



# Against the dismantling of feminism: a study in the politics of meaning

**Author:**

Thompson, Denise

**Publication Date:**

1996

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/16032>

**License:**

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/52500> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2023-11-22

# **AGAINST THE DISMANTLING OF FEMINISM: A STUDY IN THE POLITICS OF MEANING**

Doctoral Thesis, School of Sociology and Social Anthropology,  
University of New South Wales, 1996

Denise Thompson

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the neglected question of what feminism means in the current climate of academic feminist theorising wherein differing, even conflicting, claims are being made in the name of feminism. By clarifying what is at stake in these claims, this thesis makes an original contribution to feminist theory. It is divided into two Parts. In Part I, I begin with a discussion of some basic debates in sociology concerning 'the individual' and 'society', arguing not only that 'the individual' is social all the way through, but also that feminism requires an explicit account of the human individual as a moral and political agent with the potential for resisting relations of ruling. I then proceed to define feminism in terms of opposition to the meanings and values of male supremacy which structure a reality where only men are 'human', and also in terms of the concomitant struggle for a human status for women at no one's expense. I argue in favour of a feminist standpoint which is not reducible to 'women's life activity' alone, but which takes its meaning and value from its recognition of and struggle against the social system of male domination. In Part II, I argue for the limitations of defining feminism in terms which equivocate on the question of male domination. I investigate a number of representative academic feminist texts which account for the central problematic of feminism in terms other than male domination. I discuss some problems entailed in implicitly defining feminism in terms of 'women', 'patriarchy', 'sexism', the idealist constructs of 'gender' and 'dichotomies', as well as the concept of 'difference', both in the sense of differences between the sexes and in the sense of differences between and among women. This issue of differences between women is discussed at length in the last chapter in relation to the question of 'race' as it has been debated within feminism. I conclude with a discussion of what is involved in recently suggested links between masculinity and racism, arguing that no account of domination is adequate unless it acknowledges male supremacist relations of ruling.

*Table of Contents*

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Part I: Understanding Feminism</b> .....	10
<b>Chapter One: Some Preliminary Theoretical Considerations</b> .....	11
Feminism and Sociology .....	11
Ideology: Justifying Male Domination .....	29
Pleasure and Desire: ‘Enabling’ Male Domination.....	46
The Ideology of Individualism: Disguising Male Domination .....	56
<b>Chapter Two: Defining Feminism</b> .....	71
On Definition.....	71
Defining Feminism.....	74
<b>Chapter Three: A Feminist Standpoint</b> .....	90
Relativism.....	99
Truth and Domination .....	111
Meaning and Understanding .....	117
<b>Part II: Misunderstanding Feminism</b> .....	130
<b>Chapter Four: Other Definitions</b> .....	131
‘Women’ .....	140
‘Patriarchy’ .....	151
‘Sexism’ .....	158
Idealism .....	161
‘Gender’ .....	163
‘Dichotomies’ .....	172
‘Difference’ .....	176
Differences Between the Sexes .....	177
Feminist Object Relations Theory.....	178
<b>Chapter Five: Feminism and Racism</b> .....	191
Differences Among Women.....	191
Feminism and Racism .....	193
Misrepresenting Feminism: Denying Male Domination.....	197
Misinterpreting Feminism .....	202
What Does It Mean To Call Feminism ‘White and Middle-Class’?.....	218
‘Race, Class and Gender’ .....	232
The Radical Feminist Account.....	241
Racism, Masculinity and Dehumanisation.....	244
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	259
<b>References</b> .....	263

## Introduction

This project can be read, at least in part, as a companion piece to Susan Faludi's *Backlash* (Faludi, 1991). Whereas *Backlash* was an investigation of attacks on feminism which came from outside feminism, this present work investigates some attempts to dismantle feminism from within. At the same time, however, given that my project is a Doctoral dissertation written for assessment in the academic discipline of sociology, it also differs from Faludi's book in that it is written in a quite different style from the popular journalistic style of *Backlash*. To say as much is not to depreciate Faludi's work, which not only displays an impressive array of research skills, but which also represents an admirable example of the radical feminist tradition of exposing the workings of male supremacy. My work also differs from Faludi's in that I not only use feminist insights to expose the vested interests of anti-feminism, I also attempt to give an account of what feminism is, as well as what it is not. Another difference between my work and Faludi's is that I make no attempt to confine what I say to 'Australian women', unlike the implication of the inclusion of 'American women' in Faludi's subtitle. In fact, what Faludi exposes in her book is not only relevant to US women. Although her data are confined to the US context, similar examples can be found anywhere. Indeed, given the world-wide hegemony of US cultural imperialism, they will often be the same examples. Nonetheless, despite these differences between the two works, the similarity remains.

The recognition that attacks on feminism can masquerade as feminism itself is not an original insight of mine. Faludi herself recognised that anti-feminist positions could also be held by those identifying as feminists. Tania Modleski also recognised the same phenomenon: 'what distinguishes this moment from other moments of backlash' she said, 'is the extent to which it has been carried out not *against* feminism but in its very name' (Modleski, 1991: x—her emphasis. See also: Barry, 1995; Pateman, 1986), although I would suggest that all attempts to discredit feminism work against it, whether they are carried out in its name or not.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon has existed from the beginning

---

1. Modleski and I differ on where to draw the feminist/anti-feminist line in some cases. Most of her critiques, especially of the malestream Hollywood movies and 'male feminism', but also of some of the feminist examples, are unequivocal in their identification of the male supremacist interests served by those texts. But while she would include sexual libertarianism within feminism, I would not because the individualistic emphasis of sexual libertarianism excludes sex from political contestation. (For a further discussion of the individualistic tenor of Modleski's defence of 'sex radicals', see chapter one, the section on 'Individualism').

of this 'second wave' of feminism, under the guise of competing, conflicting, or more neutrally, just different, feminist frameworks. In the 1970s, those frameworks tended to be summed up under the headings 'liberal feminism', 'socialist feminism' and 'radical feminism', with 'anarchist feminism' making a brief appearance; subsequently, they have multiplied into a plethora of 'feminisms' which defy enumeration. But such a characterisation disguises the relations of power involved. What has been happening is not a struggle over the meaning of feminism between equally matched contenders, but a stream of attacks powered by allegiances to varieties of malestream thought, against what is labelled 'radical feminism'. This labelling serves the ideological purpose of opening a space within feminism for other 'feminisms', thus providing them with a platform for attacking it from within. But contrary to this conventional account, 'radical feminism' is not one form of feminism among others, but simply feminism 'unmodified', as Catharine MacKinnon puts it (MacKinnon, 1987: 16).

