

What Counts as Feminist Theory?

Feminist Theory

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Centre for Women's Studies

University of York, Heslington

1 February 2000

Dear Denise Thompson,

MS 99/56 What counts as Feminist Theory

At last week's editorial meeting it was decided that FEMINIST THEORY would not be able to publish your article on 'What Counts as Feminist Theory'. In making this decision we took into account

- a) that B. Winter's piece in Issue 1 already addresses the concerns your paper raises;
- b) the readers' reports, copies of which we herewith enclose.

As you'll see, one of them was quite favourable but two recommended rejection.

Yours, with best wishes,

The Editors

Reader A, *Feminist Theory*

MS 99/56

I do not think this piece is publishable. There is nothing objectionable in publishing unpopular positions for sure or views that are out of the academic mainstream as this one is. But I think the burden is on the writer who promotes a position that is not widely held to engage with the ideas that have claimed the mainstream. In other words, the author needs to bring to her argument a fuller awareness of the historical situation of her own position. The fact that I disagree with the position she takes is not important. What matters to me and to the journal is that the analysis is shoddy and the argument unearned. What passes as an informed position here is a series of assertions. When the author does acknowledge that Radical Feminism is passe she simply turns this around to serve as proof that "male domination is the default operation of our society" (8). There is a sense I have here of someone who is still raging over debates from fifteen years or more ago (many of the citations are from the mid eighties) which in itself is fine. I too promote "old fashioned" ideas in my work. But the case needs to be made for their relevance for now and in a more rigorous relation to those discourses that have

critiqued radical feminism.

"Relations of Ruling" is an unacknowledged reference to a phrase from Dorothy Smith (Everyday Life as Problematic) This way of thinking power is/may be different from the one the author invokes in her definition of feminism as a concern to assert women's humanity against male supremacy. She needs to make the connection clear, especially as male supremacy not relations of ruling seems to be THE sole criterion for thinking power in the feminism she argues for, subsuming capitalism and all else. But, again, she makes no argument for this, merely asserts it! (6)

The section on sex and gender is confusing as I read it and the debates it refers to only generally referenced. Feminism did not "always already treat sex as a social phenomenon" and gender cannot mean anything. These claims seem to me nonsensical.

In sum, I cannot recommend publication.

Reader B, *Feminist Theory*

COMMENTS FOR THE AUTHOR

This manuscript poses an important question for feminist theory, but the argument—that only radical feminist theory is feminist theory—is built through assertion. This is not an account of the politics of knowledge production as is claimed but rather the assertion of a position with no attempt at dialogue or theory building. The oppositions and binaries which are constantly relied on throughout the paper (eg. between poststructuralism and radical feminism) are rather unhelpful and restrictive, and moreover the whole tone is one of someone who is in possession of the 'truth' and who is simply 'right'. Given the way in which this kind of claims making has been problematized—including of course in feminist theory—there needed to be a much more thoroughgoing engagement with the extensive literature on theories of knowledge and the politics of knowledge. In addition, when reference is made to existing works, rather restrictive interpretations are put into play. For example, reference is made to a number of recent accounts which critique problematic presentations of radical feminism, but such writings do not propose that radical feminism is the only kind of feminist theory. Similarly, the claim that recent work on identity only ever concerns the individual is not demonstrated but simply asserted. In these senses the manuscript does none of the work which *Feminist Theory* seeks to achieve, including addressing theory in a broad manner and crossing disciplinary and theoretical borders. I cannot see how this rather dogmatic manuscript is useful for current feminist theorizing.

Reader C, Feminist Theory

MS 99/56

I would recommend publishing this piece, although the central thesis—that feminist theory is radical feminism—will be received by many as controversial, I nonetheless think it makes a fairly strong case within its own terms, and may generate some much needed debate. The point that 'feminisms' avoids rather than addresses the question of what the parameters of feminism are is both welcome and well-made. Also the discussion of 'sex' and 'gender' is an important area of debate, especially since the distinction is not made in many other languages (this point could be alluded to in a footnote), and I recently heard Joan Scott speaking about how 'gender' no longer does the work we hoped it would. There are places where the argument could be even stronger, but it is for the editors [to] consider whether to encourage, and the author to decide, whether anything more than minor sub-editing should be undertaken. Looking at all of the criteria [for inclusion in the journal] the piece qualifies.

I have a few sub-editing suggestions.

Small editing points

1. I think page 2 is the first place the term 'relations of ruling' appears. This is obviously a conceptual term, since it recurs. It is not one I am familiar with and an explanation of how it is being used and whether it comes from the authors own work, or elsewhere would be useful.
2. Somewhere close to the beginning I would include some statement about feminism being a politics, as well as a theoretical framework. This is implicit in the piece, but as the focus is on 'theory' maybe it seemed too obvious a point to make. But without it the section on identity politics is a little odd, since the 'identity' aspect is explored but the 'politics' is not.
3. The sentence on page 3 second para 'Feminism has its own logic, meaning and practice' sits uneasily here without more detail. I don't think it is needed in this context, so should either be cut, or expanded.
4. P.4 and sentence end of second para—I would include 'practices' alongside meanings and values—as is done elsewhere in the piece.

Potential extension/strengthening

Where the early radical feminist contention that male domination is the first form of social domination is made, some reference could be made to the complexity of how the concept of patriarchy (a term interestingly absent from the paper) was used by some theorists. Here there was an understanding that these hierarchal relations were also about relations between men, originally stemming from the family but extending out from there into hierarchies based on class/caste/ethnicity, including slavery. Again I think the original questions posed were interesting and challenging but were eschewed by a debate on the concept which ignored the most complex of its formulations.

My Reply

November 2000

The Editors

Feminist Theory

Centre for Women's Studies

University of York, Heslington

Dear editors,

In February of this year, you told me that *Feminist Theory* would not be able to publish my paper, 'What Counts as Feminist Theory?' I'm writing to you because I'm concerned about the reasons given for your decision. I'm concerned because I find those reasons problematic. As I understand them, they are as follows:

—Bronwyn Winter's piece already dealt with the issues I raised (stated in your letter to me).

This is not accurate. While Bronwyn explicitly refused to define feminism, my paper was an extended and detailed discussion of just that point. As I see it, that's a significant difference between the two pieces, and a crucial one.

—My views are 'unpopular' and 'out of the academic mainstream' (in the reader's report beginning 'I do not think this piece is publishable').

Your reader went on to say that that in itself was not sufficient reason for rejecting the paper, but rather, that I did not 'engage with the ideas that have claimed the mainstream'. Since this is not true—I do engage with them, I disagree with them—it leaves us simply with the original objection, that the paper is unpublishable because it is unpopular and non-mainstream. Is this really your journal's policy? If so, it sits oddly with your editorial statement in the first issue of the journal to the effect that you don't 'wish to impose any form of theoretical orthodoxy'. If you reject non-

mainstream submissions, then you are by definition imposing an orthodoxy. As well, your reader's assertion begs some important questions. Unpopular with whom? Isn't this an instance of agent deletion? Why is it unpopular? Why is a position like mine out of the mainstream? What is the regime of power/knowledge operating here? Is it being kept out because it is a challenge to the reigning orthodoxy? Whose interests does this serve? And so on.

—*Your readers disagree with what I say.*

At least one of your readers (in the same report mentioned above) recognised that disagreement was not in itself sufficient reason for rejection. She went on to assert that 'the analysis is shoddy and the argument unearned'. But her attempt to demonstrate this supposed 'shoddiness' distorted what I said. I did not 'acknowledge that radical feminism is passé'. I said that it had been silenced in various ways which I discuss in detail. Far from implying that radical feminism is no longer relevant ('passé'), I was arguing that it is more relevant than ever, given those concerted efforts to silence it.

You may be interested to know that a friend of mine, whose first language is not English, thought her English had failed when she read this assertion to the effect that my argumentation was 'shoddy'. 'What does shoddy mean?' she asked. When she was told what it meant, she said: 'But your writing is never shoddy'. The point of this little story is that shoddiness or otherwise is in the eye of the beholder, unless the assertion is substantiated with rather more argument and evidence than your reader supplied.

—*My ideas are 'old-fashioned'.*

Once again the same reader says that she is not rejecting my paper for this reason alone, but because I have failed to make the case for their

relevance now, and also to deal rigorously with 'those discourses that have critiqued radical feminism'. In relation to the latter point, I have written at length elsewhere about the distorted and incoherent nature of the attacks on radical feminism (and I cite those references in the paper). But apart from these writings, there is sufficient material in the paper itself to bring into question the adequacy and accuracy of the widespread (and popular?) criticisms of radical feminism, sufficient, that is, for anyone willing to listen.

The question of the relevance of radical feminism in the here and now is spelled out in the paper itself. In brief, that relevance is as follows: radical feminism exposes the reality of the social relations of male domination in order to challenge and oppose them, and just as male domination still exists, so does the necessity for exposing it. You may not agree with this, but do you really think you are justified in refusing it a hearing?

—My argument proceeds by way of 'a series of assertions'.

I am at a loss to know why this constitutes an objection to my paper, since I fail to see how one can write without assertions. Your readers' reports are full of them. If it means I do not adduce arguments in favour of the position I hold or against positions I disagree with, then it's simply wrong. Your readers may not agree with my arguments, but they cannot say I don't make them. There may also be any number of issues I raise which could do with a fuller analysis. But that's unavoidable—I can't say everything in every piece I write, no one can. What this objection means is that your reader doesn't agree with the assertions I make. But as she herself pointed out, disagreement alone is not sufficient reason for rejection of my paper.

—'The whole tone is one of someone who is in possession of the "truth" and who is simply "right" ', and my paper is a 'rather dogmatic manuscript' (in the report

beginning 'This manuscript poses an important question').

Once again I am at a loss—how on earth can one say anything at all without making truth claims? The answer is, you can't. Making truth claims is a large part of what language usage is all about (with some exceptions, such as performative or imperative utterances, and poetry, of course). One can't assert anything without at the same time logically implying 'This assertion is correct'. So this reader is taking me to task for not doing the impossible, for not building into my sentences the implication that I might be wrong. (She doesn't do it herself either, for the simple reason that it's logically impossible). But sentences contain other things apart from truth claims. Take the sentence quoted above. If I re-word it to say 'I believe I'm speaking the truth', the truth content of the assertion is the same, but something has changed. Her sentence is an accusation that I have done something wrong; my sentence lacks that implication. We agree about the fact referred to in the sentence; we differ in our judgements of the moral rightness or wrongness of the fact. But there's something weird about passing a negative moral judgement on someone for believing she's speaking the truth. Of course, this reader is saying no more than that she disagrees with me. But in that case, we're once again back with the question of whether or not a reader's disagreement, unargued for and unsubstantiated, is sufficient reason for rejecting a submission to your journal.

As far as I'm concerned, your readers' disagreement is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem, though, when they have the power to silence me without even addressing the main issue I raise, specifically, that of defining feminism in terms of the opposition to male domination.

—My paper 'proposes that radical feminism is the only kind of feminist theory' (in the same report). This is an issue which also concerned your third reader, who referred to it as 'controversial' but who recommended publication anyway.

My point about 'radical feminism' is unfortunately undermined by the terminology, by the practice of referring to a typology of 'feminisms', all of them preceded by a modifier (including the modifier 'radical'). On the one hand, I reject the typology because it's an evasion of the necessity for addressing directly the contradictory positions held in the name of 'feminism', and it allows anti-feminist positions to be smuggled in as 'feminism' itself. On the other hand, I keep using the term 'radical' feminism because that is the term commonly used to designate those feminist writings which have most clearly and unequivocally identified what feminism is all about. But in retaining the modifier 'radical', I'm implicitly relying on the typology. It might seem, therefore, as though I'm saying that 'radical' feminism is one form of feminism among others, and that the others (socialist feminism, postmodernist feminism, etc.) are not feminism at all. This appearance is deceptive, however, because I have rejected the typology. Feminism is feminism wherever it's found, whatever it's called, and whether it's named or not. It's recognised by its meaning, which is why I've spent so much time and effort defining it. Something does not qualify as 'feminism' simply because someone who calls herself 'a feminist' says it is. So when I say that 'radical' feminism is feminism per se, I'm not saying that 'socialist' feminism, say, isn't. I'm saying that the extent to which any modified feminism is feminism, it's simply feminism, that which is commonly (but erroneously because it relies on the suspect typology) labelled 'radical' feminism.

You may think this is unnecessarily convoluted, but I'm attempting to address a problem—anti-feminist positions being presented as 'feminism' itself—to which your readers appear to be oblivious. And if they're oblivious to the problem, they're not going to be able to recognise attempts at solving it.

In sum then, it seems to me that you found my paper unpublishable

because it was unpopular, non-mainstream, old-fashioned, and your readers disagreed with it. That is, anyway, the only sense I can make out of your stated reasons. Since I don't find these good enough reasons for not publishing, it also seems to me that there's another agenda operating here, a covert one which is nonetheless rife throughout the academic feminism. That agenda is a denial of the existence of male domination, of those social arrangements organised around the principle that only men count as 'human', and the consequent dehumanisation of everyone which that entails. Now, you may not believe in the existence of male domination. I don't know whether you do or not because your readers didn't address the issue, despite the fact that it was my main point. I'm prepared to debate it, endlessly, in fact. You, it seems, prefer to be complicit with the cover-up. Is that really what you want for your journal?

© Denise Thompson, November 2000

Australian Feminist Studies

(July 2003): I also sent the paper to *Australian Feminist Studies*, as one of a set of four papers I sent off at the end of 2002, in yet another attempt to get something published in the academic journals. (The other three papers were 'Feminism and the Struggle over Meaning' to *Politics & Society*, '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 had earlier decided I wouldn't send anything more to AFS after they had rejected my paper, 'What Does it Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle Class?' But then they published a very good review of my book, *Radical Feminism Today* (Walsh, 2002). Obviously, it was sent to someone sensible to review, so I thought this paper might also be sent to someone sensible. However, it was rejected without being sent out to reviewers at all. The paragraph below is the whole of the comment it received from AFS:

After reading the article and holding in-house consultation the editor has decided not to proceed further with it. Her considerations are as follows:

The article is too long—we are returning to our earlier policy of insisting that articles be no longer than 6,000 words. More importantly, though, we consider that the issues raised in the article have already been debated at length in the pages of AFS, some years ago, and that this article will not contribute anything new to those debates. We wonder if you would consider sending it to a mainstream philosophy journal. (Letter dated 28 October 2002).

Reference

Walsh, Mary (2002) 'Review: Denise Thompson, *Radical Feminism Today* (Sage) London, 2001' *Australian Feminist Studies* 17(38), July: 233-5