

# My Reviews

(July 2003): On this page I have included some of the reader reports I myself wrote, most of them reports on papers I was sent to review for publication. In other words, these are writings from the other side of the divide between authors and reviewers. This time I am the one sitting in judgement on someone else's work. I leave it to readers to decide whether or not there are any differences between the ways in which I assess people's work and the ways in which my own work has been assessed.

There are six pieces below:

A letter to a friend, December 94;

A review for *Women's Studies International Forum*, March 96;

A review for *Feminism & Psychology*, May 96;

A review for *Feminism & Psychology*, October 96;

A letter of protest to the New York *Women's Review of Books*, October 96;  
and

A review for *Feminism & Psychology*, May 99.

## ***Feminism & Psychology, June 1992***

READER'S REPORT on 'Female Psychosexuality: An Australian Perspective'

I would not recommend that this paper be published without substantial revision, for the following reasons:

(i) In general terms:

—The paper is largely a series of vague generalities which are not clarified, argued for, or substantiated with empirical evidence. To the extent that there is a coherent structure to the paper, the author has at least three projects going at once: a universal theory of female sexuality (universal, that is, in the sense that it is not confined to any specific historical or cultural context), a history of what psychology has had to say about female sexuality, and an account of Australian history and society. Each of these is a large task in itself, but the author has only skated over the surface, and has often made mistakes as a consequence of her superficial treatment. (See the detailed criticisms below).

As well, the separate projects are frequently at cross purposes with each other. The theoretical endeavour to account for female sexuality in universal terms sits uneasily with the particularity of the Australian context. For example, from pp.26ff, there is a discussion of "'the ideology of motherhood" in Australian society'. But what she says about that ideology is not confined to Australia, which is not the only society with an ideology of motherhood, a belief that only women should care for children, a 'gender division of labour', 'male dominated capitalism', etc. Neither can psychological generalisations about female sexuality be limited to Australia. By the same token, it is not possible to derive a theory of female sexuality or a female psychology from events in Australian history. Although it is possible to write a history of Australia from a feminist standpoint, the author is not sufficiently clear about either Australian history or the uses of the Australian perspective for her own purpose.

Hence, I would not recommend that the author attempt to link the three projects because they are frequently incommensurable. Instead, I would suggest that she focus more closely on her main argument—that the affiliative nature of female sexuality poses a dilemma for

women's independence. Since this is a highly contentious point, and by no means self-evident, it requires careful consideration and argument. And since the dilemma (to the extent that it is one) is not peculiar to Australian women, the Australian perspective is irrelevant.

(ii) In particular:--

—pp.5-7—The section called 'Historical Perspectives: Pre-Colonial History' should be omitted. It is not possible to write a history of the world in 5 paragraphs, much less bracket it off as a prologue to the colonisation of Australia.

—pp.7-10—The section on Australian history is also problematic, quite apart from its irrelevance to the main argument. (One small point concerns the citation of the title of Anne Summers' book, which was 'Damned Whores and God's Police', not 'policemen'.).

The author's account is sketchy, and it is not entirely clear what it is a history of. Although the section is called '(White) Colonial Women in Australia', in fact what she is discussing is an (exiguous) history of male supremacist views towards and social control of European women in Australia, with an even briefer mention of the plight of Aboriginal women. There is still a lot of work to be done by historians on the male supremacist treatment of European women in Australia (not to mention Aboriginal women and women from the countries of South East Asia and the Pacific). The information is not readily available as it is still mostly tied up in primary sources. Certainly the dividing of women into 'good' and 'bad' was, and is, as prevalent in Australia as anywhere else in the world. But what is peculiar about the history of white Australia is the fact that men vastly outnumbered women until well into the nineteenth century. It was not a matter of 'keeping some equality of male/female numbers' (p.8)—the numbers were unequal from the beginning. That segment of the English ruling class represented by the Colonial Office had to devise explicit policies to redress the numerical imbalance between the sexes, and the concern even predated the arrival of the First Fleet. As a result, Australian history, including the history of migration in the twentieth century, is replete with documents spelling out the functions women serve for men, and which women served which functions.

—The paragraphs about women and madness (pp.9-10) sit oddly in a history of Australia, since there is nothing specifically Australian discussed.

—I would suggest that the author leave this section out too. She can then research in much more detail areas of Australian history of particular interest to her, as a separate project.

—p.11—Why is the only cited reference for Freud's theories of female sexuality a secondary source, i.e. Young-Bruehl? Freud himself was eminently clear in his writings about female sexuality. His *Three Essays* appears in the bibliography, but is not quoted in the text.

—p.12—Freud said: '*Anatomy* is destiny', not 'biology'.

—p.12-14—There are a number of cogent 'second wave' feminist critiques of the work of the sexologists in general, and Kinsey and Masters and Johnson in particular, from Anselma Dell'Olio's paper, 'The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War' in 1972 (in Klagsburn, J., ed. *The First Ms Reader* New York: Warner Books Inc.), to the work of Sheila Jeffreys—*The Spinster and Her Enemies* (London: Pandora, 1985) and *Anticlimax* (London: The Women's Press). This critique points out that, far from being liberating for women, the work of the sexologists served to tie women more firmly into sexual relationships with men.

—p.15—The author's account of feminism in Australia is couched in such a way that it is largely impossible to verify or refute it.

How is it possible to decide whether feminism in Australia was 'less intense' than it was in the US? In my experience, feminism in Australia was very intense, and it still is in the circles I move in. Certainly feminism is resisted here, 'by both men and women', but so is it in the US, and anywhere else where male supremacist values and meanings predominate.

What evidence is there that Greer and Spender 'have received more recognition overseas than at home'? And how does it prove the conservatism of Australian feminism if they have? Greer in particular is regarded by feminists of my acquaintance as not radical enough, although we all deplore the treatment she receives at the hands of some of the media pundits.

—The author's statement to the effect that Australia is a frontier society is false. White Australia has long been a highly urbanised Western industrialised nation—80% of the population live in the major cities around the coast, and have done for at least the last twenty years, the time span of 'second wave' feminism.

—And while Australian culture is undoubtedly 'a hostile environment for women who might dare to question the existing order', is there any culture which is not?

—My experience of Australian feminism is that it is as radical as anywhere else in the world. But information about feminism in Australia does not get widely publicised in the mainstream. Feminists have very little access to the media. To give just one example, the Women's Day marches which attract tens of thousands of women all over the country every year receive little television coverage, and even less publicity in the newspapers. Radical feminists in particular have little access to publishing and to universities. Feminists in Australia, like feminists everywhere, have little money, few resources, and are subjected to a constant barrage of media distortion, trivialisation and hatred. That does not mean that Australian feminism is conservative, it is merely means that it is kept out of public awareness. Again, I recommend that the author do a great deal more research before making generalisations about feminism in Australia.

—One especially stark omission from the author's account is the central part played by lesbianism within Australian feminism. Lesbians were in the forefront of every feminist activity, whether it was the setting up of women's health centres and refuges, the organising of conferences, demonstrations and meetings, the production of publications, advising on governmental policies, or theorising feminism. Every feminist gathering was, and still is, full of lesbians. Lesbians were constantly pointing to the silencing of their presence within feminism, and theorising the reasons for it—that the lesbian presence could not be acknowledged because it was a central challenge to male supremacy, and that by failing to acknowledge the lesbian presence, feminism was depoliticising itself. There is very little documentation of these struggles. Only those of us who were there, or who know women who were there, know about it. Nonetheless, the information is available, chiefly, although not only, in the memories of the participants. By failing to do the necessary research, the author has reproduced the silencing.

—The treatment of lesbianism in this paper in general is unsatisfactory. Lesbianism is relevant to many of the generalisations about female sexuality made by the author, and yet it is not mentioned in connection with those generalisations. For example,

—p.16: 'compulsory legitimated heterosexuality'—the term is Adrienne Rich's, from the title of her paper, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence'. It was coined within the context of lesbianism, yet the author uses the term within the context of a discussion of heterosexual sexual liberation, without mentioning lesbianism, and seemingly without any awareness that, within the terms of Rich's argument, *heterosexual* sexual liberation for women was impossible;

—p.17: 'The new liberated woman had not had time to define herself outside the context of "man made language" and man made mores'. There is a substantial body of lesbian feminist literature which claims that lesbians do just that—define themselves outside male meaning and value. (Many of these documents can be found in: Hoagland and Penelope, eds. (1988) *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* London: Onlywomen Press. These documents are not Australian, but the same debates were, and still are, going on in Australia). The way the author of this paper defines women's lives, as dual-career supermums, as welfare mothers, as workaholic careerists, lends credence to this lesbian claim. Yet, once again, lesbianism is not mentioned;

—pp18ff: Neither is lesbianism mentioned in the discussion of the 'new feminine identity, Woman-centered rather than Man-derived'. Again, the lesbian feminist literature is centrally concerned with just this issue, yet the author appears to have read none of it.

—p.30: Again no mention of lesbianism in relation to a 'contemporary female sexuality' which 'continues to define itself partly by its repudiation of traditional (patriarchal) mores';

—p.35: The single mention of lesbianism which occurs before her discussion of 'Homosexuality' is a pejorative one, and refers to 'the physical abuse which may occur in lesbian relationships'.

—The discussion of lesbianism in the 'Homosexuality' section, pp.36-8, is also unsatisfactory. One problem is the title of the section—why not 'Lesbianism', rather than the male-identified term? As well, the discussion is not related to the rest of her analysis (see above). It contains bald, unsubstantiated assertions, e.g. 'the likelihood of fusion and lack of boundaries in lesbian relationships' (unlike heterosexual women in relation to men?), and "'elective" or "primary" lesbians' (p.37). And it is unclear just exactly what she is arguing. At one point, lesbians are not a distinct category of women—there is a continuum of 'support', 'understanding', and 'intimate communication' between women. At another point, they are—they 'come out', suffer an 'added stigma'. Hence, the author's once again exiguous discussion wavers between, on the one hand, seeing lesbianism as relevant for all women, and as a relevant only to a certain type of woman on the other.

—p.26: The reference to Rich within the context of a discussion of 'maternity', i.e. Rich, 1980, is inaccurate. This is Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' paper which does not discuss maternity. Does the author mean Rich, 1976, i.e. *Of Woman Born*? Although the 1980 paper appears in her bibliography, the 1976 book does not.

—The references to Aboriginal women throughout are tokenistic, e.g. p.8, p.30. The comment, on p.29, to the effect that the rate of death and injury of Aboriginal women caused by 'their male partners' is 15 times higher than that of white women, is particularly problematic, because the author gives no evidence for this. Moreover, she cites nothing produced by Aboriginal women themselves: Sally Morgan's *My Place*, Glenys Ward's *Wandering Girl*, Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, Margaret Kennedy's *If Everybody Cared*, Mum Shirl's autobiography written in conjunction with Bobbi Sykes, Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed*, and the films of Essie Coffie. Nor does she cite the work of the white female anthropologists who have worked closely with Aboriginal women, e.g. Diane Bell's *Daughters of the Dreaming*, the collection of papers edited by Peggy Brock, *Women Rites and Sites*. Aboriginal women deserve more than token mentions in texts written for other purposes. It would be better to leave such references out altogether, while acknowledging that the history of Australia is one of British colonisation, alienation of the land from its original inhabitants, genocide and systematic and deliberate dehumanisation. But that would take the paper a long way from its central theme.

—There are a number of other problems with the paper that I do not want address in detail. One concerns the discussion of 'female perversions' pp.30ff, and the comment on 'incest', p.33. As the author herself points out, these phenomena are male. Why does she want to insist that female sexuality be included in these categories? Another problem concerns the discussion of maternity. What does it mean to say that 'maternity is an essential aspect of female sexuality' (p.25)? That female sexuality is 'essentially' tied to reproduction? That female sexual relationships are 'essentially' non-reciprocal, with the female doing all the nurturing without being nurtured in return?

(iii) In conclusion, I would suggest that the author concentrate on expanding and developing her main thesis that the nature of female sexuality poses problems for female autonomy. There is an extensive feminist literature addressing this question, not to mention the even more extensive mainstream literature. The author has started to touch on some of the issues, but there is still a great deal of work to be done, not the least of which is to limit her project to a manageable size.

Denise Thompson, Sydney, June 1992



## A letter

13.12.1994

Dear [...],

Here follow my comments on your 'Queer' paper:

The most general point I want to make is that you're too lenient with 'Queer'. You give it too much credibility, and hence weaken your own criticism. (Mind you, as far as I'm concerned, any credibility at all is too much, but you may not agree with me). This is particularly the case in the first part of the paper, up to the heading 'Does Queer Politics Provide Positive Ways Forward?' In setting out an account of what is involved in 'Queer' politics you stick too closely to *their* terms of reference and self definitions. Consequently you give the impression that you basically approve of it and that it would be redeemable if they only made a few adjustments.

I don't know whether or not this soft-peddalling on your part is connected with your remark to me that you wanted to avoid being attacked. If you remember, my response was that you can't avoid attacks if you criticise something like 'Queer', no matter how much you concede. Any position which is as unthought out and as politically and morally bankrupt as 'Queer' cannot allow any criticism at all. So criticism is always going to be attacked. There is no point in conceding anything (unless you want to for your own purposes), because only the criticisms ever get heard, and you get attacked anyway. Neither is telling the truth any defence. Those defending indefensible positions don't want to hear the truth, and they tend to get violent when you keep insisting on saying what they don't want to hear.

The only way I have found to deal with attacks is to be as sure as possible of my own ground, and that involves writing and re-writing and re-re-writing over and over again, sometimes for months, until I'm as clear as I can be about what I am saying and about the kinds of objections I'm likely to run into. Mind you, even so I get caught by surprise, when someone brings up an objection I haven't thought of, and sometimes, that I don't even understand because it seems to have nothing to do with what I've said. The only advice I can give you is: Be brave!

What I suggest you do is state your objections and criticisms up front, and then proceed to argue for them. That way, you don't concede anything you don't want to, and you get to say what you want to say. As I understand your main argument, you are saying that 'Queer' doesn't have anything to offer lesbians. I suggest that you say that to begin with, and then spend the rest of your paper demonstrating that. That's the bulk of your paper anyway.

I have a few other remarks, most of which relate to the first few pages. I've re-arranged the order of the pages you gave me because it didn't make sense in the original order. Since you haven't numbered the pages, I'll give you part of the first line of the page my comments relate to (apart from the first page, which is obvious).

—[First page, first 3 sentences]: Is this really the way you want to characterise 'Queer'? It sounds as though you approve of it, or at least don't disapprove. For example, you call it 'anti-assimilationist', without comment, and yet later you criticise this stance on the grounds that 'Queer' is 'consonant with the values of the dominant society' (on the page I have numbered 23, first para. under the heading 'Positive Ways Forward'). I suggest you build your criticism into the way you characterise 'Queer' in the first place. You can use its adherents' self-definitions, but make it clear immediately that you disagree, and why.

The same point applies to what you say about paedophiles. You use 'Queer's' own self-serving terminology--'cross-generational sex', etc.--without locating it with the 'Queer' interest in pretending that it doesn't have anything to do with child sexual abuse. You say 'now called', but not by whom.

—[First page, lines 8 and 9]: There are problems with characterising lesbian feminism as a 'political movement based around sexuality', firstly, because of the libertarian connotations of 'sexuality'--anything goes, sex-neutral, everyone's got one--and secondly, because lesbian feminism is more importantly about challenging male supremacy by challenging the taken-for-grantedness of male sexual access to women.

—[Page 2, starting: 'Firstly, what exactly is queer ...', paras. 3 and 4]: In my experience lesbian feminism was feminist from the beginning. It wasn't a consequence of lesbians getting

disillusioned with the gay movement and then moving to feminism (although some lesbians did that). As I and many other women experienced it, lesbianism and feminism happened together and were inseparable. Although we had some connections with the gay movement, there was never any question that our allegiances were with feminism and the interests of women. Lesbianism was feminism, and the question of whether or not feminism welcomed lesbians never arose because we were feminism (wherever else it might be as well). In Australia, there wasn't any organisation of lesbian feminists separate from feminism in general, or not until recently and under the influence of ideas from overseas, France, Canada and the US. And lesbians disillusioned by feminism tend not to call themselves feminists.

—[Page 3, starting: 'and made real a vision of the equality of women ...', para. 2, line 9]:  
Feminists never joined gay men in coalition politics. Although we are sympathetic to gay men and the horrors they face because of AIDS, feminists are wary of giving priority to men's interests, no matter how dire and pressing.

That's all for now. I hope this has been of some help.

All the best,

Denise

## ***Women's Studies International Forum, March '96***

(A reader's report for *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22.3.1996)

This paper displays a firm commitment to radical feminist principles and a wide reading in the area. However, it is not clear what the author is trying to argue. There are a number of potential arguments here, but they get dispersed among too many different themes—lesbian mothers, the oppression of women, biological determinism, the family, the public/private distinction, feminist resistance, etc.—themes which are not brought into relationship with each other. There is a kind of structure to the essay implied in the headings, but that structure needs to be spelled out in detail rather than left at the level of simple assertion.

By and large, the paper tends to proceed by way of lists of disparate phenomena tenuously held together by a theme—e.g. p. 7, attitudes towards unmarried mothers—but with no detailed development or argument. As well, the paper contains a number of large generalisations with no context within which to ground them. Instead of giving a detailed exposition, the author cites a feminist authority—e.g. p. 2, Daly, 1978—and leaves it at that. Overall, the paper tries to cover too much ground too briefly, with the result that nothing is treated adequately and in depth.

I would recommend that the author works out exactly what it is she wants to say, by deciding on a manageable argument and following it through step by step, staying with each topic until she has said as much as needs to be said before moving on to the next. There are many exciting and fruitful ideas in this paper, any one of which could be material for a volume all in itself. As it stands, however, the present account is too scanty to do justice to any of them.

A note about the title: the phrase 'Patriarchal Institutional Trilogy' (and its acronym 'PIT') is too idiosyncratic. It is not easily recognisable as a designator of the political problem feminism is struggling against, and hence of what it is that women are oppressed by. I agree that there is a pressing need for feminism to have a name for the enemy. I would suggest the term 'male domination' as a short-hand way of referring to a social system which institutionalises the male as the 'human' norm and excludes women from human status, rights and dignities.

## ***Feminism & Psychology, May '96***

(A reader's report for *Feminism & Psychology*, May 1996)

I find myself in something of a dilemma in reviewing this paper. On the one hand, it is well written, it reads easily, and it appears on a first reading to be clearly argued. As well, it presents the radical feminist standpoint on male-to-female constructed transsexuals' demands to be accepted as 'women', a standpoint which deserves the widest possible dissemination, given the public hegemony of the liberal tolerance, 'queer theory' version. On the other hand, this paper adds little that is new to the debate, and many of the arguments remain undeveloped.

In particular:

1. The author initially raises the question of women-only space in terms of whether or not transsexual or transvestite men have a right of access to women-only spaces as long as they define themselves as 'women', but then proceeds to discuss it in terms of why women are justified in demanding women-only space. This discussion does not address the question as it was originally posed, which was not about the actual existence of women-only spaces, but about whether or not men who defined themselves as 'women' should have access. In relation to this question the discussion is irrelevant. What the author needs to demonstrate is that these male 'women' bring the oppressive outside environment with them into women-only spaces, by continuing to behave in male dominant ways, for example. Something of this sort is hinted at elsewhere in the paper when the author alludes to the media portrayal of transsexuals as better women than women themselves (p. 6), in her discussions of the ways in which transsexualism reinforces the stereotypical notions of femininity which are so oppressive of women, and in her quotation from Dory Quinton's article, 'When Is a Lesbian Not a Lesbian?' to the effect that lesbian groups which admit transsexuals will be forced to devote attention and energy to transsexual issues at the expense of lesbian issues. As her discussion of women-only space stands at the moment, however, it does not provide any counter-argument to these men's claims for admission, since they are not arguing that women-only spaces should not exist, but that they themselves should be allowed in.

2. In the section headed 'Are Transsexuals Women?' the author does not really discuss this question. She provides some examples of 'the dominant view' that transsexuals *are* 'women', but she does not discuss any reasons why this might not be so. The section ends with three different questions which are addressed later in the paper. While a case can certainly be made for changing the terms of the debate, and extracting it from the futile alternatives of 'yes, they are' and 'no, they aren't', the author does not argue this.

3. The section 'Is Biology Destiny?' is at times unclear, although it also contains useful insights. The first three sentences of the first paragraph (p. 8) should be deleted, so that the section starts: 'Feminist theory has demonstrated ...'. This would do away with the contradiction between asserting that biology is not destiny because it can be changed by surgery (lines 3 & 4), and that it is destiny because it can't be changed (last 3 lines).

The author is quite correct in pointing out that resorting to mutilating surgery is a form of biological determinism, and that postmodernism's unqualified support for transsexualism sits oddly with its supposed commitment to social constructionism. She is also correct in arguing that transsexualism, far from being 'radical', is a reassertion of rigid, stereotypical patterns of femininity, and that being a woman cannot be reduced to a matter of 'surgery, hormones and cosmetics' (p. 10). She is also right to point out that there is a difference between the feminist social constructionist account and that of postmodernism, in that feminism insists that women are real, whereas postmodernism's questioning of 'the category "women"' abolishes any possibility of women fighting in their own interests, and hence of feminism itself.

But I feel that the author has not fully grasped what is at stake in the 'society/biology' dichotomy she is attempting to address in this section. The issue is not simply a matter of sorting out the 'biological' accounts from the 'social constructionist' ones, and rejecting the former while accepting the latter. That this is so is evidenced by her own recognition of the peculiarities of the postmodernist position which espouses *both* the surgical management of transsexualism *and* social constructionism. Neither is the feminist point about the 'society/biology' dichotomy simply about which things can be changed and which cannot. (Do we really want to allow that some things cannot be changed?) Rather, it is a recognition

that male supremacist ideology operates by ruling certain crucial issues beyond political contestation and debate. It does this by defining them as 'natural', and hence not available for negotiation or challenge. The focus is usually on women, as 'naturally' maternal, weak, passive, etc. But in the area of male sexuality, it is men who are 'nature'. Whenever 'nature' is invoked, the message is clear: 'Thou shalt not criticise or object!'

Transsexualism has been 'naturalised' from the beginning. It has had to be if it is to be useful as yet one more mode of male intrusion on women. It is 'naturalised' in its origins—I was born that way—and it is 'naturalised' in its social management through surgery and hormones. Its 'naturalisation' places it beyond debate, at least in the male supremacist mind. To deal with it by means of political consciousness-raising, or even counselling or psychotherapy, would be to cast doubt upon its 'natural' status, and hence weaken its efficacy as one more male demand on women's attention and energy.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the arguments in this paper need further development, relevant and important though they are already. The author might consider narrowing her focus to concentrate on a few specific questions, for example: What are the reasons why women might not want transsexuals in women-only spaces? Why is the question, 'Are transsexuals women?' the wrong question? What are the negative consequences for women of male-to-female constructed transsexualism? (The author has already provided a number of answers to this question). I would also suggest that the author avoid getting bogged down in the 'society' versus 'biology' debates, unless she can see her way clear to change the terms of the debate and bypass the dichotomy altogether.