This present work is an investigation of one of the most influential sites of the process of dismantling feminism from within, what I have come to call 'academic feminism'. By 'academic feminism' I do not mean everything produced in universities under the heading 'feminism'. Still less do I mean all feminist work which is academic in tone and format, since I regard my own work as academic in this sense. What I am referring to is that work, self-identified as 'feminist', which either ignores feminism's central problematic of opposition to male supremacy, or which actively sets out to pillory genuinely feminist work. The meaning, value, truth and reality of feminism, as I shall be arguing at length, is its identification of and opposition to male domination, and its concomitant struggle for a human status for women in connection with other women, which is at no one's expense, and which is outside male definition and control. Because academic disciplines are male supremacist in meaning and purpose, it is hardly surprising that feminism, which exposes those interests, cannot be allowed a place in the academic canon. That some feminist work in the academy has nevertheless been able to identify and to resist the coercions and seductions of malestream thought, is a tribute to its authors' commitment, persistence and dedication. But in too many self-identified feminist texts emanating from academe, the signs of their origins are only too evident. The chief of those signs is equivocation on, or outright repudiation of, the question of male domination. While this may be inadvertent, it is nonetheless systematic. Accusations of 'cultural feminism', 'essentialism', 'puritanism', 'false universalism',

'political correctness', 'white and middle-class', 'ahistorical', etc., are typically directed against those feminist writings which most clearly identify male domination and its ways.<sup>2</sup> Such accusations are too often characterised by a lack of scholarly rigour, a lack which betrays the hidden agenda of anti-feminism.<sup>3</sup> Part II of this present work is devoted to a detailed examination of some examples of this anti-feminism masquerading as 'feminism'. The texts which are criticised there have been selected randomly. They are exemplary only, and not in any sense 'chief offenders' in the issues I identify. They are intended to illustrate certain themes, and not to castigate individual authors or particular pieces of work. I could have chosen any number of other texts to illustrate those themes, which are endemic in 'academic feminist' theorising and not peculiar to particular authors. There are many feminists within academe whose feminist politics is direct and unequivocal, and who have succeeded in conveying it to their students, but they are in the embattled minority like radical feminists everywhere. (For some accounts of those battles, see: Spender, ed., 1981; Bowles and Klein, eds, 1983; Culley and Portuges, eds, 1985; Kramarae and Spender, eds, 1992; Richardson and Robinson, eds, 1993).

As will already be obvious, my project is the reverse of those academic feminist enterprises which tend to subordinate feminism to more conventional academic preoccupations, e.g. Marxism, postmodernism, the Western intellectual tradition, the current crisis in Western subjectivity, or whatever (e.g. socialist feminist writings of the 1970s. See also: Flax, 1990; Braidotti, 1991; Weedon, 1987. For an earlier example, see: Coward and Ellis, 1977). To criticise conventional academic disciplines using feminist insights is an important intellectual project (e.g.: Lloyd, 1984; Pateman, 1988; Pateman, 1989; Le Dœuff, [1989]1991). But that is not my purpose here. I am writing

---

2. For a critique of the concept of 'essentialism' and its unjustified use against radical feminism, see: Thompson, 1991: chapters 7 and 10.

3. To take just one example: On two occasions in *Women and Moral Identity*, Elizabeth Porter asserts that there are some feminist positions which hold that 'all men are corrupt' (Porter, 1991: 36, 42). On both occasions, she cites the 1970 anthology, *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, edited by Robin Morgan, as evidence for this. On the first occasion she gives page numbers in the anthology where this view is supposedly expressed, on the second occasion she cites the whole anthology. But according to my copy of the same edition of *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), those page numbers refer to four pages of a ten-page article which says nothing about 'all men' being 'corrupt'. The article, called 'Social Bases for Sexual Equality: A Comparative View' by Karen Sacks, is an attempt to argue for a connection between capitalism and male domination, partly by arguing for the non-existence of male domination in non-capitalist societies. There is also nothing in the whole anthology which could be interpreted as saying that 'all men are corrupt'. It is, however, a radical feminist text which explicitly addresses male domination.

from a feminist standpoint and hence this text is first and foremost an exercise in feminist theory. As such it gives epistemological, moral and political priority to feminism, rather than to the standard academic discipline of sociology (or to the philosophy which also appears here). Its purpose is not to make use of feminist insights to fill out the lacunae or rectify the distortions of sociology in order to make it more truthful about or relevant to the social locations of women (as, for example, in Smith, 1987; Smith, 1990). Neither is it intended to throw light on crises, current, pending or resolved, in sociology, or in any putative Western intellectual tradition. My intention throughout is to give priority to feminism rather than contributing to the clarification of sociological or philosophical questions. My project is the devising of feminist theory. Sociology and philosophy contribute to that project only to the extent that they elucidate recognisably feminist questions.

That is not to say that feminism is incompatible with sociology or philosophy. On the contrary, there is a sense in which feminism is both a sociology and a philosophy. Feminism entails, implicitly or explicitly, a theory of 'society', of social structure, meaning and value, of the positioning of individuals within relations of power and interdependence. And it potentially addresses all the great philosophical questions of 'Mankind', not least because of the male supremacist connotations of the word 'Mankind' itself. But instead of bringing feminist insights to bear on conventional academic disciplines with the aim of contributing to those disciplines while leaving them basically intact, this present project treats them as resources to be mined for feminist insights *avant la lettre*, for insights which can contribute to broadening the feminist enterprise of including women in the human condition on our<sup>4</sup> own terms by challenging the social system which is male supremacy. Mary Daly put this in terms of

---

4. There has been a great deal of feminist criticism of the use within academic discourse of the pronoun 'we'. Although some of this criticism is justified, especially when it exposes claims to all-inclusiveness on the part of dominant vested interests masquerading as the interests of all, the pronoun is still useful for feminist purposes. Although I sometimes refer to women as 'they', it is not appropriate in this case because I myself am a woman and because I include myself in that collective feminist enterprise. In the same vein, I tend to use the feminine form of the third person singular personal pronoun. I have deliberately chosen this option as a solution to the dilemma raised by the pronoun because I find the other two options unsatisfactory. As a reader I find the 'he/she' or 's/he' usage clumsy and irritating; and the 'they/them/their' usage is grammatically incorrect. Both are also frequently inaccurate in that they imply a symmetry between the sexes which does not exist. As well, my use of the feminine form is intended to unsettle and discomfort, to underline the fact that the practice of using the masculine form as the universal remains hegemonic, 'de-gendered' and 'non-sexist' language notwithstanding. The use of the feminine form in contexts with no specific female reference still jars because the male is still the 'human' norm.

‘Pirating, Plundering and Smuggling’ back to women the knowledge acquired in phallocratic contexts. ‘I Now see my whole life’, she said,

as an increasingly daring Piratic enterprise, which has involved Righteously Plundering treasures of knowledge that have been stolen and hidden from women and Smuggling these back in such a way that they can be seen as distinct from the mind-binding trappings in which they have been hidden and distorted by the patriarchal thieves (Daly, 1992: 110 and passim).<sup>5</sup>

It should be obvious that, to the extent that feminism is incorporated into liberalism, Marxism, postmodernism, sociology or philosophy, it is not feminism. Conversely, to the extent that feminism is its own meaning, value, truth and reality, it is not some other thing. That is not to say that feminism cannot use for its own purposes knowledge gained in other contexts. But there is a difference between using for feminist purposes the insights men have gained on the one hand, and on the other, unthinkingly following the lines men have laid down in their own interests. It is true that, as well as monopolising ‘human’<sup>6</sup> status, men have also monopolised what counts as knowledge and fashioned it in their own interests. At the same time, however, what has interested men can also be of interest and importance to women. Which is the case in any particular instance of knowledge—whether it is irrelevant to women because it only involves competitive rituals between men, or whether it is relevant to women, either because it is constructed at women’s expense, or because it speaks directly to women because it belongs to the human condition—can only be decided with due regard to the

---

5. Mary Daly and I differ about which patriarchal works need to be plundered for feminist purposes. While she is scathingly dismissive of Marx and Freud, for example, I think that they are important analysts of current conditions, Marx because of his insights into capitalist domination and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few (men), and Freud because he identified the primary symbol structuring the meaning and value of male supremacy, i.e. the phallus (although he regarded that as a good thing and inevitable, whereas in fact it as an evil to be resisted and opposed). And whereas Daly finds theological writings important, e.g. Augustine and Aquinas, I do not. I am also unsure about the extent to which these insights have been ‘stolen’ from women. Women have certainly been denied access to what counts as knowledge, both because women have until recently been denied access to those places where knowledge is perceived to reside, and because women’s knowledge is not seen to count as such. But I do not think it is always the case that things are known first by women and then appropriated by men for their own purposes, if only because women and what they know is held in such contempt under conditions of male supremacy.

6. I use quotation marks around the term ‘human’ whenever I am using it in its male supremacist sense, to indicate the corrupt and oppressive nature of those forms of ‘humanity’ permitted under male supremacist conditions. Used without quotation marks, the term indicates feminist ethical aspirations towards a human status available to all at no one’s expense.



instance in question. Neither the wholesale rejection of anything and everything said or written by men, nor the uncritical acceptance of malestream canons, is adequate for feminist purposes. In fact I refer to many writings by men in this present work, never uncritically, but not always negatively. There are many questions which have been discussed insightfully by men and which are of use and benefit to feminism. Where this is the case, I have not hesitated to use their work for feminist purposes, while remaining constantly alert for the signs and symptoms of male supremacist ideology.

Although the critique of ‘academic feminism’ is one of my major concerns, I do not discuss postmodernism in any detail. This might seem a curious omission in light of the overwhelming influence of postmodernism on feminist theorising in the academy in recent years. The omission, however, is deliberate. I do not discuss postmodernism as an identifiable framework because to do so, even as critique, would be to reinforce its position of pre-eminence. To focus attention, even critically, on postmodernism would be to award it credibility as a feminist enterprise, when from a feminist standpoint, it is merely another ruse of male supremacy. As Mia Campioni put it:

The white, male, middle-class intellectual response to this revolt [of the ‘other’] has been to appropriate this claim to “otherness” as its *own* revelatory experience ... As a male theorist declared unilaterally: “we have found that we are all others” (Paul Ricoeur, quoted in H. Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 1983: 57) He forgot that he was once more speaking for all of “us”. The noisy protests of others hitherto mute (or ignored/unheard) must have come as a huge shock to him ... He could not understand these protests in any other way than by assuming this “other” to be him again, or to be again there for him to appropriate as his own (Campioni, 1991: 49-50—her emphasis).

On the other hand, I do address many of the issues which have been raised under the postmodernist banner, and many of the texts I discuss are explicitly identified as ‘postmodernist’.<sup>7</sup>

---

7. For a critique of postmodernism from a feminist standpoint see: Brodribb, 1992. For a qualified critique, see: Pierce, 1991. For my own more detailed critique, see: Thompson, 1996.

The referent of the ‘feminism’ I will be alluding to throughout this present work is that ‘second wave’ of feminism, initially known as the Women’s Liberation Movement, dating from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feminism, in the sense of women defending their own interests in the face of male supremacy, is of much longer duration than the last two and a half decades, and hence to call this latest manifestation a ‘second wave’ does an injustice to the long history of women’s struggles on their own behalf (Spender, 1982; Lerner, 1993). (There is no ‘third wave’—feminism at present is a clarification and holding on to the insights and gains of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the face of the male supremacist backlash, and of those co-optations and recuperations which penetrate the very body of feminism itself. Still less have we arrived at any era of ‘postfeminism’, for the simple and obvious reason that male supremacy still exists). But although ‘feminism’ has wider historical connotations than I give it here, my task is not to write a history of feminism throughout the ages; it is, rather, to engage in ‘the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes’ of the age I myself have lived through (to paraphrase an insight of Marx’s).<sup>8</sup>

As I mentioned above, it is radical feminism which provides my own standpoint and which I regard as feminism per se. But although I will be arguing at length that much that is called ‘feminism’ is not, I have often allowed the designation ‘feminism’ to stand even while I argue against it. In other words, I use the term ‘feminism’ in a systematically ambiguous way. Sometimes I mean feminism per se, i.e. radical feminism which identifies and opposes male domination; and sometimes I accept the self-identification as ‘feminism’ even while disagreeing with it. Which is which should be clear from the context. I have kept the ambiguity in the interests of open-endedness because it resides in the texts under discussion. It is sometimes the case that I criticise one aspect of a text which in other respects displays impeccable feminist credentials. My task is not to sort out who is a feminist and who is not. The surreptitious slide from defining *feminism* to defining who is a *feminist* is an exercise in the ideology of individualism. (See: chapter one, the section on ‘The Ideology of Individualism’). It is a covert insistence that the only form of explanation possible is one in terms of the attributes of individuals. This insistence is ideological to the extent that it operates in male supremacist interests by impeding the progress of feminism. Placing a ban on saying what feminism is, because no one has the right to tell anyone else whether or not

---

8. ‘Letter to Ruge’, Kreuznach, September 1843, in *Early Writings* Penguin Books, 1975, p.209.

she is a feminist, stymies the important project of the self-clarification of feminism. But the issue of the meaning of feminism does not involve the qualifications or otherwise of particular individuals. To see it in this light is to reduce politics to a matter of personal preference and opinion. The crucial question is not ‘who is a feminist?’, but ‘what is feminism?’. This latter question can only be addressed with reference to the logic of feminist theory and practice. The meaning of ‘feminism’ still needs to be radically contested and debated. Although I am clear where I stand, I have no interest in imposing what I believe feminism to be on anyone else (always supposing I were in a position to do so, which I am not).

As an exercise in radical feminist theory, this present work is somewhat unusual. Apart from a few texts, some of which date from early in this ‘second wave’ (e.g. Millett, 1970; Morgan, ed., 1970; Firestone, 1981[1970]; Atkinson, 1974; Dworkin, 1974; Daly, 1973), some of which are more recent (e.g. Daly, 1978; Daly, 1984; Rich, 1980; Frye, 1983; Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989; Rowland and Klein, 1990), radical feminist writing has not proceeded by way of explicit theory-making in the sense of building on, extending and engaging with attempts to say what feminism is. For if radical feminism has not been welcomed into academe, the feeling has been mutual—neither has radical feminism been eager to intrude upon the more arcane levels of theorising. Arising as it does out of the practical politics of women’s lives and experiences, and springing directly from the changed consciousness which is feminism, the theory has tended to *show* itself in the issues addressed and in the ways in which those issues are interpreted, rather than by being *said* outright.<sup>9</sup> In most cases feminist theory is implicit in feminist texts, rather than explicitly spelled out. By and large this has been a deliberate strategy on the part of radical feminist theorists. It has meant that radical feminism has remained tied to issues of real concern to women, rather than being

---

9. The reference is to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s distinction between ‘showing’ and ‘saying’. While the distinction has interesting implications for feminist purposes, within the moral and political domain within which feminism operates it is not as hard and fast as Wittgenstein asserted: ‘What *can* be shown *cannot* be said’. (Wittgenstein, 1951[1922]: 4.1212) The distinction may be absolute in the case of logic, since any attempt to *say* what logical form is involves another proposition which once again *shows* its logical form without being able to say it: ‘4.12 ... To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world. 4.121 Propositions cannot represent the logical form: this mirrors itself in the propositions./ That which mirrors itself in language, language cannot represent./ That which expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by language.’ But a political commitment such as feminism must be able to identify explicitly the interests, meanings and values which determine both what feminism is struggling against and what it is struggling for. In that sense, any distinction between what can be said and what must simply be shown is provisional. It is tied to certain purposes and shifts according to the task at hand.

enticed by the seductions of theory for theory's sake (Stanley and Wise, 1993). For the most part, radical feminism has focused on exposing the worst excesses of the social system which is male supremacy (for a recent example, see: Chesler, 1994). The need to say what feminism is, however, has become urgent and pressing in light of the strength and influence of the anti-feminist backlash, a backlash which is increasingly masquerading as 'feminism' itself. This present project is a contribution to the debate.

The work is divided into two Parts. Part I is called 'Understanding Feminism'. In it I discuss what is at stake in feminist politics. Chapter One discusses the theoretical background to the postulation of male domination as a social system. Chapter Two is an explicit definition of feminism, i.e. radical feminism, in the terms outlined above—the opposition to male domination and the struggle for a human status for women. Chapter Three discusses what is involved in a feminist standpoint, arguing that it is based first and foremost in a moral and political commitment to ending male domination. Part II is called 'Misunderstanding Feminism'. It is devoted to criticisms of a number of ways of characterising feminism other than in terms of the opposition to male domination. Chapter Four discusses a number of largely implicit definitions of feminism, in terms of 'women', 'patriarchy', 'sexism', 'dichotomous thinking', 'gender' and 'difference'. Chapter Five develops further the question of 'difference' as it relates to race differences among women.

## **Part I: Understanding Feminism**

## Chapter One: Some Preliminary Theoretical Considerations

In this chapter, I sketch out a sociological background to the account of feminism outlined in succeeding chapters. That task is necessary because there is too little recognition that the problem feminism is addressing, that is, male domination, is a social system of meanings and values, and too little awareness of what that might entail. I use the unequivocal and adamant terminology of ‘male domination’ and its synonyms, not because I conceive of male supremacy as men’s absolute power and women’s absolute powerlessness, nor as some kind of master mechanism coercing individuals into pre-ordained patterns, but for the sake of clarity, in order to designate as clearly as possible what it is that feminism is opposing. The need for clarity is pressing in a context where a great deal of what is called ‘feminism’ is not, where euphemisms and evasions abound, where the ‘sponge words’ (to use C. Wright Mills’ felicitous phrase) of postmodernism soak up all meaning, and the backlash against feminism masquerades as feminism itself.

### *Feminism and Sociology*

Within current historical conditions of individualism, the term ‘male domination’ tends to take on individualistic connotations. Much of what is called feminism is not immune to the ideology of individualism, although radical feminism is less prone to its seductions, largely because of radical feminism’s explicit identification of the social structure of male domination. But too seldom are feminist texts informed by even the most basic concepts of sociology. Although the appeal to ‘social construction’ is ubiquitous in feminist texts, its significance is confined to challenging arguments for women’s subordination which appeal to ‘nature’. It operates simply as assertion—women’s subordination is not ‘natural’ but ‘social’—with too little realisation of the extent to which people are social all the way through, and of the implications of that for feminist politics. The enthusiasm with which the ‘social construction’ thesis has been embraced as a feminist discovery is puzzling. It is not a new idea, nor is it a particularly feminist one even in the weakest sense, i.e. concerned specifically with women. The thesis was argued within the sociology of knowledge in the 1960s (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1967—especially the Introduction), and within ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism (e.g. Gagnon and Simon, 1974). To give an idea of the flavour

of those early arguments with particular reference to sex, here are some quotes from Gagnon and Simon's *Sexual Conduct*:

the sexual area may be precisely that realm wherein the super-ordinate position of the sociocultural over the biological level is most complete (p.15);

it is only our insistence on the myth of naturalness that hides these social components from us (p.9);

Rarely do we turn from a consideration of the organs themselves to the sources of the meanings which are attached to them, the ways in which the physical activities of sex are learned, and the ways in which these activities are integrated into larger social scripts and social arrangements where meaning and sexual behavior come together to create sexual conduct (p.5).

The idea that sex is socially constructed originated with sociology. Indeed, the very notion of social construction is sociology's subject matter. But although it is an improvement on arguments from 'nature', it has a limited use for feminist purposes unless the 'society' referred to is acknowledged as male supremacist.

Appeals to 'social construction' notwithstanding, feminist reactions to the term 'male domination' too often betray an unwitting commitment to the ideology of individualism, that is, the belief that the only meaningful explanations are those 'couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals', as Steven Lukes defined methodological individualism (Lukes, 1973: 110; Lukes, 1977: 177-86). Phenomena which ought to be interpreted at the level of social structure, because only in that way do they take on political meaning, are instead interpreted as a question of the properties and attributes of individuals. Using the term 'male domination' is seen in terms of statements about men as individuals who 'have all the power', and about women as individuals who have none, who are nothing but victims of a male will to power. Although these are some of the ways in which male supremacy is manifested,<sup>10</sup> the use of the term 'male domination' does not entail

---

10. Women who are raped, for example, women who are bashed and killed by their male partners, children who are sexually abused, women harassed, commented upon, whistled at, voraciously stared at, *are* innocent of any wrong-doing. Passivity and helplessness *are* consequences of continual failed

believing in a set of personal failings, nasty attitudes or bad behaviour on the part of men and from which women are exempt (much less in the existence of a sex-linked gene). It does not entail believing that male domination originates in a set of personal attributes belonging to male individuals, nor in some kind of inherent maleness which drives men's actions, desires, attitudes and proclivities in ways which are beyond their control. On the contrary, male domination is a social system of meanings and values which structure the way the world is. It is a social phenomenon. It constitutes the social environment of women as well as men. If the meanings and values of domination constitute the 'mutual knowledge'<sup>11</sup> of social actors, they are part of the taken-for-granted ambience of everyone.

At the same time, to insist that male domination is a social phenomenon is not to embrace the other pole of the 'individual/society' dichotomy. It does not mean that individuals are nothing but 'bearers of social relations', inert entities moved hither and yon by forces outside their control (the waning influence of Louis Althusser and Nicos Polantzias notwithstanding—Lukes, 1977: 15-17; Lukes, ed., 1986: 3-4). Male domination is not some kind of monolithic and homogeneous system within which individuals are inserted without their knowledge and with no possibility of non-compliance. In the first place, any such assertion would be empirically false. It is not the case that individuals have no choice but to comply with dominant norms and the norms of domination. No régime, even the most totalitarian, can turn human beings into automata or reduce people's choices to absolute zero. What is most horrifying about the fascism of the totalitarian régimes of the twentieth century is the deliberate attempt to abolish the freedom of the individual, through the exercise of brutality, murder, terror and lies, and through depriving segments of the population of the basic necessities for human dignity. But even those régimes failed to crush all rebellion. In the second place, as Anthony Giddens points out, "'societies" rarely have easily specifiable boundaries'. He warns against any 'unthinking acceptance of societies as clearly delimited entities',

---

attempts to stop uninvited and unwelcome male encroachment (although so are rage and the separatist move). And the link between desire and domination constitutes the 'routinisation' of the everyday conditions of male supremacy. Anthony Giddens characterises 'routinisation' as: 'The habitual, taken-for-granted character of the vast bulk of the activities of day-to-day social life; the prevalence of familiar styles and forms of conduct, both supporting and supported by a sense of ontological security' (Giddens, 1984: 376). 'Ontological security' is: 'Confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity' (p.375).

11. Once again, the term is Giddens'. He defines it thus: 'Knowledge of "how to go on" in forms of life...; the necessary condition of gaining access to valid descriptions of social activity' (Giddens, 1984: 375).



and comments that ‘the degree of “systemness” in social systems is very variable’, and that it is mistaken to perceive social systems ‘as internally highly integrated unities’ (Giddens, 1984: xxvi-xxvii). In other words, to refer to a social system is not to imply anything absolute, invariant or totalising.

Further, as sociology has long argued, there is no absolute distinction between ‘individual’ and ‘society’. ‘Society’ requires people’s active participation if it is to exist at all; and individuals only exist within the social realities which supply them with ways of knowing, understanding, valuing, and recognising self and other. Feminism has a great deal to learn from sociology. Although feminism is already a social theory, that theory has not been spelled out in any detail. The idea of ‘social construction’ (of sex differences, sexuality, ‘gender’, ‘subjectivity’, or whatever) is proclaimed as a startling revelation original to feminism, whereas in fact it is sociology which has had the most to say about ‘the social construction of reality’ and the ways in which individuals are situated within social domains. The idea is not even a particularly radical one. As one of the most conservative of sociologists, Talcott Parsons, argued (in C. Wright Mills’ ‘translation’ into plain language of extracts from Parsons’ *The Social System*):

Legitimations that are publicly effective often become, in due course, effective as personal motives ... The first problem of maintaining social equilibrium is to make people want to do what is required and expected of them ... That these shared values are learned rather than inherited does not make them any the less important in human motivation. On the contrary, they become part of the personality itself. As such, they bind a society together, for what is socially expected becomes individually needed (Mills, 1970[1959]: 46, 41, 39).

Hence, not only are social systems not rigidly delimited entities capable of precise identification and location; they are also maintained and reproduced through people’s commitment to their continued existence. Anthony Giddens puts this in terms of the ‘recursive’ nature of human social activities, which are

not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors.

In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible ... The fixity of institutional forms does not exist in spite of, or outside, the encounters of day-to-day life but *is implicated in those very encounters* ... Human societies, or social systems, would plainly not exist without human agency. But it is not the case that actors create social systems; they reproduce or transform them, remaking what is already made in the continuity of praxis (Giddens, 1984: 2, 69, 171—emphases in the original).

But sociology is useful for feminist purposes only up to a point. It provides a necessary corrective to any tendencies there might be within feminism towards either individualism or social determinism. But it is less useful for a feminist account of male domination. Within sociology, what is involved in relations of power, how it is that some can exercise their capacities at the expense of others who are thereby prevented from exercising their own capacities, remains on the level of suggestive insights, rather than a fully worked out theory of social domination. That sociology has so far not been able to address questions of power in a way which is entirely satisfactory for feminist purposes is a consequence of sociology's own implication in the ethos of male supremacy. The male domination of sociology, its 'malestream' tendency, does not proceed only through the eclipsing of women's experience and the exclusion of women from those authoritative positions from which to speak and be heard (Smith, 1987: 17-43). The exclusion of women is itself a consequence of sociology's unwitting commitment to a belief in the male as the 'human' norm (a commitment which might be unconscious, but which is recognisably purposive from a feminist standpoint). Women and their interests are simply not seen within a sociology which, like every other discursive practice of the malestream, recognises only men as 'human'. Nonetheless, because relations of power exist among men too, and because the question of power is integral to the sociological endeavour, those insights still have something to say to feminism, even if, in the last analysis, feminism is alone in its project of uncovering the workings of male supremacy.

Within sociology,<sup>12</sup> questions of power address the same issues as questions about the nature of the relationship between the ‘individual’ and ‘society’, while at the same time challenging any tendency to regard them as in any way polar opposites. Power is defined in terms of human agency, that is, as the capacity of individuals, singly or collectively, to get things done, to achieve outcomes, to make a significant difference in the world (Giddens, 1984; Lukes, 1974; Lukes, 1977). At the same time, however, there is a recognition that to leave the definition there is misleading since people do not in fact have unlimited freedom of action. But there is a general consensus that the problem of power cannot be resolved by locating freedom wholly within the individual and constraint wholly within social structures. Giddens recommends that ‘the dualism of the “individual” and “society” [be] reconceptualised as the duality of agency and structure’ (Giddens, 1984: 162. See also: Lukes, 1977). By this he means not only that freedom of action is possible despite the constraints placed on individuals by the limitations of social reality, that people have choices, that they are, more often than not, aware of what they are doing and of alternatives, that they not only reproduce social structures but also transform them. He also means that freedom of action is possible *because of* those constraints. He states that ‘the structural properties of social systems are both enabling and constraining ... forms of constraint are ... also ... forms of enablement. They serve to open up certain possibilities of action at the same time as they restrict or deny others ... All types of constraint ... are also types of opportunity’ (pp.162, 171-2, 117). Constraint, he says, operates ‘through the active involvement of the agents concerned, not as some force of which they are passive recipients’ (p.289), and points out that ‘all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors’ (p.16).

While this account is entirely correct in pointing out that questions of power and domination, of free-will and determinism, of freedom of action and constraints upon action, cannot be addressed by setting up an irresolvable dichotomy between the ‘individual’ and ‘society’, the sociological approach is still less than satisfactory for feminist purposes. The account so far is true enough as far as it goes. It *is* the case that people exercise power despite social conditions of constraint. It is also the case that the social structures which constrain provide opportunities as well as limiting them. It is

---

12. In what follows, I rely largely on the work of Anthony Giddens, because his knowledge of sociology is encyclopaedic. Since he has already provided an overview of the sociological tradition, there is no point in replicating his work here.

also true that no human action is ever wholly unconstrained or wholly constrained. But the problem with leaving the argument there is that domination tends to vanish because there is no clear analytical distinction made between power-as-domination on the one hand, and on the other, power as ‘the means of getting things done’ and as ‘the capacity to achieve outcomes’, as Giddens puts it (Giddens, 1984: 175, 257). Giddens asserts that ‘whether or not [outcomes] are connected to purely sectional interests is not germane to [the] definition [of power] ... “Domination” and “power” cannot be thought of only in terms of asymmetries of distribution but have to be recognized as inherent in social association (or, I would say, in human action as such)’ (pp.257, 31-2). But if ‘domination’ is co-extensive with ‘power’, and ‘power’ is co-extensive with ‘social association’ or ‘human action as such’, there is no way of distinguishing between those dominating forms of power which serve the interests of some at others’ expense, and those forms which everyone needs if they are to operate in the world. If ‘domination’ cannot be separated out from ‘power’, and confined to ‘asymmetries of distribution’ and the hegemony of some ‘sectional interests’ over others, how do we distinguish power-as-capacity (including access to those resources which enable human action) from power-as-domination (including the monopolisation of resources and their accumulation in the hands of the few)? (See: Hartsock, 1974, for an early radical feminist account of these two forms of power). On Giddens’ account, there is no possibility of political struggle *against* relations of ruling and *for* the capacities of everyone to control the conditions of their own existence. If ‘power’ is ‘domination’, political struggle is futile.

Moreover, if constraint is at the same time enablement, then the reverse is equally true. Forms of enablement are also forms of constraint. How do we distinguish between the constraints which enable, that is, which provide the basic prerequisites for action, and those which ‘enable’ no more than people’s consent to their own oppression? The example Giddens uses shows this dilemma, while at the same time casting some doubt on the validity of his own ‘constraint is enablement’ thesis, at least in the terms within which it is couched. His discussion of Paul Willis’ work with working-class schoolboys, *Learning to Labour* (Giddens, 1984: 289-309), identifies the constraints placed upon the economic opportunities of ‘the lads’ by the structural requirements of capitalism, while at the same time showing that the boys are not ignorant and passive victims of the capitalist class system. They know exactly how they are situated in relation to the world of work they will enter when they leave school. They know that there is little or nothing

they can do to improve their life chances, and their behaviour, in school and out of it, reflects that knowledge. They band together to disrupt classes, challenge teachers, break rules, and rampage around the countryside out of school hours, creating havoc and mayhem. But how is this collective behaviour ‘enablement’ if it is complicit with oppressive conditions? The most that can be said is that the boys do not accept their situation passively. But if their behaviour is consonant with those conditions and ensures their continuation, to call it ‘enabling’ merely obscures the issue. All that this example demonstrates is that people manage to live despite oppression, that dehumanising conditions never completely extinguish the life force of those subjected to them (short of chronic depression and suicide). What still needs to be addressed is the extent to which people are complicit with or acquiescent in oppressive conditions, and the extent to which they resist, challenge or oppose those conditions. While ‘the lads’ can do nothing to change the class system of capitalism, they can refuse to comply with its meanings and values. They can refrain, for example, from taking out their rage and frustration on each other, and on those weaker than themselves, on women and smaller children (a possibility Giddens does not consider).

But for feminist purposes, ‘constraint’ is not really the issue. Although women may indeed be ‘constrained’ under conditions of male supremacy, the issue is male domination. From this perspective, constraints on the worst excesses of male behaviour are positively beneficial for women. (Giddens himself acknowledges something of this sort in his discussion of democracy, when he says that ‘the “liberty of the strong” must be restrained’—Giddens, 1992: 186). For example, the restraining powers of the state have sometimes been of benefit to women, although those benefits are not acknowledged in the voluminous malestream critiques of the state, emanating from both the left- and the right-wing of the political spectrum. The police and the judiciary have the power to protect women and children from violent men, and that power is sometimes used effectively, if too often reluctantly. The state also has the power to redistribute income, and that power operates in favour of the women and children who comprise a disproportionately large segment of the poor. That the state thereby constrains men, by imposing penalties for violence and by taxing the wealthy, is a positive virtue from the point of view of women. To couch questions of freedom and power in terms of ‘enablement’ and ‘constraint’ betokens a masculine ethos. This is the world view of those who either already have the capacity to act freely because the world

is made in their image and likeness, or who react violently if they are deprived of what they have been promised is their automatic right.

Why should we be concerned with ‘power’ unless it is the sort of power which causes problems, that is, the domination which results in human harm and misery, and which needs to be addressed as such if it is to be redressed? Why be concerned with ‘power’ if it means no more than achieving outcomes, when the *problem* with power is the way in which it is exercised to prevent categories of people from achieving even the most basic outcomes necessary for their human dignity and respect? Why should we be concerned with ‘power’ but not powerlessness, with ‘enablement’ but not helplessness, with ‘constraint’ but not with identifying who is constrained, how and why and in whose interests? If domination provides the very occasions for action, how is it possible to identify those social structures which ought not to exist because they establish categories of individuals who exercise their ‘transformative capacity of human agency’ (Giddens’ term) at others’ expense? And how is it possible to distinguish between social structures which establish categories of individuals who have fewer opportunities than others to make a difference in the world and to control the conditions of their existence, and those social structures which do not?

The answer is that it is not possible unless there is a moral and political stance taken against power in the form of domination and in favour of power in the form of the exercising of capacities at no one’s expense. Although sociology does not do this in relation to male domination, it does contain insights into the ways in which power-as-domination is exercised. It is clear that it is not always overt and deliberate, and that it is not confined to those occasions identified by Max Weber as “the capacity of an individual to realize his will, even against the opposition of others” (Quoted in Giddens, 1993[1976]: 118. see also: Giddens, 1979: 68-9). This recognition is connected to the sociological insight that the social control of populations is most efficient when people control themselves, when they perceive the status quo as in their own interests and acquiesce more or less willingly in its maintenance and reproduction. Indeed, this commitment on the part of individuals is essential if the social order is to be reproduced at all. Hence, it is frequently the case that some individuals can prevail over and against other individuals, without those others putting up any opposition at all. As Lukes points out, power-as-domination is frequently exercised through the imposition of

ignorance, by controlling sources of information so that people do not even get to find out that they have grievances, much less protest against or act to change the conditions under which their interests are being suppressed.

the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent ... conflict from arising in the first place ... is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (Lukes, 1974: 23, 24).

Hence, people can willingly act to reproduce relations of domination and subordination without realising that that is what they are doing, much less being in a position to resist. But Lukes is only partly right in his comment on relations of power between women and men, when he says that both are 'victims of the system, rather than one being held to exercise power over the other'. He is right to point out that it is 'not so much a question of men ... choosing to exercise power over women, through voluntary actions on the basis of modifiable attitudes', but rather 'a system of domination in which both men and women are caught up, albeit one serving the interests of the former at the expense of the latter' (Lukes, 1977: 10). But while it is true that both women and men can be complicit with relations of male domination, if the system operates in the interests of men and against the interests of women, they are not both 'victims' in quite the same way. It is highly misleading to refer to men as 'victims' of a system which ensures that their interests will prevail at women's expense, although it remains true that the system is often unwittingly, and sometimes explicitly, maintained by both women and men. Moreover, it is also true that the system of male domination cannot be wholly identified with men's conscious, deliberate choices to subordinate women, firstly, because the taken-for-granted nature of the system allows women's subordination to be effected through business as usual, and secondly, because the actions of women can also serve to maintain the system as long as women remain unaware of their real interests. Nonetheless, the question of women's liberation from male domination is a moral one,

and as such, it *depends on* ‘voluntary actions’ and ‘modifiable attitudes’ on the part of both sexes, but especially on the part of women, if the system is to be challenged and opposed.

A concept of interests is essential to any account of domination. To acknowledge the existence of domination is to acknowledge the existence of interests which are not only conflicting, whether or not that is acknowledged by those whose interests they are, but which are also asymmetrical in relation to the distribution of power and resources. Within sociology, the concept of interests refers neither to a wholly individual phenomenon, nor to a wholly collective one. Giddens links interests to ‘wants’, and defines ‘interests’ as ‘any outcomes or events that facilitate the fulfilment of agents’ wants’. He points out that the two are not identical—people may want things that they do not necessarily see as in their interests, and they may have interests of which they are unaware, and hence do not actively desire—but says that ‘there are no interests without wants’ (Giddens, 1993[1976]: 92-3; Giddens, 1979: 94, 189). However he also says that, although wants ‘can only be attributes of subjects’ (because ‘social systems have no wants or needs’) (Giddens, 1979: 189), neither wants nor interests are properties of individuals existing in isolation, much less are they based in ‘personal need dispositions’ or ‘hypothetical “states of nature”’ (Giddens, 1984: 118). He criticises the work of Talcott Parsons for interpreting ‘conflict of interests’ in terms of conflicts between ‘the individual’ and ‘society’, pointing out that this interpretation is unable to address questions of ‘divergent group interests embodied in social action’ (Giddens, 1993[1976]: 104). Not only do people have interests only ‘*by virtue of their membership of particular groups, communities, classes, etc.*’ (emphasis in the original), they also have wants in common (Giddens, 1979: 189). Hence, interests are both personal and collective, that is, they arise out of people’s participation in identifiable social groups. They are felt as intrinsically personal, as wants and desires, but they are also collective and shared. They are also objectively identifiable, that is, they can be shown to exist whether those whose interests they are recognise them or not.

But the question of whose interests are at stake, and at whose expense, cannot be a matter of indifference to a political movement such as feminism. It is true enough, as Giddens says, that ‘power and conflict frequently go together ... because power is linked to the pursuance of interests, and people’s interests may fail to coincide’, and that



‘while power is a feature of every form of human interaction, division of interest is not’ (Giddens, 1993[1976]: 118). But once again, this is only partly right. The problem with domination is not just that people’s interests are ‘divided’ or ‘fail to coincide’, but that the interests of some prevail at the expense of the interests of others. But it is only an explicit moral and political commitment to opposing domination, which can identify *whose* interests are being obliterated, ignored or trivialised, and who is benefiting from this, and which can specify forms of human interaction *not* based on divisions of interest.

There are good reasons for thinking that sociology not only can take up explicit moral and political stances, but that it must if the sociological investigator is to be in a position to see what is there to be investigated, and to avoid complicity with current relations of domination. Giddens’ concept of the ‘double hermeneutic’ expresses this sociological capacity and obligation, although not entirely explicitly (Giddens, 1993[1976], and *passim*). In fact, as Giddens himself makes clear, the double hermeneutic is actually triple. It involves three levels or phases of interpretation, not two. In the first place, it refers to the interpretations which social actors themselves make in the process of being and acting in the world. These interpretations are generalisations which provide reasons for acting when reasons are called for, and are fully qualified social theories in themselves. The second level of interpretation is the sociological one. It requires a further level of abstraction than the generalisations of social actors, and hence a certain degree of detachment, since its purpose is to expose to view aspects of the social world which are unavailable, or not readily available, to social actors absorbed in their own experience. The third level of interpretation is the reflexive return of the sociological interpretations to the social world they refer to. This in turn affects the first level which changes as a consequence, either by accommodation with, incorporation of, resistance to, or rejection of, the sociological interpretations.

The sociological endeavour requires both detachment from, and an engaged immersion in, the meanings and values which constitute the social world being investigated. Without involvement, there is no possibility of understanding; but without at least some form of detachment, there is no possibility of going beyond, of taking those understandings further than the taken-for-granted, routinised processes which enable social actors to function competently and knowledgeably. This tension between

immersion and detachment is not peculiar to sociological research. It exists in the social world as well, whenever social actors need to make decisions about whether or not to proceed as usual, whenever routine reasons either no longer make any sense, or acquire, or are exposed as, meanings and values which people want to repudiate. For sociology an adequate level of detachment is sufficiently guaranteed by the fact that the researcher comes from 'elsewhere'—the academic community, the sociological tradition, the paradigms of social science, etc. But it is only an explicit moral and political stand which provides the immersed social actor with the leverage necessary, not only to engage in the process of extricating herself from those aspects of her social milieu she wants to repudiate, but also to recognise the oppressive aspects in the first place. Unless there is a standpoint from which to assess experience, there is no possibility of going beyond it to resist those aspects of experience which are the source of oppression. Nonetheless, without the experience, the standpoint has no meaning (which is to say that it is not thinkable).

Sociology's inadequacy for feminist purposes (its numerous helpful insights notwithstanding) lies in its status as a malestream discourse. Created by men, for men and about men, it lacks a grounding in the kind of experience which gives rise to a feminist standpoint.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that 'women's experience' automatically ensures a feminist commitment. It does not. Not even women's professed embracing of the feminist cause guarantees a feminist commitment (as will become clear in subsequent chapters of this present work). But the experience of being a woman is, for the time being at least, a prerequisite for 'getting a feel for' what is at stake in the multifarious ways in which the meanings and values of male domination operate to women's detriment, not only overtly and violently, but also through rewards and benefits and through women's own acquiescence. Feminism is still feeling its way. Because even women ourselves are often unsure about what counts as male domination and what does not, about the extent to which we ourselves are complicit with what works against our own interests and what counts as resistance, and because men have

---

13 The work of feminist sociologists has had some influence on the mainstream discipline, but that influence is confined to particular areas, e.g. the sociology of work and of the family, and the study of male violence (Stanley, 1992: 263-4. For other discussions of the influence of feminism on the discipline of sociology, see: Roberts, 1981; Abbott and Wallace, 1990). On the level of a general theory of society, feminism appears to have had very little influence, largely because of the lack of clarity about what feminism means. As should be clear from my arguments throughout this present work, there is still too little awareness of what feminism is, even amongst feminists themselves.

too much of themselves invested in maintaining the status quo, the progress of feminism must remain for the time being in the hands of women who have nothing at stake in the ethos of masculinity.<sup>14</sup>

Anthony Giddens' recent brave attempt to incorporate feminist insights into sociology, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (subtitled 'Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies') (Giddens, 1992), provides a case study of some of the ways in which male supremacist meanings and values persist in even the best-intentioned male-authored text. Because of Giddens' own implication in masculinity with its systematic incapacity to radically subvert 'sexuality',<sup>15</sup> and despite insights into the ways in which sexuality functions to subordinate women, he commits a number of misogynist errors, and fails in the last analysis to realise what is at stake for women in this thing called 'sexuality'. He is not alone in this. Sexual libertarianism is the dominant public face of what is published as 'feminist' accounts of sexuality these days (e.g. Snitow et al., eds, 1984; Vance, ed., 1984; Feminist Review, eds, 1987. For critiques of sexual libertarianism, see: Thompson, 1991; Jeffreys, 1990; Jeffreys, 1993; Leidholt and Raymond, eds, 1990; Coveney et al., 1984; Dell'Olio, 1972). And in fact, Giddens is more critical of sexual libertarianism than some self-styled feminist writings (p.180). But he continues to hold fast to a belief in 'sexuality' on the male model, as long as it is 'equal' and allows for women's 'sexual autonomy', without realising the enormity of the extent to which what counts as 'sexuality' has been bound up with the penis, and with the cultural demand that what the penis wants the penis gets, whatever the cost to women (and too often, children as well).

Among the instances of residual misogyny are the following:

- He tends too often to exclude women from the account without acknowledging that this is what he is doing. His chapter, 'Personal Turbulence, Sexual Troubles', for example, is largely about men. Even the section on 'Female Sexuality' is mostly about men. Given that the chapter is about 'sexual trouble',

---

14. For the sense in which I use the term 'masculinity', as a system of meanings and values rather than a personality characteristic of individual men, see pp.66-7, this chapter.

15. 'Sexuality' is central to the masculine sense of self. As Giddens himself puts it: 'sexual identity forms a core part of the narrative of self' (p.77). Because penis-possession is central to masculinity, and the primary adult function of the penis is its use in sex, 'sexuality' is sacred because the penis and its prerogatives are sacred. 'Sexuality' can be criticised in its more aversive forms, but there must always remain a level on which 'sexuality' is beyond critique.

including a section on 'Male Sexual Violence', and sexual troubles are largely caused by men, the restriction of the discussion to men is not unreasonable. What *is* unreasonable is that the restriction is unacknowledged. The chapter heading is couched in general terms although in fact it only discusses men.

- At one point he remarks that 'the *ars erotica* was usually a female speciality ... cultivated by concubines [and] prostitutes' (p.63), without noticing that its only purpose was *male* sexual satisfaction, and hence, was hardly a 'female speciality' in any sense that served women's interests.
- On another occasion, in a discussion of Casanova, he asserts that Casanova 'did not have that outright contempt for women' which is typical of 'womanisers', because 'he sought to look after women he had loved'. And yet, in the same breath, he says that Casanova had to resort to rape in his old age 'as a means of keeping his sexual life going' (p.82), as though Casanova had no choice because 'keeping his sexual life going' had absolute priority over women's safety and their right to live free from violation. Here Giddens is oblivious to any connection between rape and contempt for women, not to mention any questions about why the continuation of Casanova's 'sexual life' should take precedence over the basic human rights of women.
- In a further discussion of 'womanisers', Giddens refers to 'their dependence on women' and their being 'in thrall to women'. But what these men are in thrall to is not women, but their own penises. They need women as receptacles for and arousers of their penises, as human reflectors of the grandiose importance of penis-possession, but not women themselves. Giddens indicates that he knows this, when he says that these men are unable 'to meet [women] as independent beings capable of giving and accepting love' (p.85). But he nonetheless obliterates the main motivating force driving the 'womanisers', the obsession with the penis and what it must be allowed to do no matter who gets hurt and degraded in the process.
- In his discussion of 'toxic parents' (pp.99-109), the only 'parents' mentioned are fathers, except in his brief, and wildly inaccurate, discussion of incest (p.107). This discussion proceeds by way of sweeping generalisations unsupported by

any evidence. It is true that there is little reliable data on the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse, both incestuous and extrafamilial. But there are some data available. There were also a number of feminist debates on the issue available at the time Giddens was writing, none of which he cited (e.g. Russell, 1984; Russell, 1987; Campbell, 1988; MacLeod and Saraga, eds, 1988; Driver and Droisen, eds, 1989). The information which does exist indicates that on this issue, one of vital importance to women, Giddens was less than scholarly in his approach. He says that 'most, but not all, is carried out by men', but then goes on to say that 'unlike rape, sexual abuse of children is not exclusively a male crime'. But if over 90% of perpetrators are male (a proportion which Giddens does not mention), then it *is* a male crime.<sup>16</sup> He also says that 'boys seem almost as often the victims of incest as girls', without citing any sources. But the available information indicates exactly the opposite.<sup>17</sup> He asserts baldly that 'father-son incest is easily the most frequently found type'. But given the predominance of girls among the victims of child sexual abuse, this is unlikely to be the case; and given the paucity of the data, it is unclear how he knows

---

16. In a study of 250 cases of child sexual abuse discussed by Susan Brownmiller, 97% of perpetrators were male. The study was undertaken by the Children's Division of the American Humane Association in 1969 (Brownmiller, 1975: 276). A similar proportion of male perpetrators was uncovered by a study conducted by Diana E. H. Russell in 1981. This study of the childhood sexual abuse experiences of a random sample of 930 women revealed that 95-6% of the perpetrators were male (Russell, 1984: 187. See also: Russell, 1987). Russell also points out that there are difficulties in estimating the proportion of female perpetrators from studies based on reported cases, because of the way in which females are defined as 'perpetrators'. Women are often included in the statistics as 'perpetrators' if they failed to stop men sexually abusing children, even though the women themselves did not have sexual contact with the children. Women are also listed as perpetrators if they acted together with men. Russell notes: 'even if these were situations in which the female was committing a sexual form of abuse, most clinical accounts involving both male and female perpetrators identify the male as the initiator of the sexual abuse. Frequently the female partner is acting under duress' (Russell, 1984: 218). Russell concludes that 'Sexual abuse by women does occur in some fraction of cases: probably about 5 percent in the case of girls and 20 percent in the case of boys. But to take the appearance of some cases of sexual abuse by women to mean that sexual abuse is not primarily committed by men is ... wrong, and is not supported by the data' (p.231).

17. Russell cites David Finkelhor's estimates of the relative proportions of girls and boys who are sexually abused, based on an overview of a number of studies. Finkelhor estimated that 'from 2.5 percent to 8.7 percent of men are sexually abused as children', and that 'two to three times as many girls are victimized than are boys' (Russell, 1984: 195). Finkelhor's own study of 796 college students revealed that 8.6% of the male students, and 19.2% of the female students, had been sexually abused as children (p.194). In Russell's study of a random sample of 930 women, 16% had experienced incestuous abuse before the age of 18 years, and 12% before the age of 14 years. When both incestuous and extrafamilial abuse were combined, 38% had had at least one experience before the age of 18, and 28% before the age of 14 (p.193). Russell's study explicitly excluded forms of sexual interaction which did not involve physical contact, e.g. exhibitionism, voyeurism, verbal propositions. There is no study cited of a comparative random sample of men. However, the American Humane Association's study for the year 1978, involving reported cases of child sexual abuse from 31 states in the US, investigated 6,096 cases, of which 803 were boys. On this data, girls were seven and a half times more likely than boys to be abused.

this.<sup>18</sup> He concludes by asserting that ‘the sexual molesting of sons by mothers is not uncommon’. But again this cannot be right if the vast majority of perpetrators are male.<sup>19</sup> If he had said ‘not unknown’, rather than ‘not uncommon’, this statement might have been less objectionable. As it is, he leaves us with the general impression that women are only marginally less likely than men to abuse children sexually.

These errors of detail, not to mention the remarkable failure of scholarship where the interests of women are concerned, point towards the larger problem with Giddens’ overall thesis. The changes in forms of intimacy to which he alludes are not quite as he describes them, if they are viewed from a feminist standpoint. He interprets those changes as basically two in number: ‘a revolution in female sexual autonomy’, and ‘the flourishing of homosexuality, male and female’ (p.28). But he interprets female sexual autonomy as more women having more sex, including lesbianism, with more partners and enjoying it more. He is aware that more sex does not in and of itself lead to greater autonomy, that it can be obsessive, addictive and dehumanising. And he is aware that women’s autonomy does not involve only freer sex, but also freedom from other coercive and constraining aspects of the traditional female role. But the reasons he gives for women’s greater sexual autonomy are less than satisfactory. He appears to believe that women’s autonomy is sufficiently guaranteed, even if the process is far from completed, by the fact that sexuality has been ‘severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations’ (p.27). It is this detachment of sexuality from biological reproduction, marriage and the family which detaches sexuality from ‘its age-old subservience to differential power’ (p.147), because it is ‘no longer harnessed to the double standard’ (p.94). It promises, at least in principle, to ‘free sexuality from the rule of the phallus’ (p.2), because ‘if fully developed, [it] would imply a neutral attitude towards the penis’ (p.140). It is the severing of sex from reproduction and traditional kinship relations which is behind the development of what he calls the ‘pure

---

18. Russell cites work by Judith Herman, involving an overview of five studies of child sexual abuse, which located 32 cases of father-son incest in the literature. Ten of those cases were found at a single child-guidance clinic. Herman commented that the researchers had not been looking for incest and were surprised at the relatively large number. She concluded that ‘father-son incest may be significantly under-reported’ (Russell, 1984: 197-8). That does not, however, warrant an assertion such as Giddens’.

19. Herman’s comment on mother-son incest is that it ‘is so extraordinary that a single case is considered worthy of publication’. She found 30 cases in the literature she investigated, eight of which, she said, ‘might be more accurately described as rape, since they involve situations in which an adolescent or adult son subjected his mother to forced intercourse’ (Russell, 1984: 197).

relationship'. This, he says, 'has nothing to do with sexual purity'. Rather, 'it refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (p.58).

But if the penis is to be severed from the phallus, the link has to be acknowledged in the first place for what it is, a direct correspondence between penis-possession and the phallic power of male monopolisation of 'human' status. Giddens fails to make that direct link. Instead he interposes 'reproduction', and its social structural manifestation as kinship relations, between the penis and the phallus. In doing so, he argues by implication that phallic power is a consequence of kinship relations which are in the process of being dismantled, at least in the West under conditions of modernity. But if phallic power is a consequence of nothing but phallic power, if it is its own reason for being and contains its own meaning and value within itself, then the historical changes described by Giddens are merely another ruse of male supremacy. Although kinship relations have diminished in extent and importance, shattered by capitalism's demand for 'free labour', the phallic imperative of control over biological reproduction has not. Although men have more freedom to choose whether or not to be fathers in any relationship sense, they are still supported in their demands for ownership and control of the human products of their personal sperm. As Janice Raymond has pointed out, there is now a 'new norm of fatherhood grounded in male gametes and genes'. She calls this 'ejaculatory fatherhood', and says that 'the ejaculator is called a father from the very moment that his sperm fertilizes an egg' (Raymond, 1994: 30). John Stoltenberg makes the same point. He says: 'