

Who's Afraid of Defining Feminism?

(This paper was given at the Australian Women's Studies Association (AWSA) conference, Macquarie University, 31 January to 2 February 2001, and at the Women's Health NSW conference, 17 March, 2005).

Abstract: The paper starts with some examples of the curious reluctance among feminists to say what feminism is. It then discusses the reasons given for that reluctance, arguing that they are misplaced. Along the way it suggests a definition of feminism in terms of opposition to male domination. It then discusses the question of who has the power to define feminism, pointing out that the prevalent stance of pure tolerance is no such thing since it coexists with a distorted criticism of radical feminism. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of two problems with failing to define feminism, stressing that the question at issue is 'What is feminism?' and not 'Who is (or is not) a feminist?'

Prologue: When the AWSA conference program first appeared, the title and abstract of this paper weren't on it. When I queried this, I was told that the paper didn't fit into any of the sessions planned. I was asked if I had any suggestions to make about where it might fit, and of course I didn't, since I could see the problem. The session, 'Shadows of generations', was suggested as the least inappropriate, and I agreed, but the paper didn't really fit there either. The disparity between my paper and the rest of the conference raises an interesting question about Women's Studies. If there's no place for discussing the meaning of feminism at a Women's Studies conference, what is the connection between feminism and Women's Studies? It suggests to me that what I have to say here is highly relevant, just *because* it is so obviously out of the Women's Studies mainstream.

There's a curious reluctance among feminists to say what feminism is. Usually this reluctance shows itself as an absence—that is to say, it's difficult to find any definitions of feminism. But sometimes it's a deliberate strategy. Feminists don't want to define feminism, and they say so. To give some examples:

- Alice Jardine, in her book, *Gynesis*, said that the word feminist 'poses some serious problems'. She went on to say that 'we would[n't] want to end up by demanding a definition of what feminism is and, therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire that epithet; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least' (Jardine, 1985: 20).
- Rosalind Delmar, in her paper, 'What Is Feminism?' referred to 'the impossibility

of constructing modern feminism as a simple unity in the present or of arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism', because of the 'fragmentation of contemporary feminism' (Delmar, 1986: 9).

- Rosemarie Tong said, in her book, *Feminist Thought*: 'even if this is not the time to decide, once and for all, what feminism is, it is probably the time to consider the possibility that its meanings are ever changing' (Tong, 1989: 223).
- Karen Offen, in her paper 'Defining Feminism', quoted one writer saying that 'definition is a male prejudice' and that 'the day we start defining feminism it's lost its vitality'. Offen herself disagreed with this writer, saying: 'As a practical matter, I find it difficult to accept the renunciation of definition that has recently become stylish in the wake of French feminist literary criticism (see, e.g., Alice Jardine, *Gynesis*). Knowledge is not well served by [refusing to define feminism] ... The utility of definition depends on how it is done' (Offen, 1988: 121n4).
- The editors of *Australian Feminism: A Companion* said they 'did not even attempt to impose a singular definition of feminism ... because of the diversity in, and constant movement of, feminist terrain' (Caine et al, eds, 1998: x).
- The editors of a journal called *Feminist Theory*, said in their first issue: 'we neither wish to impose any form of theoretical orthodoxy nor any single definition of what counts as feminist theory' (Griffin et al., 2000: 5).
- Even compilers of feminist dictionaries are reluctant to define feminism. Maggie Humm, author of *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, said that it could only be 'misleading to offer precise definitions of feminism because the process of defining is to enlarge, not to close down, linguistic alternatives; it is to evoke difference and to call up experience' (Humm, 1989: xiv).

So it would seem that there are a number of reasons for the reluctance to define feminism. I think we can leave aside the comment that definition is a male prejudice. It's not a common objection, and I'm not even sure what it means. Apart from that one, there seem to be two main reasons:

- One, feminism is too diverse to be pinned down—as indicated by Tong's comment that its 'meanings are ever changing'; by the Oxford *Companion* editors' reference to the 'diversity in, and constant movement of, feminist terrain'; and by Delmar's reference to the 'fragmentation of contemporary feminism'. The idea that feminism is diverse is usually summed up these days by the use of the term 'feminisms' in the plural. Hence, to define feminism would be to diminish that diversity, as indicated by Jardine's comment that 'dictionary meanings are suffocating'; by Humm's

comment that definition 'closes down linguistic alternatives'; and by the comment by the writer quoted by Offen to the effect that to define feminism would be to deprive it of its vitality.

- Two, definition is a kind of dogmatism—as indicated by the *Feminist Theory* editors' statement of their intention to avoid 'imposing any form of theoretical orthodoxy', and Jardine's comment about '*demanding* a definition of what feminism is and, therefore, [demanding a definition] of what one must do, say, and be'. It implies that defining feminism is an imposition, even a kind of authoritarianism which dictates to others what they can and can't do or say in the name of feminism. It's seen as setting oneself up as an expert in something that belongs to all of us, as taking on more than anyone has a right to claim. No one has any right, it is implied, to set herself up as more knowledgeable than anyone else.

But, you might ask, isn't it true that feminism is diverse, and that to define it would be to diminish that diversity and impose a single standard on everyone? And isn't it true that no one has any right to tell us how we should think about feminism? Perhaps, but is that really what's at issue here?

Take the question of 'diversity': If feminism is simply 'diverse' without further qualification, then there are no limits to what is to count as feminism, and anything goes. But that can't be right because there are many things that aren't feminism, even things wholly focused on women. Gynæcology, for example, is wholly focused on women, but it isn't feminism; and there are many right-wing discourses which focus on women, but they can hardly be regarded as feminism either. But if everything's included in the interests of diversity, then it's impossible to exclude anything.

But why would we want to exclude anything? After all, no one's arguing that gynæcology is feminist, and it's a fairly simple matter to identify right-wing discourses and refrain from calling them 'feminism'. Or is it? Take the media treatment of Camille Paglia—she's invariably referred to as 'a feminist' even though what she says is demonstrably anti-feminist. To give just one example, there's her insistence that the differences between the sexes are biological and ineradicable. So already we have one example of something popularly regarded as 'feminism' which is no such thing.

Even so, you might argue, it's easy to exclude Paglia's maanderings from what counts as feminism, and we did it without defining feminism. Or did we? Isn't there a definition already implicit here? In arguing that sex differences are not biological,

feminism is distinguishing itself from discourses which argue that they are. In fact, as we know very well, feminism argues that the differences between the sexes are socially constructed, not natural. The reason for that is that feminism requires that certain aspects of current social arrangements around sex differences be changed, and that isn't possible if they're biologically wired in.

Now, this feminist commitment to social change ought to give rise to a further question (although it rarely does). That further question is: change from what? And it's the answer to *this* question which provides the crux of the feminist project. The social arrangements feminism requires to be changed are those of male domination. Or as Alison Jaggar put it, feminism 'is defined by its moral opposition to male dominance' (Jaggar 2000: 225). I would go further and say that, not only is feminism a *moral* stance of opposition to male domination, it's also a *political* project challenging the male supremacist aspects of social life. I would also say that male domination refers to those social arrangements structured around the principle that only men count as 'human' (in quotation marks, since men can't be genuinely human unless women are too).

Another relevant question that arises from feminism's commitment to social change is: change *to* what? And the answer to that question is: towards a human status for women which doesn't require women's subordination to men and doesn't rely on any of the meanings and values of male domination. Feminism is still diverse, both because male domination takes many forms, and because we can't specify any limits to the ways in which women can be human outside male definition and control (or men either). But its meaning is also unified by its opposition to male domination, whatever form that takes.

One major implication of defining feminism as the opposition to male domination is: that anything which reinforces male supremacist meanings, values, practices and institutions, or which denies or ignores their existence, doesn't count as 'feminism'. Being able to make that judgement, though—whether something is an instance of male supremacy, whether it's part of the struggle against male supremacy, or whether it's neither—depends on being able to recognise male supremacy. And that's not an easy task because it's the taken-for-granted social reality of all of us (although it's not all of social reality, i.e. as well as male supremacist social relations, there exist social relations that are *not* male supremacist). But simply embracing 'diversity' is not only no help in deciding whether or not something is an instance of male supremacy, it's a positive hindrance because it allows no criteria for deciding which is which.

So much, then, for the 'diversity' objection. But what about the objection that to define feminism is to impose it on others? The problem with this objection is that it takes no account of where the power lies. To insist that feminism be defined is not to say that the defining can only be done by an elite few. It leaves open the question of who is to do the defining. This means that anyone can do it. How then does defining feminism become an imposition if it's something we all do? The fact of the matter is, though, that feminism is already being surreptitiously defined by an elite few. Editors of academic journals and those who do the 'peer reviewing' of articles submitted, writers and publishers of feminist texts, those who decide who shall be hired to teach, those who have made careers out of feminist scholarship, do have the power to control what counts as feminism, disclaimers notwithstanding.

Refusing to define feminism is seen as tolerant and open-minded, as welcoming all comers and allowing a free exchange of ideas while giving favour to none. This stance of pure, abstract tolerance, however, hides an intolerant reality. It sees orthodoxy where there is none and ignores the dogmatism which is actually happening. For if everything is acceptable, then nothing is available for criticism. So everything is tolerated except criticism.

But criticism of what, you might ask? There is, after all, plenty of criticism within feminism, much of it directed against radical feminism, or rather a distorted version of it. These days radical feminism tends to be contemptuously dismissed as 'old-fashioned 70s-style feminism', as unpopular, non-mainstream and passé; earlier it was triumphantly demolished with accusations of 'essentialism', 'biologism', 'false universalism', etc. So the mandate of tolerance tends not to be extended to radical feminism. I would suggest that the reason for this is that radical feminism is inherently critical. It criticises the social arrangements of male supremacy, especially the ways in which sex is central to women's oppression. This is seen as *intolerance*, even as an unwarranted intrusion into people's private lives. And, of course, radical feminist criticism of the institutions and practices of male supremacy *is* intolerant. It's intolerant of oppression and exploitation and dehumanisation. But this radical feminist stance is not, it would seem, something which can be tolerated by those whose have the power to tolerate.

So what *is* being tolerated under the official feminist regime of tolerance? First, there's the acceptance within feminism of positions which contradict each other. Take positions on pornography, for example: It's been asserted in the name of feminism, *both* that pornography is innocent pleasure *and* that it harms and degrades women. But both can't be feminist positions because they contradict each other. One

of them has to go if feminism is to have any coherence at all. In fact, given the above definition of feminism, it's the tolerance of pornography which must be excluded from feminism, because pornography portrays women as things for men's sexual use, and degrades both sexes although it is men who demand that degradation.

Second, tolerating everything (except radical feminism) allows anti-feminist positions to masquerade as 'feminism'. If we don't know what feminism is, worse, if we're forbidden to say, how do we defend feminism against the incursions of malestream thought which twist and distort it into a mockery of itself? You don't think that happens? Then consider the following: Have you ever seen prostitution purveyed as a feminist practice? Sadomasochism? Make-up? Cosmetic surgery? Do *you* think these are feminist practices? Or are you caught in a dilemma? On the one hand, you have a sneaking suspicion that such things are not feminism; on the other hand, you're reluctant to say so because that would mean, you think, that you're saying that women who engage in these practices are not feminists.

But the issue is not who is (or is not) a feminist. The issue is: what is feminism? To define feminism in terms of who is a feminist is to define feminism as an 'identity' (and it does get defined that way, despite the taboo against definition). This is one way of blocking any discussion of what feminism is, even of surreptitiously introducing anti-feminism as 'feminism' itself. If 'feminism' is anything that anyone who identifies as 'a feminist' says it is, but we're disqualified from disagreeing because it's her 'identity', then anything goes, including male supremacist practices masquerading as women's 'choice'.

I would argue that those who identify as feminists have a responsibility to define what is meant by 'feminism', especially those who have the social power to set the agenda. There are already a number of covert definitions around, including the main one, i.e. feminism is about women, women's equality or women's rights. I don't think this is adequate because it makes it look as though women are the problem, whereas I believe the problem is the system of male domination. A crucial aspect of that defining is going to involve saying what feminism is *not*, that is, of criticising many things which have been said in the name of feminism, and sometimes being thoroughly intolerant of some of them. The current stance of pure tolerance can only impede this necessary task of criticism and clarification.

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