(November 2003): The following was in the same file as the above although separated from it by a page break. I can't remember why I would have done that. Presumably I initially intended it as part of the review, but then decided not to include it (although I also couldn't throw it away, so here it is).

There are major problems with any assertions to the effect that: 1. feminism must focus on 'social factors' alone, and not biology, 2. for strategic reasons, 3. because women's situations

can only be changed if they are social in origin and not biological. In the first place, such assertions reinforce the very dichotomy between 'the social' and 'the biological' that feminism is supposedly concerned to abolish. They leave open the possibility that women's life situations may indeed be influenced, or even caused, by biology, but that it is not convenient or opportune for feminism to acknowledge this, whatever the truth of the matter might be. In contrast, if we insist from the very beginning that feminism is a social, moral and political standpoint committed to challenging women's subordination to men, biology becomes irrelevant except to the extent that it functions as an ideological weapon to keep women down. In that case, it can be challenged as ideology, as the expression of male supremacist meanings and values. Feminism does not have to accept the ideology's own self-definition as 'biology', but rather can expose it for the male power play it really is.

In the second place, it is a mistake to assume that something can be changed simply because it is 'social'. It is this mistake, constructed in terms of 'the sex-gender distinction', which left feminism wide open to postmodernist intrusion. If 'gender' is socially constructed, then it is 'only superficial', 'merely apparent', 'phantasmatic' and 'illusory', says postmodernism, and we can all change it at will, endlessly, into anything we so desire, and if that requires surgery, well, surgery is a social construction too, isn't it?



## ***Feminism & Psychology, October '96***

(Reader's Report on 'Women's Self-Starvation, Cosmetic Surgery and Transsexualism')

I recommend that this piece be published in the 'Observations and Commentaries' section of *Feminism & Psychology*, although with certain modifications suggested below. The piece deals with important issues, in a way that is on the whole clear and succinct. It does not need any major re-writing—the suggested changes are minor, relating to clarity of expression rather than to the over-all argument.

Comments and suggested changes:

p.1—Is the 'Australian' in the first sentence necessary? It is not only Australian feminists who are critical of these issues.

p.2—first sentence, first para.—I think the link set up in the first two paras. (p.1), between femininity and self-mutilation, can be made stronger here, along the lines of:

[after the colon]: in their desire to 'live as real women', encouraged by their doctors and psychiatrists, they mutilate their bodies in order to conform to stereotypical femininity.

This would mean that the reference on p.5, 2nd para. (see below), to self-mutilation as 'a further issue' no longer holds. But then it didn't anyway, because the issue is already raised in the first para. on p.1.

p.2—second para.—There is a slight ambiguity in the sentence beginning: 'There is even an active embracing ...', which can be rectified by putting 'as' before 'proving'.

Next sentence—The brackets can be deleted, this is too important a point to be bracketed off.

p.2—last para.—I suggest deleting the first sentence, which is somewhat obscure, and reworking it and the next sentence along the lines of:

However, supporting the 'right' of men to 'change' their sex ignores the disturbing implications this has for all women ...

(Does the author really want to assert that men have a 'right' to 'change' their sex, and do they really change it? Hence the quotation marks).

p.3—There is a problem with the figure of '150,000' women dying of anorexia. Loath as I am to cite Christina Hoff Sommers favourably on anything, she does make a plausible case against this. She says she rang the president of the American Anorexia and Bulimia Association, who said that the figures had been misquoted, and that what they actually referred to were the numbers of sufferers from anorexia nervosa, not fatalities. (Sommers, Christina Hoff (1995) *Who Stole Feminism?* New York: Touchstone, pp.11-12.)

p.5—second para.—Since self-mutilation is not a 'further issue' (see above), the first sentence can be reworked along the lines of:

As well as raising questions about transsexualism's reinforcing of stereotypical femininity, a feminist analysis needs to address the self-mutilation and pain involved in bodily alteration.

—Instead of 'the enormous pain of surgery confirms profound change' (which is a bit unclear), perhaps: 'that the enormous pain of surgery is necessary if they are to undergo such a profound change'. (I don't know whether or not this fits in with what Raymond said).

—It not only 'seems to be', it is, 'violent and unethical'.

p.6—first para.—I don't agree that transsexualism is 'bandaid'. Band-aids are at least useful in a minor way, whereas transsexual surgery is not useful for any human purpose at all.

—second para.—I don't see how silicone injections are 'like anorexia in reverse'.

—third para.—It seems a bit unfair to castigate feminists by saying 'we need to look

seriously at the pressures ...', since the author admits we have already done so. Perhaps it might be better to say something like: 'there are severe pressures ..., and child sexual abuse has repercussions which many men ...'.

p.7—first para.—Insert 'which enables them' after 'counselling'.

—second para., last sentence—'While sex changes continue ...': Could some comment be made on the ideological status of 'sex changes'? by putting it in inverted commas, for example, and/or saying 'so-called'?

—last para., last sentence—Insert 'both' before 'women' and delete 'both together'.

## ***Women's Review of Books—Radically Speaking***

28.10.1996

The Editors

*The Women's Review of Books*

Wellesley College Center for Research on Women

Wellesley, MA

Dear Editors,

I am writing to protest at the review of *Radically Speaking*, which you published in your October issue.

Your reviewer appears to have two main objections to *Radically Speaking*: that it is critical of women, and that it is critical of postmodernism. The book, says your reviewer, attempts to 'bludgeon and dismember', 'endlessly chastise and ridicule', 'excoriate', 'chillingly insult' and 'drum out of the sisterhood', 'not just women, but feminists'. While the range and inventiveness of her invective is intriguing, it is sadly misplaced. What is being criticised within the pages of *Radically Speaking* is not 'women', but anti-feminist views mounted in the name of feminism by self-identified feminists. To reject these critiques on the grounds that they are criticisms of 'women' is to deny any possibility at all of critical debate within feminism. It is a pusillanimous avoidance of dealing with the issues raised by the critiques. The implication of interpreting these issues as nothing but criticisms of 'women' is that they need not be argued out and debated because they deserve to be silenced. One can even feel a smug self-satisfaction at having so bravely demolished such nasty attitudes towards 'women'. What is at issue, however, is not 'women', neither their personal opinions, nor their feelings, hurt or otherwise. What is at stake is the meaning of feminism. In the current climate of opinion where postmodernism is being vociferously proclaimed feminism's chief ally, *Radically Speaking* is one of the few feminist voices raised in protest.

What your reviewer says about what *Radically Speaking* supposedly says about postmodernism, is so meaningless one wonders whether she has understood the arguments. What does it mean, for example, to say that 'the editors and writers of *Radically Speaking* ... set up ... postmodernism ... as the cause of all feminism's troubles'? Certainly postmodernism is a 'trouble' for feminism. It purveys the meanings and values of male

domination, in numerous ways demonstrated by the volume's contributors, while being touted as 'feminism' itself, again in ways which are argued out extensively in the book. Your reviewer addresses none of these arguments. Instead, she cavalierly lumps them all together under the one absurd assertion. And what does it mean, to say that *Radically Speaking* has 'made it appear that all these postmodernists ... agree ... that male supremacy is our friend'? Whose friend? Nowhere in *Radically Speaking* does anyone say that male supremacy is anyone's friend. What is argued, at length, is that postmodernism, far from being feminist-friendly as is so often claimed, is a variety of malestream thought, no different in its implications for women than any other variety. But perhaps your reviewer's problem is not incomprehension at all, but rather a strange kind of agreement distorted into incoherence by a determination to resist the arguments at all costs.

On at least two counts, your reviewer is, quite simply, wrong. In the first place, radical feminism is not and never has been 'anti-left' in any sense which implies that radical feminism disagrees with the left's exposure of capitalism's exploitation and dehumanisation. (Might I suggest to your reviewer that she actually *read* the work of Robin Morgan and Catharine MacKinnon, not to mention a host of other radical feminist writers, instead of mindlessly slagging off at them). Radical feminism's quarrel with the left is a critique of its male domination, both in its organisations and in its exclusive focus on the productive labour of men and on the mechanics of capitalist accumulation by men. In the second place, it is not the case that postmodernism 'attempts to build on and correct traditional Marxism'. On the contrary, there are many Marxists who are highly critical of postmodernism's depoliticising tendencies, and there are aspects of postmodernism which thoroughly antagonistic towards Marxism. Hence, your reviewer's 'explanation' for what she sees as *Radically Speaking*'s antagonism to postmodernism falls apart—postmodernism is not a variety of leftist thought, and even if it were, radical feminism's objection to it would not be based on that ground. She would have done better to address the actual arguments in the book, instead of repeating that mindless furphy that radical feminism is only interested in sex not class.

The review abounds in misreadings. I do not have the space (or the interest) to address them all, but the following is typical. Your reviewer asserts that Tania Lienert's paper is an 'explanation ... for why left feminists are so much more popular than radicals'. She goes on

to pour scorn on this, on the grounds that radical feminists like Robin Morgan and Catharine MacKinnon have 'enormous media visibility', while theorists of the left like Noam Chomsky and Angela Davis are 'relegated' to 'oblivion or demonization'. Leaving aside the fact that Morgan and especially Mackinnon have also been horrifically demonised by the media (for which there is sufficient evidence in the pages of *Radically Speaking*), not to mention the fact that Chomsky and Davis have hardly been consigned to oblivion, the passage from Lienert's paper quoted by your reviewer says neither that 'left feminists' attempt to make themselves popular, nor that they succeed. Rather, it is an attempt to explain why so many theorists who call themselves 'feminists' find it so difficult to name male domination as the political problem addressed by feminism, and are so damning of radical feminism which does. Lienert suggests that these theorists are reluctant to name the enemy clearly and unequivocally because 'it might offend men and get them offside', and that they prefer instead to put forward theories 'that are less threatening to the status quo', such as explanations in terms of capitalism. She did not say that such explanations were non-threatening (much less that they were popular), simply that they were less threatening than explanations in terms of male supremacy. Whether or not she is right about this (and I tend to think that in some sense she is), the issue she raises is not addressed by misinterpreting what she actually said.

*Radically Speaking* is not beyond criticism. It contains a multitude of fascinating ideas which push at the frontiers of feminist debate and open it up in many directions. But your review is not fair criticism—it is nothing but a scurrilous diatribe owing allegiance to that vicious smear campaign against radical feminism which has gone unchallenged for far too long, and which should never have started in the first place. You gatekeepers of feminist access to the public media—editors of journals and anthologies, publishers, conference organisers—have responsibilities to feminism and to the interests of women which so many of you have shamefully abused since the beginning of this 'second wave'. Since it is inconceivable that you could have been unaware of this reviewer's mindless antipathy towards radical feminism, you must agree with it. I ask you: Who are you working for? I suggest that's a question you should be seriously asking yourselves.

Yours in despair,

(Nov 2003): Needless to say, this letter of protest was not published.

## ***Feminism & Psychology, May '99***

(Review of 'Forsaking All Others')

I would not recommend this paper for publication because there are problems with the argument and the author appears to be unaware of some of the relevant debates in the area. And while the arguments about the historical situatedness of 'modern man' are accurate enough, they are not new.

The author's main argument is that something she refers to as 'sensuality' is a 'true space of freedom' which escapes being subjected to something else variously referred to as 'heterosexuality', 'capitalism', 'Reason' or 'binary oppositions'. But she gives no account of how this 'sensuality' has come to be innocent of the power relations attendant upon 'heterosexuality', etc. Despite the paper's reliance on the work of Foucault, it makes no reference to his strictures against the 'repression hypothesis', and hence falls into the very trap he was warning against. As well, if 'sensuality' falls outside dominant regimes of power/knowledge, then no account can be given of it, unless it can be placed in some alternative system of meaning. The reference to 'undermining language and subverting binary forms' (p.11) throws no light on the question of power relations, because it is self-refuting. It is not possible to 'undermine' language while using it, nor 'subvert binary forms' while arguing for and against.

To insist that heterosexuality is compulsory for men too (as well as women) misses the feminist point that it operates in the interests of men and at women's expense. It also ignores the fact that men are never subjected to the same brutal coerciveness as women are. The paper by Adrienne Rich, to which the author refers, contains numerous examples of this. And would the author maintain that the men who rape and sexually harass, who avail themselves of the institution of prostitution, who spend billions of dollars on pornography, are compelled to do these things?

The criticism of the *Heterosexuality* volume, edited by Kitzinger and Wilkinson, relies more on rhetorical flourishes than on substantive argument. Hence it is unclear what the editors are being accused of, apart from the fact that the present author disagrees with them. This

she is perfectly entitled to do, but not by distorting and trivialising what is said. For example, it is at the very least unhelpful to interpret the volume's position in relation to heterosexuality and lesbianism in terms of 'totally pure' and 'less pure sisters' (with or without the quotation marks). And at certain points, the author's assertions are simply wrong (see marginal comments).

Finally, the author's objection to what she refers to as 'feminist theories which construct us as the pathetic, mindless victims of "male power"' (p.29), with the implication that feminism ought not to portray women in this way, takes the politics out of feminism. Since feminism is nothing if not political, giving in to this demand would be to abolish feminism. It is feminism's meaning and purpose to struggle against male domination, and in doing this it must constantly expose the harms done to women by regimes of male power (without the quotation marks). To stop feminism from doing this is to stop the feminist enterprise altogether.