars which domination leaves on the social terrain, the social problems which domination causes. But in themselves they are only symptoms, and cannot be redressed without addressing the root cause, those social arrangements which ensure that some will prosper at others' expense.

Hence, it is futile to demand women's "equality" without first identifying and opposing the social order of male domination, because it is that social order which guarantees the inequality and ensures that nothing will change unless the problems are challenged directly at their source. The most such a demand can allow is women's "equality" with men in subscribing to and upholding the institutionalized arrangements of male domination as "society" per se. "Equality" feminism ran into trouble because it largely ignored the ways in which women's inequality was symptomatic of the social order of male domination. As long as those social arrangements which masquerade as the interests of all while operating in male interests at women's expense are ignored, the equality with men of (some few) women could be neatly incorporated into the prevailing system. It is this incorporation of the "equality" paradigm which was subsequently interpreted as seeing women as "the same" as men. This interpretation was accurate as long as the male dominant paradigm of "equality" continued to prevail because it remained unexamined—the only ways in which women could be "equal" were the ways in which men were "equal", i.e. not equal at all.

But the problem is merely compounded by reverting to the insistence that women are "different" from men. As many commentators have pointed out (including Nancy Fraser in the paper cited above), this leaves us pretty much where we always were—still enmeshed in those "differences" which structure and make meaningful the oppression of women. Substituting "difference" for inequality moves even further away from identifying the real problem of social domination. It is a retreat from the social altogether, into an abstract individualism which deletes the meanings and values those "differences" acquire under conditions of domination. (For more about "differences" and individualism, see below).

## Another History—Lesbian Feminism

But these problems are avoidable because there is another account of feminism's trajectory since the 1960s which owes nothing to the "equality"/"difference" paradigm. Feminism was a passionate thing, an affair of joy and rage and terror, which is not well served by being boxed into the pallid categories of either "equality" or "difference". The women's liberation movement was born in love and hatred. The love was women's love for each other, and in one important respect it took the dominant form love takes in our culture, i.e. sexual, i.e. lesbianism. *That* lesbianism was not the "identity" of a particular category of women claiming recognition and acceptance on the basis of their difference from other women. Although that kind of claim was being made in those early days, there was also another claim that lesbianism was a possibility for all women—"Any woman can be a lesbian". There were problems with this, although one of them was *not* the impossibility of changing one's sexual orientation in adult life. There were many women who did become lesbians under the influence of feminism, and for many of them the change was permanent. The chief problem was that it was still too closely tied in to a sexuality which remained inadequately theorized. As a consequence, it has subsequently been divested of its feminist significance and reincorporated into the malestream paradigm of sex as the eroticization of domination and subordination and just another form of sexual desire and activity.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning, though, lesbian feminism was a political challenge to the hegemonic status of heterosexuality in women's lives, a hegemony which was seen as central to women's oppression. Lesbianism was seen as a very real possibility that women could divest themselves of sexual desire for men, and hence, avoid placing themselves in subjection to men. As Janice Raymond has said,

this movement called lesbian feminism ... challenged the worldview that women exist for men and primarily in relation to them. It challenged the history of women as primarily revealed in the family—a history that often in the best of accounts, rendered women only in relation to men and male-defined events. It challenged that seemingly eternal truth that 'Thou as a woman must bond with a man', forever seeking the complementarity of hetero-relations. (Raymond, 1991: 13. See also: Abbott and Love, 1973; Myron and Bunch, 1975)

That meaning of lesbian feminism has all but vanished from the public record, swamped by a

morass of "queer theory", "lesbian and gay politics"<sup>4</sup> and a multitude of indifferently valued "identities".

The hatred was hatred for men and what they had done and continued to do to women. Of course, it kept being modified and mollified by the not-at-all-hateful men we knew. But there was from the beginning a marked ambivalence about whether or not feminism should struggle for women's equality with men. At one and the same time we proclaimed both that "Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition" *and* worked diligently for equal opportunity and affirmative action. There were some of us who never claimed to be equal to, or the same as, men, both because we did not like men in general (however much we may have liked, or even loved, particular men), and because men themselves were not equal or the same. We knew that the problem for women was men (or so we thought), and we certainly did not want to be like the oppressor. But neither did we want to be like women as conventionally defined to be subordinate to men. We thought we could create ourselves anew as long as we withdrew from men, especially sexually, and focused energy, attention and commitment on each other. In doing so, we gravely underestimated the power, reach and reality of what we were struggling against, not to mention making the basic sociological mistake of assuming that we were somehow immune from what we were rejecting. But to couch that struggle in terms of "equality"/"difference" does not do justice, either to the intensity with which it was carried on, or to the recognition which was there from the beginning that, since men were the problem, being like them was certainly not the solution.

Of course, the account I have outlined above is no more the whole story than the "equality"/"difference" account is. It, too, selects certain issues and ignores others. But it is a voice which is not being heard within that prestigious site of power and knowledge, the university (and not only in the US, since the paradigm appealed to by Fraser and Nicholson is dominant in Australian universities too). Partly, this is because the confusion about the significance of lesbianism for feminism was never resolved. While on the one hand there was a very strong sense that lesbianism was somehow central to the feminist project, on the other hand, it was clearly neither necessary nor sufficient. One did not have to be a lesbian to fight valiantly in the cause of feminism, and there are many lesbians who are adamantly opposed to feminism. But partly, too, the silencing of lesbian feminism is due to the closing

off of other options for the history and meaning of feminism by the long-term hegemony of paradigms like “equality”/“difference” (from men and among women). It could also be argued that this silencing is a large part of the reason why the confusions were not resolved.

The absence of challenge and debate around the meaning of feminism is a case study in the management of power/knowledge. The meaning of feminism is as self-evident as Nicholson and Fraser portray it only within that prestigious site of knowledge production, the university. Feminism is like any other way of knowing. It has a “normal” paradigm (Kuhn, 1970), the hegemony of which is maintained by way of the gatekeeping functions of peer assessments which determine what gets published and funded and what does not, of “mentoring” which determines whose work gets recognized and whose does not, and of patronage and networks which determine who gets hired and who does not. Those academic “peers” who sit in judgment on what counts as feminism make their decisions in accordance with widely accepted views of what feminism is. But that acceptability is too often combined with a disinclination to open up the question of what feminism means to discussion and debate.<sup>5</sup>

## **Another Meaning—The Struggle Against Male Domination**

And yet there is an alternative view, a much harsher theme which threatens to disrupt anydyne paradigms like that of “equality”/“difference”. That harsher theme is the opposition to male domination. Nicholson and Fraser themselves are aware of the existence of social domination. It is, in fact, the crux of their arguments, although there are difficulties with the terms in which those arguments are couched. Nicholson refers to “imbalances of power which have enabled some to recognize and caused others to seek or avoid recognition”. She argues that struggles for recognition on the part of “groups” like women or ethnic minorities involve, not only “the demand to have the distinctive characteristics of one’s group acknowledged”, but also a demand to turn the focus of attention onto “the actual practices of recognition” and “those people or institutions in a position to recognize”. Fraser warns against simply calling for the “valoriz[ing] of existing group identities” without at the same time making “political judgments about better or worse identities and differences”. She points out that there are some “group identities” which

“may be importantly tied to existing social relations of domination”, for example, “a white supremacist identity”, and that, therefore, any account of “identities and differences” must be combined with “the struggle for democracy and equality” (Nicholson, 1996: 6,7; Fraser, 1996: 70, 71, 72).

But the political struggle is not, in the first place, for equality, but against domination, since “equality” has no meaning as long as existing hierarchies remain unquestioned in their guise as the interests of all. Those hierarchies are not at base a matter of “groups”, “identities” or “differences”. Rather, they are social arrangements structured by meanings and values which can be espoused by anyone, even those most oppressed by them (or resisted even by those whose interests they supposedly serve). While it is important to be able to identify whose basic human rights are being violated, as well as who benefits from the exploitation or degradation of others, neither dominators nor dominated constitute anything that might be called “social groups”. Not only does the terminology of “groups” imply a homogeneity which cannot possibly exist; it interprets domination as a kind of group membership for which one qualifies on the basis of pre-given attributes. In this latter sense, the use of the term “groups” owes allegiance to a version of abstract individualism—“groups” can be identified as such only because there exist already-constituted individuals with the characteristics required for membership. The chief danger of this talk about “social groups” is that oppression tends to become the central defining characteristic of the membership. It comes to be seen as an inherent property of individuals, rather than imposed by relations of ruling.

This problem of individualism is even more starkly represented in the use of the term “identities”. As Fraser quite rightly pointed out, the issue is one of political judgment. But contrary to Fraser’s view, *what* is being judged is not “better and worse identities and differences”, but meanings and values, practices and institutions, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, etc., whoever holds them, subscribes to them, embraces them. And what they are being judged for is whether and to what extent they either maintain domination or challenge it. So white supremacy or racism is not an “identity” but a moral and political stance, as is its opposite, anti-racism. The question at issue is not “Who am I?” but “What am I doing or thinking or believing, and why, and ought I to be doing it or not?” To the extent



that social domination is seen as an “identity” it is being systematically misrecognized as an attribute of individuals rather than as a social phenomenon. The same problem inheres in the use of the term “difference” to the extent that those “differences” are seen first as characteristics of individuals who are then clumped together into “social groups” on the basis of those characteristics they hold in common. As well, talking in terms of “difference” is to misrepresent the social problem, which is not at base a question of “differences” at all. Rather, it is a question of the ways in which differences between people are unfairly used to justify and legitimize social arrangements of domination and subordination. Those differences can be used as markers of a putatively “natural” inferiority, or obliterated by requiring that those who are different conform to a norm which is either impossible to attain or denies the diversity of ways of being human. The social problem is not “difference” but domination, those social arrangements which ensure that some “differences” will make a difference in people’s access to resources, safety, security and human dignity. Without domination, “differences” would be just different.

Nonetheless, both Nicholson and Fraser are aware of social domination—Nicholson in her discussion of challenges to hegemonic forms of recognition, and Fraser in her insistence that struggles around “identity or difference” need to be combined with struggling for “democracy and social equality”. But neither author gives a central place to the problematic of male domination, even when discussing feminism. Fraser uses the term “male dominance” once (Nicholson does not mention it at all), in her account of how “equality feminists” see “gender difference”, i.e. “as an instrument and artifact of male dominance” (Fraser, 1996: 62). But it is confined to that context, and its relevance limited by being bracketed off as something someone else said, and not something the author herself is arguing. Her preferred terminology is “gender difference” and “social inequality”.

The deletion of male domination from the account of feminism which appears in both papers is the result of drawing parallels between feminism and multiculturalism. While it makes sense to refer to male domination in a feminist context, its relevance is less obvious in the context of multiculturalism.<sup>6</sup> But interpreting social domination as mere “difference” fails to capture what is actually at stake in relations of ruling.

## In Defence of Radical Feminism

The theme of male domination was stated most clearly and least equivocally within early radical feminism,<sup>7</sup> although the original insight remained theoretically undeveloped. Instead, radical feminism<sup>8</sup> has since tended to focus attention on exposing the more extreme manifestations of male supremacist hatred of and contempt for women—male violence against women, rape, child sexual abuse, prostitution, trafficking in women, and especially, pornography.<sup>9</sup> The aim of this exposure was to demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that male supremacy existed, that it consistently harmed women, and that those social arrangements which permitted, even encouraged, such things to happen were gross violations of human dignity which ought not be allowed. As Kathleen Barry has put it, in discussing her own initial reluctance to investigate female sexual slavery:

I realized that my reaction was typical of women's response: even with some knowledge of the facts, I was moving from fear to paralysis to hiding. It was then that I realized ... that the only way we can come out of hiding, break through our paralyzing defences, is to know the full extent of sexual violence and domination of women ... In *knowing*, in facing directly, we can learn how to chart our course out of this oppression, by envisioning and creating a world which will preclude female sexual slavery. (Barry, 1984: 5-6—her emphasis)

In reaction to the radical feminist exposure of the more extreme manifestations of male supremacy, there appeared within the ranks of feminism itself, mounted by women identifying as feminists, a series of attacks on radical feminism. These attacks were not explicitly directed against the naming of male domination as the problem. Instead, they renamed radical feminism "cultural feminism", and characterized it as "essentialist", "ahistorical", prone to "false universalism", "prudish", "moralistic", and "anti-sex".<sup>10</sup>

So commonsense and taken-for-granted has the denigration of radical feminism become within the hallowed precincts of the university, that anything can be said about radical feminism and radical feminists, no matter how misleading.<sup>11</sup> To illustrate this problem of the cavalier treatment of radical feminism with just one example among many: Seyla

Benhabib can say, casually and without any argument or evidence, that there is “a strange and unholy alliance” between Andrea Dworkin and Jerry Falwell (Benhabib, 1994: 99). But in my own extensive reading of the Dworkin’s work—everything except the novels but including her website—I have found no evidence for this assertion. On the contrary, it is beyond the bounds of belief that Andrea Dworkin would ever form any “alliance” with Falwell, given her trenchant, insightful and sustained critique of right wing and fascist politics.<sup>12</sup>

Benhabib also says that “debates among feminists have been blocked by ... a radical feminism which can hardly conceal its own political and moral authoritarianism” (Benhabib, 1994: 113). As putative evidence for this, she references the work of Catharine MacKinnon. In a later discussion, Benhabib expands on this theme of “moral and political authoritarianism” (pp.195-6). She summarizes her view of MacKinnon’s overall argument as follows: “Just as ‘the ruling ideas’ are the ideas of the ‘ruling classes’, so too, dominant moral conceptions are the result of a system of gender and class oppression of compulsory heterosexuality “. In Benhabib’s view, this “reduce[s] normative problems of justice and morality in complex societies to simple patterns of interest and power camouflaging”. She says that MacKinnon posits “the utopia ... of a totally rationally ruled, self-transparent society of perfect power”, and that “MacKinnon’s understanding of politics, as well as of morality, has more in common with the authoritarian utopias of Leninist politics than it does with the tradition of critical Marxist theory”. She concludes by saying that “[t]he flip side of the denial of politics is an authoritarian politics which will put an end to all difference, controversy, conflict and violence among women”.

This account of Benhabib’s is a variety of the “shoot the messenger” argument which has been the bane of radical feminism’s existence from the beginning—it interprets a critique of social domination as an example of it. Benhabib’s account is at least partially correct. MacKinnon’s work is an exposure of the ruling ideas of male supremacy, and of the ways in which “justice” and “morality” camouflage vested interests and social relations of ruling. But to expose domination is not to recommend it, but rather, to take the first step in resisting it. If unjust and immoral social arrangements are to be challenged and opposed, they must be identified for what they are. Because domination operates most efficiently to the extent

that its real purposes remain hidden, naming domination as domination is an essential part of any liberatory politics. Benhabib herself acknowledges the existence of “[p]olitical ideologies as well as more subtle forms of cultural hegemony [which] have always sought to make plausible the continuation of violence and power to those who most suffered from their consequences” (p. 33). But exposing ideologies and forms of cultural hegemony is exactly what the work of Catharine MacKinnon and other radical feminists is doing. Far from denying politics, it is bringing into question the plausibility of ideological justifications for male power over and violence against women, by labeling “political” those areas of the social conventionally excluded from the political domain.

It may indeed be the case that, as Benhabib says, “neither interpersonal conflict nor economic scarcity nor the sources of human vulnerability and need are likely to be wholly eliminated, even in a more just society” (p.196). But I am at a loss to know why this is raised as an objection to the work of Catharine MacKinnon who, as I read her, has never recommended such an unrealistic project. It is true that the general tenor of her work is that pornography, misogyny and the dehumanization inherent in male supremacy ought not to exist. But this is an implication entailed by any moral and political stance of opposition to injustice and atrocity. Socialism and anti-racism contain the same implication, that is, that poverty, exploitation, racial vilification, etc. ought not to exist. The impossibility of wholly eliminating social wrongs is no reason to refrain from identifying and opposing them. The struggle is not to wholly eliminate anything, but to keep exposing domination for what it is and refusing to acquiesce insofar as we are able, even when we are helpless to do anything about it as a global phenomenon.

Moreover, it is not the case, as Benhabib goes on to say, that MacKinnon “rejects” moral theory “as simply representing the ruling idea’s [sic] of compulsory heterosexuality”. The context for this assertion was a discussion of Carol Gilligan’s work on ethics. MacKinnon was voicing her disquiet at some of the implications she perceived arising from Gilligan’s arguments about women’s “different voice” on ethical issues. She was concerned that Gilligan’s account reinforced conventional femininity by portraying women as caring and nurturing. However accurate this interpretation (and I tend to think it is not, although MacKinnon is not alone in her disquiet), it is not a rejection of moral theory per se, but of a

particular morality, one which maintains women in subordination to men. Far from being a rejection of moral theory, a stance of opposition to women's subordination is itself essentially moral. It is saying that women's subordination is morally wrong, that it ought not to be so, and that it ought to be resisted by all people of good will.

It is true that MacKinnon does separate morality and politics, a distinction which Benhabib disagrees with (as I do too, both because of its Machiavellian implications, and because it is a variant of the public/private distinction which functions to keep the personal and intimate out of the reach of political protest). But this distinction was not so much between morality and politics, as between individualistic accounts and political ones. MacKinnon was concerned to distinguish between a "difference" approach to "gender issues" (i.e. one which confined the account to the level of individual attributes), and one which acknowledged that "gender is first a political hierarchy of power". She was pointing out that talk about "differences" does not sufficiently address the social problem identified by feminism because it does not name the power relations involved. Despite her own distinction, she is very much concerned with exposing the immorality, and the injustice, of social arrangements which require women's subordination to men, and the crucial role played by heterosexuality, but especially by pornography, in ideologically justifying and maintaining that subordination. Far from recommending authoritarianism, MacKinnon's work challenges and opposes it. In order to do that, she has to tell it as it is. But in saying that this is the way the world is, she is at the same time saying this ought not to be. To read her as *proposing* domination rather than as *exposing* it is to misread her work and misrecognize its purpose.

The only way I can make sense of these charges of "authoritarianism", "denial of politics", and a supposed positing of "a totally rationally ruled, self-transparent society of perfect power", is to read them as objections to the feminist project of politicizing the personal. What Dworkin and MacKinnon (and radical feminism in general) are doing is bringing into question the dominant meanings and values of sex. In doing so, they are seen as invading the most intimate, private and personal aspects of other people's lives, and hence trespassing in areas which should not concern them. What these objections seem to be saying is that Dworkin and MacKinnon are recommending that people's lives be controlled down to the last

detail. But that just is the implication of “the personal is political”. “The personal” means the intimate aspects of people’s lives. It does not mean, however, that Dworkin and MacKinnon have any power over other people. On the contrary, to accuse them of “moral and political authoritarianism” is to ignore the social context within which they write. Not only do they not have the social power to impose anything on anyone, the social institutions ranged against them are immense—from the apparatuses of the U.S. legal system, the pornography and entertainment industries and the mainstream media, to the ACLU and, most unhappily, those self-styled “feminists” who insist on seeing their work as advocating “censorship” when they are not in a position to censor anything. What they are trying to do is to get onto the public agenda a message which goes radically against the grain of dominant malestream depictions of what sex is, with the aim of providing an alternative so that people can take control over their own lives. And they are doing it in the face of very powerful vested interests indeed.

The irony is that Benhabib herself is an insightful moral philosopher. Her reworking of Habermasian communicative ethics contains many fruitful insights appropriate for a meta-ethics of feminism. Unfortunately, she violates her own ethical stance, in particular, her commitment to a society characterized by what she frequently refers to as “the norms of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity”. When it comes to radical feminism, it seems there is neither respect nor reciprocity nor egalitarianism. There is no respect because there is no will or desire to understand; there is no reciprocity because there is no dialogue; and there is no equality because radical feminism is constantly under attack while its opponents’ misrepresentations are allowed to pass unchallenged.

## **Sexuality and Male Domination**

It is no accident that both the radical feminist critique and the attacks on it centered around sexuality. The attacks were particularly virulent towards the feminist anti-pornography movement. They took the form of a sexual libertarianism which attempted to place any and every kind of sexual desire and activity, including sadomasochism, prostitution and the sexual abuse of children (euphemistically renamed “cross-generational encounters”) (Rubin, 1984), outside the reach of moral and political critique. That they were so virulent, and proceeded by way of such distorted misrepresentations of what radical feminists were

actually saying,<sup>13</sup> indicates that something very powerful indeed was at stake, nothing less than an attempt to place on the agenda of public debate a complete rethinking of the human meaning and value of sexuality.

That this is so is indicated less by the radical feminist critique, which was not on the whole directed against sexuality per se, at least as far as the anti-pornography movement was concerned,<sup>14</sup> but against its more degrading and violent aspects. It was the libertarian opposition to radical feminism which interpreted the anti-pornography movement as an attack on sexuality per se. If to be against pornography is to be “anti-sex”, then pornography must be sex. And if the meanings and values of pornography are what define “sex”, then the radical lesbian feminist position (if not the anti-pornography movement as a whole) gains support from a most surprising direction, from the very libertarianism which is so virulently opposed to radical feminism—both radical lesbian feminism and libertarianism agree that pornography expresses what sex is. The difference, however, is crucial. Libertarianism interprets pornography as a kind of test case of personal freedom, so absolute that it must not even be criticized, much less censored or constrained in any way. Radical feminism, on the other hand, interprets pornography as condoning oppression, as the most blatant and shameless expression of the worst that men are not only permitted, but actively encouraged, to do to women.

Both the radical feminist insistence that sexuality is central to women’s oppression, and the furor which that aroused (in the form of distortions, misrepresentations and outright falsehoods deployed to silence the radical feminist voice), indicate that something important is going on. But while there is a wealth of evidence from the work of radical feminists that sexuality is central to women’s oppression, and many suggestive insights as to why that might be so (especially in the work of Andrea Dworkin), the theoretical question remains undeveloped.

In what follows I want to present a schematic outline of a theoretical account of the feminist project.<sup>15</sup> This account is an attempt to give due weight to the radical feminist struggles around sexuality, and to counter the hegemony of alternative views, whether bland or vicious, which delete feminism’s central problematic. To start with, I would argue that

feminism is a moral and political standpoint of opposition to the meanings, values and reality of male domination; that male domination is a social order structured around the principle that only men count as "human"; and that feminism's concern for women is a concern to assert that women are human too, by struggling against social conditions which deny that, and by placing the central focus of attention and energy on women.

Sexuality is central to women's oppression because it is central to male domination.<sup>16</sup> And sexuality is central to male domination because the penis is central to both. I could, of course, say "phallus" instead of "penis", since what I am talking about is what the penis means and the ways in which it is valued. But I see no point in making the distinction when no distinction is made in practice between the penis and its meaning. Under male supremacist conditions the penis is not just another bodily organ, but encumbered instead with meanings and values which inflate its importance out of all human proportion.

The penis is central to male domination because it is the symbol of "human" status.<sup>17</sup> In saying this, I am taking very seriously indeed what Freud so blandly called "the anatomical distinction between the sexes". What Freud described, and also prescribed since he found nothing morally wrong in it, was nothing less than the central place in human existence occupied by the penis. Such a valuation of what is required to be counted as "human" is neither necessary nor universal nor irrevocable (despite Freud's conviction that it was). Social relations of domination are not the only social relations possible, even under conditions where domination prevails. But if male supremacy is to be challenged and opposed, it needs to be recognized for what it is, and Freud's account is one of the clearest and least equivocal.

I am arguing, then, that Freud and radical feminism uncovered the same social phenomenon, what Freud called "the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love",<sup>18</sup> and radical feminism called "pornography". Both exposed the dehumanizing aspects of male sexuality as systematic rather than the result of individual pathology, although they are diametrically opposed in the relative valuations they placed on it. While feminism is understandably opposed to the Freudian account of what is required to be a "normal woman" (Millett, 1971; Firestone, 1981; Figs, 1972; Chesler, 1972), Freud never mentioned



pornography, and he was only concerned about the degradation of men who could only perform sexually with “women of ill-repute”.<sup>19</sup> But although what Freud (and his followers, including the women) said about women, and then proceeded to set in stone by calling it “science”, needed to be exposed for the hateful ideology it was, it was not wholly untrue. As ideology, psychoanalysis could be so widely influential because what it said about women fitted so neatly with dominant beliefs.

More to the point, however, is what it said about men. Both logically and chronologically, what Freud said about women followed on from what he said about men. He said that male existence is haunted by the fear of losing the penis. This loss is threatened in the name of the father at a time when the male is a helpless and dependent child, during the struggle to establish a consciousness and sense of self, and is emphasized by the fact that there exist others—females—who have already suffered that “loss”. The terror aroused by that threat—“castration anxiety”—can only be managed by repudiating any identification with the female, a repudiation which, Freud constantly reminds us, demands that the female be held in contempt because she lacks what makes him what he is. Because the penis is central to male existence, and male existence is what counts as “human” existence, female existence, too, must center around the penis. Because she does not have it she is inexorably condemned to be subordinate to men if she is to acquire any recognizable existence at all. She must convert herself into a sheath for the penis,<sup>20</sup> and her highest destiny is to be the mother of sons. Not only must she live with male contempt, she too must develop a contempt for all things female, and a particular hatred for the mother who gave birth to her as such a deficient being.

Of course, Freud’s account is permeated with the naturalistic fallacy. He put it all in terms of “is” rather than “ought”—this is the way of the world and there is no point in “feminists” saying otherwise. He himself found his discoveries distressing, although not because of what he said about women. (His chief distress was reserved for male sexual impotence (Freud, 1910, 1912), and the impossibility of finding a happy resolution between “instinctual life” and “civilization”). He frequently appealed to “constitutional factors”, and he never completely abandoned his early expressed hope that what he had discovered would eventually be found to have a biological basis. Even more to the point, however, is his

failure to morally condemn those social arrangements which ensured a second-rate status for women. He did feel a certain unease. There was his coy disclaimer to “the ladies” (“This doesn’t apply to you. You’re the exception; on this point you’re more masculine than feminine”) (Freud, 1933: 150), and his “great question” towards the end of his life (“What do women want?”) (Richards, 1977: 326n1). He admitted that what he had to say about femininity was “certainly incomplete and fragmentary and does not always sound friendly”, that he was “only ... describing women in so far as their nature is determined by their sexual function”, and that “we do not overlook the fact that an individual woman may be a human being in other respects as well” (Freud, 1933: 169). But he still insisted that women were “biologically destined” to femininity as he described it (Freud, 1933: 152).

For Freud, then, hyper-valuation of the penis and the concomitant devaluation of women and their subordination to the penis was something like an inescapable fact of life. In Freud’s view, the social arrangements based on penis-possession were beyond question, completely outside any realm of human action and responsibility. Far from seeing what he had discovered as a social problem to be redressed, he regarded it as human existence per se. It never occurred to him that his life’s work might be part of the problem, nor that, in the clarity of its exposition, it might suggest the solution: to dislodge the penis from the central part it plays in defining who is to count as “human”. Nonetheless, for that very reason—he had nothing to hide because he was largely oblivious to the moral implications of what he uncovered—he succeeded in unveiling the phallic imperative behind what passes for “normality”.

Read as ideology rather than “science”, the Freudian account can be seen to contain a plausible explanation for the continued existence of prostitution, pornography, male sexual abuses, and the more widespread cultural norms which ensure that sex permeate every aspect of human existence and be rigidly defended against criticism. If the penis is so overloaded with meaning and so hypervalued as the symbol of what counts as “human” status, it is hardly surprising that it is so highly charged with erotic energy that it demands satisfaction at any price. If men are nothing but penis-bearers, they must keep using it to prove they still exist. And because what men desire is seen as “human” desire per se, it is not surprising that there exist so many institutionalized ways of eliciting, inciting and

servicing that eroticism. Nor is it surprising that those institutions should be oppressive, exploitative and degrading, since the overweening importance of penis-possession is already dehumanizing because it has already announced that to be female is to be less than, or not at all, human.

It is this phallic imperative which feminism has exposed with its adamant focus on sexuality. In the light of that exposure, it hardly makes sense to define feminism in terms of a claim for women's "equality" with men. Certainly, feminism is the struggle to put an end to all those forms of inequality which deprive women of access to the resources necessary for human dignity. But challenging inequality is not the same thing as demanding equality. To challenge inequality is to expose the ways in which domination operates, but as long as the social arrangements of domination continue in force, "equality" has no meaning. That is not to say that social domination is not remediable. It is, even under current conditions where domination still prevails. Except for violent coercion and economic deprivation, domination is not absolute since it operates through the management of consent, or at least non-resistance, on the part of subordinated populations. Hence, there is usually room for manoeuvre and refusal, no matter how small scale, piece-meal, or intermittent those resistances might be. And the naming *has* begun, and as a consequence it is possible to interrogate social arrangements for the extent to which they maintain social relations of ruling, or alternatively contribute to genuine human well-being.

Feminism, in its exposure of male domination, has uncovered forms of domination inconceivable in conventional political terms (not surprisingly, since the conventions are malestream ones). But that exposure is not helped by defining feminism in terms of women's sameness to, difference from, or equality with, men, or indeed, as long as it continues to be defined only in terms of women ("white, middle-class, heterosexual" women versus the others). The problem is not particular categories of women, but social arrangements of domination. The feminist question in relation to forms of domination which seem at first sight "other" than male domination, is not only to ask how women collude in the race or class oppression of others, but also to ask about the male supremacist aspects of racism, elitism, economic exploitation and deprivation, etc. As long as feminist attention remains solely focused on women, this latter question—how do racism and economic domination

contribute to, arise out of, or help maintain, male supremacy (or vice versa)?—does not get asked. The feminist focus on women is crucial to the feminist project, not, however, because of something inherent in women, but because the social relations of male supremacy deprive women of human status and that needs to be redressed. And it cannot be redressed unless the radical feminist exposure of the rapacious extremes of male sexuality is accorded due recognition as central to the feminist struggle.

## Notes

1. A rare exception can be found in the work of Maria Mies (Mies, 1986: 37-8 and *passim*). Mies' preferred term for what she refers to as "the system of male dominance under which women suffer today in most societies" is "capitalist patriarchy" (p.37)—"capitalist" because "capitalism constitutes the most recent and most universal manifestation ... [of] patriarchal civilization as a system" (p.13), and "patriarchy" because it is "less open to biologicistic interpretations" than "the concept of 'male dominance'" (p.37). I prefer to use the term male domination (or male supremacy) to designate the social problem challenged by feminism. Because it is so difficult to place the social arrangements of male domination on the public agenda, male domination needs to be named as clearly, as unequivocally and as often as possible. I do not agree that it has "biologicistic" connotations, although it does tend to be interpreted individualistically, a tendency which can be countered by insisting that what is at issue is a social system of meanings and values, and not a set of male personality characteristics. Capitalism itself is, moreover, a form of male domination, both because it exploits women differently from the ways in which it exploits men, and because the capitalist accumulation process appears to be intimately connected with maleness, as Mies herself so ably demonstrates, both in the text cited above and in her earlier book (Mies, 1982).
2. I first came across this history in Eisenstein, 1984 and Eisenstein and Jardine, eds, 1985. For a more nuanced account of the "equality" / "difference" paradigm in terms of the women's liberation demand that women be recognized as fully human, see: Curthoys, 1997)
3. Valerie Solanas and Ti-Grace Atkinson warned us that something like this would happen (Solanas, 1971: 30-2; Atkinson, 1974: 84-5).
4. The term is Sheila Jeffreys'. She says: "I use the term 'lesbianandgay' to describe those theorists who apparently make no distinction between lesbians and gay men in their theory.

They avoid feminist insights about the different class positions of women and men and homogenise experience to create a universal gay theory in which lesbian specificity disappears" (Jeffreys, 1993: 18n2).

5. There do exist a number of texts which seem at first sight to address the question, e.g. Delmar, 1986: 8-33; Offen, 1988: 119-57; and the feminist dictionaries: Humm, 1989; and Kramarae and Treichler, 1985. But these are unsatisfactory in various ways. For a detailed discussion of these texts, see: Thompson, 2001.

6. That is not to say that it has no relevance at all. Elsewhere I have argued that no form of social domination is adequately accounted for unless its male supremacist aspects are also acknowledged (Thompson, 2001). I tend to agree with the early radical feminist argument (more recently restated in Lerner, 1986) that the original form of domination is the domination of women by men, although I disagree with the way in which this is located in history (or pre-history). Rather, I see it as an aspect of socialization into the meanings and values of male supremacy, and its 'origin' at the beginning of each individual life. Once that first form of dehumanization is set in place, it becomes the norm (although it must always be remembered that domination is not the only form of social relations possible, even under conditions where domination prevails). There is more work to be done on this, but this paper is not the place to do it.

7. Recorded for posterity in such classic texts as Millett, 1971; Firestone, 1981[1970]); Atkinson, 1974; Morgan, ed., 1970; Koedt, Levine and Rapone, eds, 1973; Klagsburn, ed., 1973; Dworkin, 1974.

8. Radical feminism is not a group of individuals. Rather, it is a standpoint which runs through all feminist work. It is what makes feminism feminism, rather than a variation of some malestream paradigm, e.g. Marxism, socialism, liberalism, postmodernism. It is what Catharine MacKinnon has called "feminism unmodified" (MacKinnon, 1987: 13).

9. Documented in the work of Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Sheila Jeffreys, Janice Raymond, Susan Griffin, Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Diana E. H. Russell, Susan Brownmiller, Kathleen Barry, Marilyn Frye, among others, and the writings and activism of various anti-pornography and "Reclaim the Night" movements and movements against violence against women.

10. For some examples of these attacks, see: Heresies, 1981; Webster, 1981; Snitow, Stansell and Thompson, eds, 1984); Vance, ed., 1984; Echols, 1984a, 1984b; Rubin, 1984; Feminist

Review, eds, 1987; Segal, 1987.

11. For one defense of radical feminism, see: Richardson, 1996. For my own attempt, see: Thompson, 1991.

12. See especially: Dworkin, 1983. But her commitment to the cause of the oppressed, women in particular but not only women, and consequently her undeviating opposition to rightist politics, was already clear in her first book: Dworkin, 1974.

13. For radical feminist critiques of sexual libertarianism, see: Linden, Pagano, Russell and Star, eds, 1982; Jeffreys, 1985, 1990, 1993; Reti, ed., 1993.

14. There was certainly a strand of radical lesbian feminism which argued for a complete repudiation of heterosexuality on the part of "serious feminists" (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1981). For more recent discussions of feminism and heterosexuality, see: Wilkinson and Kitzinger, eds, 1993; and the subsequent debate in *Feminism & Psychology*, issues 3: 3 (1993), 4: 2 (1994), 5: 1 (1995), 5: 4 (1995), 7: 4 (1997).

15. I have argued a similar case in more detail elsewhere (Thompson, 1991 (chapter 2), 1994, 2001).

16. "Women's oppression" does not automatically imply male domination, given the frequency with which "women's oppression" is used in contexts where references to male domination are remarkably absent. See, e.g., Barrett, 1984).

17. For a similar account, see: Graham et al., 1994: 91-3.

18. Or rather, the translator of the Standard Edition did. An alternative translation of the same paper is "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life". The German word used by Freud is "Erniedrigung".

19. The editor of the Standard Edition tells us that "the German, 'dirne', ... is not well rendered by 'prostitute', which in English lays too much stress on the monetary side of the relationship", but proceeded to translate it as "prostitute" nonetheless.

20. We didn't need Freud to tell us this—the word "vagina" means "sheath". This has some fascinating implications. Does that make the penis a sword? But a sheathed sword is harmless—it cannot be used as a weapon while it is in its sheath. The next question, however, is: harmless to whom? Obviously not to women who are raped, or whose "consent" is coerced by payment, blackmail or lies. It can only be other men who cannot be harmed while the penis is sheathed.

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## **An email exchange with *Constellations***

Date: Mon, 23 Nov 1998 14:51:04 -0500

From: [...]

To: D.thompson@unsw.edu.au

Subject: Constellations

Dear Dr. Denise Thompson

Thank you for allowing us to consider your manuscript, "Feminism and the Struggle Over Meaning," for the journal *Constellations*. However, at the suggestion of our reviewers, *Constellations* is unable to publish your paper in its present form.

A hard copy of this letter is on its way in the mail. Thank you again for your interest in *Constellations*, and best wishes for your future work.

Sincerely,

[...]

Editorial Assistant

11.2.1999

Dear [...], Could you pass the following on to the editors of '*Constellations*', please?

Thanks

To the editors of '*Constellations*':

At the end of November last year, I received an email informing me that your journal was unable to publish my paper, 'Feminism and the Struggle Over Meaning', and that a hard copy of what was referred to as 'this letter' was being posted to me. I have not to date received any such letter.

Neither have I received any explanation for your rejection of my paper. Leaving aside the issue of common courtesy, I can only conclude that your action in relation to my paper is yet another example of exactly what the paper was criticizing, i.e. that regime of power/knowledge which ensures that only one version of 'feminism' reaches the public arena.

Yours faithfully,

Denise Thompson

Date: Thu, 11 Feb 1999 12:39:43 -0500

From: [...]

To: teragram@ozemail.com.au

Subject: Re: To the editors

Dear Denise:

I'm afraid your lack of hard copy was my fault, not the editors. At the time I e-mailed you, our computer was down and we had no way to print. We continued to have computer problems (not to the extent of being able to print, but huge problems that took up tremendous amounts of time and energy) until January. In any event, we were able only to accomplish enough work to keep afloat. I'm afraid a detailed explanation of the decision to not print your piece got lost in all the disruption. Again, this was my fault, I should have made sure the letter got to you, and I did not. I'm sorry.

Your paper went through the review process and on the advice of our reviewers was not accepted for publication. As you no doubt know, we have many papers come in and most do not get printed. I can assure you that the rejection of your piece was an editorial decision and not one in reaction to the argument of your paper.

If you wish, I can send a substantial critique of your paper to you. Please let me know.

Again, sorry for the confusion,

[...]

12.2.1999

Dear [...], Thanks for that explanation. Please do send me the reviewers' comments.

However, your explanation relates only to the 'common courtesy' point, and not to the reasons the paper was rejected. Yes, I know most papers submitted to academic journals are rejected (and having reviewed a few myself, I'm not surprised). Nonetheless, my point about the manufacturing of knowledge remains. Only certain things are allowed to count as 'feminism' in the public domain, while others are systematically excluded. And you can tell the editors I said so. I may have more to say when I get the reviewers' comments.

Could you please send them to: P.O. Box 132, Leichhardt - 2040, Sydney, Australia.

[June 2003: I received no such 'substantial critique'.]

## **A request from *Women's Studies International Forum***

*Women's Studies International Forum*

Women's Studies

Roehampton Institute, London

13 April 2000

Dear Denise,

Thank you for your patience in waiting for [...] to return to work after her illness and the time taken in the reviewing process.

The three reviewers are all enthusiastic about this work as the paper presents an important argument that needs to be heard. They agree that while the scholarship is generally sound the paper needs substantial revisions before it can be published, I enclose comments from two of the reviewers and a copy of the paper that has been annotated by one of the reviewers for you. [Added July 2003: In fact, there were only two reviewers. The annotations were notes made by Reader B.]

Please let us know if you are willing to revise your paper in the way suggested. We look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely

### **Reader A, *Women's Studies International Forum***

Reviewer's comments on : Feminism and the Struggle over Meaning

There are some fascinating insights here. I like the way criticisms of rad fem are taken apart here and the way article shows this is because of rad fem's seeing sexuality as central and as political.

I think, though, that the article ends rather strangely. The title is OK but could more specifically describe the task undertaken here e.g. Radical feminists are attacked for naming male domination and for saying sexuality central to this. Title does not say this article will outline a whole rad fem framework, but this is said on p11 towards the end of the article. 'In what follows I want to present a schematic outline of a theoretical account of the feminist project'. In fact the last 3 pages do not attempt to do this but instead do a critique of Freud.

It is a nice critique of Freud but I think ref should be made to all the other rad fem theorists who have made a critique of Freud central to their work. So many rad fems have criticised

Freud because precisely of what is being pointed out here, the bald ideology of penis power reflected in sexuality.

So I think the end needs to be different. Should not say that it will outline rad fem framework but show how from the beginning rad fems have identified in critique of Freud centrality of penis and sex and why sex is political and central to male domination. Plus maybe mention should be made of psych feminism because this is an important and very puzzling development.

## **Reader B,** *Women's Studies International Forum*

Feminism and the Struggle over Meaning—Comments for author

I read this paper with interest since its argument is one I have much sympathy with. I also think that the 'difference-equality' story is one that very much needs to be challenged since, as the author suggests, it has become a form of orthodoxy. The article is well written and is based on sound feminist scholarship, but I think there are ways in which the argument might be further strengthened.

Some general points first

I wonder whether the author might be trying to do too much in one paper. There is a critique of the difference-equality story, then an alternative history and finally an attempt to theorise the centrality of sexuality to male domination. The final part of the paper was, to me, the least convincing, in part because it was too brief to do it justice. My feeling is that the author should leave this for another paper and develop the argument more—and I'll offer a few ideas when I come onto my more specific comments. My view is that this could be signposted as something which needs pursuing, but that the focus here should be on contesting a version of the history of feminist thought which is partial and damaging.

Another issue I would like to raise in relation to the paper as a whole, is that the author should recognise that, in addition to the position she advances, there are other feminists who do not fit into the 'difference-equality' mould. There are too few of us who still argue that feminism is about challenging male dominance to risk excluding each other. If we do so, we collude in the misrepresentation of radical feminism, which this author (along with others, including myself) is so keen to contest. While I have differences with this author around the centrality she accords to sexuality, I have no objection to her concentrating on advancing that case, but I would suggest that she acknowledges other radical feminist positions along the way. I also think that there are others who might not call themselves radical feminists (including some materialist feminists) who are also arguing for an emphasis on male dominance and who contest both [the] liberal version of 'equality' and difference theory.

Finally, a minor point, but one worth mentioning, is that the version of history being challenged here emanates from the USA and is having a colonising effect on feminism elsewhere. It is, of course, partial

even in the US context. But part of the problem, as I see it, is US academic parochialism, which refuses to consider any form of thinking that derives from elsewhere (or constructs its own version of it, as in the infamous 'French feminism'). Also, the Nicholson-Fraser axis is particularly influential in part because of the location of that pair at the heart of significant networks and patronage chains.

Now on to my more specific points. I have scribbled on the manuscript, but this might not always be clear, so I'll reiterate those remarks here:

p.2. End of first full para, where dominance is established as the central problem addressed by feminism: Yes, absolutely—but one key point that needs to be made is that once we foreground dominance, our version of equality differs from the liberal version. Importantly, equality does not then mean women becoming 'like men'. As Christine Delphy put it (in WSIF 16, 1), if women were the equals of men, men would no longer equal themselves. This seems to me so fundamental, and so self-evident, that I have never been able to understand who those who tell the 'equality-difference' story seem unable to grasp it.

This is pertinent to the argument at the bottom of the page, and running over to the top of p.3, regarding the problems (liberal) equality feminists ran into—the tendency Delphy is part of (French materialist feminism) were aware of this problem from the mid 1970s. They made it very clear that, in setting themselves against 'difference feminism', they were not arguing for women to become 'like men'—and that point has been restated time and again by Wittig, Delphy and others.

An aside—it might also be worth making use of Felski's critique of difference theory in these early sections (Signs 23, 1). While her perspective differs from this author's, and mine, she does have some very useful things to say [...]

p.4, last para. Here the author admits that her version of events is not the whole story either—here, I think, she should at least mention other silenced voices—e.g. those who have related patriarchal domination to the appropriation of women's labour, which includes those who link this to heterosexual marriage (e.g. Guillaumin, Wittig).

p.5, top of page, on Nicholson and Fraser's portrayal of feminism 'only within the university'—I would say only within the American (US) university.

New section—part of the problem with Fraser's argument is that while she talks of power, she abstracts it from its material context and doesn't, for example, consider how dominant 'groups' benefit from their domination—and therefore she cannot see that relations of dominance and subordination produce race, gender, etc—she seems to be aware of this re class, but not anything else. This is, in part, because of her use of a Weberian framework.

The critique of the idea of pre-existing groups (bottom of the page) is the crux of the matter and needs to be expanded and given more punch. It's a vital point.p.6, use of the phrase 'relations of ruling'

(which crops up again elsewhere). This comes from Dorothy Smith and should be acknowledged—and, indeed, maybe her perspective as a whole needs acknowledgement.

The idea of ‘identities’ as it features in these debates is, as the author recognises, hugely problematic—part of the problem is that it is being used in two rather different ways:

a) in terms of political allegiance

b) in terms of some essential, ‘pre-existing’ group identity. (And re this and what I’ve said above, it might be worth hammering home the essentialism underpinning these arguments since they so often accuse us of this sin).

Re essentialism—be careful in middle para p.6. Surely the point (given what has been argued so far) is not that ‘differences’ are simply used to justify dominance and subordination. Of course, real and imagined differences are—but the most significant differences are products of relations of dominance and subordination. Of course this has long been recognised re class, but it has also been strongly argued in relation to gender and to ‘race’ (including by radical feminists—e.g. Guillaumin on ‘race’ and sex) [...]

pp.7-10, on radical feminism. Not all forms of radical feminism are represented here. This should be made explicit.

p.10 An aside—There is a bizarre idea around, coming from those ‘difference’ theorists, that McKinnon is not to be trusted because she uses phallic language!!!! (I think this probably originated with Cornell, but it has wide currency).

Perhaps it should be made clear that Dworkin and McKinnon have never argued for state censorship—indeed are on record against it—which rather undercuts some of the critique of them.

The last section, as I’ve suggested, should be dropped and developed for a future article, but I’ll offer a few points. Note: the last paragraph should stay, as it is a strong conclusion and would still work without the rest of the section.

Paragraph beginning foot of p.10 and over to p.11: There are some complex contradictions being dealt with here, which need spelling out in more detail.

Short, penultimate paragraph on p.11: The idea of the penis and its meaning needs to be explained and theorised more. A source which might be useful here is a very old classic—Kessler and McKenna’s (1978) book on gender. I’ve re-read this recently, and been struck by how radical the arguments were for their time. One of the key points they make is that genitals are always social and cultural and, moreover, that the penis is the cultural genital, in that gender is defined in terms of its presence or absence—which ties in with the male as the standard of humanity.

The reading of Freud is an interesting one, but needs some contextualisation and justification given the place of psychoanalysis in academic feminist theorising.



## **My reply**

5.5.2000

[...]

Editorial Assistant

Women's Studies International Forum

Dear [...],

I've made some small changes to the paper, so I'm sending you another copy. But I'm not quite sure that I understand what the readers are asking me to do. It seems that there are two main changes they are asking for: to include more references to radical feminist work, and to delete, or rewrite, the discussion of Freud. (In what follows, A refers to the shorter comments, and B to the longer ones).

To start with, I agree with B that I 'might be trying to do too much in one paper'. But what I am trying to do is to provide not only an alternative history, but also an alternative theoretical account of the meaning of feminism, since what counts as history depends on what meaning feminism has. I have dealt with these issues at greater length elsewhere (and I include those references in the paper), but I can't discuss everything in every paper I write. I know that a lot of what I say reads strangely (as A commented), but that is because, in some sense at least, I'm trying to do something no one else is doing. (Even so, your readers seem to have had no problem understanding what I'm saying, and I would suggest that is because they are already thinking along those lines themselves). Although I situate what I say within radical feminism, in fact there are ways in which it is also different. One of those ways is my use of Freud's writings to expose the real meanings and values of male supremacy. On my reading of feminist accounts of Freud, there seem to be two main positions. One ends in a stultifying Lacanianism, leaving us trapped in the phallic symbolic with no way out. (One of the earliest exponents of this position was Juliet Mitchell). The other, the radical feminist one, is a dismissive critique which rejects the Freudian account out of hand (for good and understandable reasons, it must be said). In contrast, while I find what Freud says morally unacceptable, I also find that his is the clearest exposure I have yet come across of exactly what we're fighting. Of course, he has to be read in a certain way, as ideology, as a justificatory apologia for male supremacy. But that doesn't mean that what he said is untrue. Unfortunately, it's only too real in the lives

of all of us—the overweening importance of penis-possession and the dehumanisation of women because we lack that over-valued organ. So, no, I can't leave Freud out—he said it clearer than anyone else, even if he was oblivious to the implications of what he was saying.

As for the question of including more references to radical feminist work, I'm afraid notions of 'excluding each other' and of 'other silenced voices' have a decidedly hollow ring as far as I'm concerned. I very much doubt if there is a single feminist who has written as much as I have, who has been more silenced (although, if there were, I wouldn't have heard of her, would I?). I see no reason why I should cite the French, even those with genuine feminist insights, any more than anyone else. In the first place, it's impossible to cite everyone; and in the second place, I didn't get my ideas from anywhere else. I'm continually delighted that others are thinking along the same lines I am, but I do actually think of things for myself and in my own way. I am in fact more likely to cite those I don't agree with, because I see theory as having an essentially critical function. But that is another paper.

On the more specific points mentioned by your reader B:

- I know the Nicholson-Fraser axis (along with Seyla Benhabib) has an unwonted amount of influence over what counts as feminism and who gets published. In this regard, you might be interested to know that I first submitted this paper to *Constellations*. Not surprisingly, it was rejected. It was the way in which it was rejected which gives some idea of how that influence is wielded—I was told via email by the Admin. Assistant. I received no letter, nor was I sent any readers' reports. What the holders of personal fiefdoms don't want to hear, they treat with contempt, and they make sure no one else hears either.

- Re 'equality': That is a nice point Delphy makes, but I'm making a somewhat different one, i.e. that 'equality' is meaningless under conditions of domination, and that it makes no sense to talk about women being equal to men if men themselves are not equal. Yes, I am aware that real French feminism (as opposed to the 'made in America' variety which too often functions to purvey anti-feminist attitudes as 'feminism' itself) has been challenging 'difference feminism' for a long time. But it was also happening in the circles I was moving

in. Those challenges have left few, if any traces, largely because the places where theorising and writing was happening were antagonistic to radical feminism and very, very intimidating and hence silencing.

- Re domination and the production of 'difference': I'm not sure I entirely agree that it is domination which produces differences, at least not all differences. It is certainly the case that class is a function of domination—in a society where economic arrangements provided everybody with the resources to live in dignity, there would be no classes. But I don't think that sex and race are the same kind of differences. There's nothing wrong with the differences between the sexes that getting rid of male domination won't fix; and racial, ethnic, cultural, etc. differences are fine as long as they're not used to exclude anyone from human status.

- The term 'relations of ruling' does not originate with the work of Dorothy Smith. It is a sociological term. On the question of citing Smith's work, I have a major disagreement with her argument. She interprets the 'lived actualities of people's lives' as a form of authenticity which she contrasts to the 'ideological apparatuses of the relations of ruling'. Her purpose is to give sociology a human face by extricating it from 'the objectivized forms of knowledge' of its present location in 'the textual realities of administration, management, professional discourse, and the like', and locating it in 'the lived actualities as people know them in their everyday/everynight lives'. (*The Conceptual Practice of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*: 97 and passim) Despite her clear perceptions of particular manifestations of male domination, especially in her earlier book (*The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*), Smith sees domination only in its bureaucratic forms, and not in its mundane aspects as manifested in everyday life. Instead, she appeals to everyday life, in the form of 'women's experience', as a corrective to the traditional masculine bias of sociology. She interprets domination as confined to objectified, bureaucratic forms of 'relations of ruling', and fails to see that the 'women's experience' to which she appeals is already structured within relations of male domination.

- I agree that the 'identity' thing is essentialist. But I find the term 'essentialism' politically bankrupt, given how often it's been used to denounce radical feminism; and I

think the problem is more one of individualism, i.e. of disguising relations of ruling by attributing the problems domination causes to inherent characteristics of individuals, rather than to the structures and processes of domination. But that's another paper (or 2) as well. I treat this in more detail in my thesis, *Against the Dismantling of Feminism* (which will be published by Sage, although under another title, and I don't as yet know when).

- Re different forms of radical feminism: Yes, there are different forms, but I would suggest that this has to be seen as a matter of emphasis, rather than of substantive distinctions. What the different forms have in common, and what makes something radical feminist and 'feminism unmodified', is the recognition of the existence of male supremacy in order to struggle against it. The focus on women is not sufficient because there is also a right-wing focus on women, but one which obliterates the existence of male supremacy and insists on women's continued subordination to men.

In sum, then, I don't think I can re-write the paper along the lines suggested because it would be a different paper. I thank the readers for their perceptive insights, and I'd be grateful if you could send them copies of my comments.

## **Finding out what happened**

From: [...]

Organization: University of Surrey Roehampton

Date: Fri, 2 Jun 2000 11:54:22 +0000

Subject: WSIF

Dear Denise

Thank your letter and for sending a copy of 'Feminism and the Struggle Over Meaning' with the small changes. [...] is on sick leave but is due back on 7 June, I will then pass on your letter and comments.

With best wishes

[...]

Editorial Assistant to [...]

24.7.2000

Hi [...], What's happening?

Regards,

Denise

13.9.2000

On 24 July I sent an email asking what was happening about my paper, and I received no reply. Perhaps it didn't arrive (or was too cryptic). Anyway, you did say you (or someone) would get back to me, and so far no one has.

Denise

From: [...]

Organization: University of Surrey Roehampton

Date: Wed, 20 Sep 2000 13:08:07 +0000

Subject: WSIF

Dear Denise

I am sorry about the long delay. Your email was received by this office but over the summer the Editor in Chief was unwell and uncontactable, in fact she is not due back until next week. I can assure you that your manuscript is on the top of her in tray.

With best wishes

Editorial Assistant to [...]

22.2.01

Hi [...], I don't know whether or not you're in touch with [the editor of WSIF]. If you are, could you remind her that the last paper I sent WSIF is still sitting in her in-tray, awaiting a decision. (The reviewers approved of it, although they had suggestions about modifications. I made some minor changes, and explained why I couldn't incorporate all the reviewers' suggestions. And there the matter has rested for some time now).

Date: Thu, 2 Aug 2001 17:48:30 -0700

Subject: Re: WSIF

Dear Denise

I talked to [the editor of WSIF] and she said that the 2 reviewers of your paper had been radical feminists [...] and that what they had asked you to change seemed reasonable.

But you had written back and disputed the queries.

There's not much I can do about it if that's the case.

Can't you just make SOME of the changes?

2.8.01

[...] As for what WSIF asked me to change being reasonable - well, I beg to differ.

They were POLITE, which is more than I can say for many readers' reports I've had. But what they were asking was not reasonable.

(a) They wanted me to quote more writings by radical feminists. I wrote and said that since I saw theory as essentially critical, I was more likely to quote those I disagreed with than those I agreed with; and

(b) they wanted me to drop the Freud. But what Freud said was central to the argument - he said it first and best, although he didn't know what he was saying and the misogyny has to be clearly exposed for the male supremacist garbage it is (which I do). He said the penis is central to our civilization, and it is. He thought that was a good thing, or at any rate unavoidable since it was natural; I (we) know it's a piece of ideological bullshit but it nevertheless has massive effects (which radical feminists see more clearly than anyone).

(c) Both of those requirements would have made the paper something other than the one I wrote, and quite frankly, I don't feel like writing to someone else's dictation. I don't write to get published, but because I've got something to say. That seems to mean that I don't get published in so-called feminist journals, but there's nothing I can do about that. I'm not being stubborn, I literally CANNOT write what someone else wants me to.

## **Response from *Politics & Society***

Date: Mon, 27 Jan 2003 21:50:44 -0600

From: [...]

Subject: Politics & Society

Dear Professor Thompson,

Thank you for submitting your paper to *Politics & Society* for publication consideration. The editors were very interested in the topic, but decided not to accept your paper for publication. The editors felt that your piece, while interesting, did not sufficiently go beyond the existing literature to warrant publication. Although you make some interesting points, your reading of the theorists is somewhat erratic, and tends to be more polemic than we normally look for in our articles. More importantly, however, you ignore long debates among feminist scholars over many of the issues raised in the paper — debates which, if considered, might have provoked a more nuanced statement. We usually look for papers that push theoretical debates in new ways, and this is not that sort of paper.

I am sorry that we cannot offer more extensive comments, but the editors feel that it is better to return a paper relatively quickly with minimal comments, rather than to hold it for many months. We have been behind schedule because of the holidays (and emergency surgery earlier), and I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

We wish you the best of luck in finding a publication outlet for your paper, and hope that you will consider *& Society* when seeking to publish future work.

Sincerely,

[...]

for the Editorial Board

## **My Reply**

(June 2003): On the surface, this seems like a reasonable enough explanation. It's a sensible and down-to-earth report, its tone is calm and measured, and it makes its points without flourishes or undue emphasis. But its reasonableness depends on whether or not what it says is true. It makes three points: that the paper doesn't say anything new and ignores the 'long debates' about the very issues the paper is addressing, that its interpretations are 'erratic' and that it's too polemical.

The assertion that it doesn't say anything new is another version of the 'old-fashioned' charge and subject to the same objections. But I know from my years of working in the area, that there have not been any 'long debates' in the area. Instead, there has been silencing, vituperation and a 'follow-my-leader' mindlessness that displays a marked unwillingness to think beyond whatever the current fashion dictates. (Some of this is documented in the paper).

In rejecting my paper, 'the editors' dealt with none of the issues I raised. To call my reading of the theorists I discuss 'erratic' is nothing but an insulting gloss added onto a stubborn unwillingness to know. I quote the theorists I discuss accurately and at some length, so there can be no doubt they do indeed say what I say they do. There's nothing erratic about that. It's true that my interpretations go against the grain of what counts as feminist theory—I refuse to remain silent in the face of systematic inaccuracy and injustice. But to dismiss what I say on that basis alone, is to dismiss the very basis on which intellectual work should rest, i.e. the constant questioning fueled by a passion to know. To dismiss dissenting voices without addressing or even mentioning the content of the dissent, threatens to abolish any possibility of intellectual life at all. Unfortunately, such unthinking dismissiveness is the norm rather than the exception in academic life. Of course, it's never been any different. There's never been



a time when the academy didn't silence dissenting voices—all the more reason, then, for challenging it wherever possible.

As for the charge of polemics, I have to concede it's true. But it could be argued that it's a virtue rather than a failing because it's a consequence of acknowledging where I stand morally and politically. This is not a common practice in academic work which, instead, clings rigidly to positivist notions of 'objectivity', despite decades of critique. There is a price to be paid in intellectual and moral aridity. But it seems to be a price the gate-keepers are prepared to pay.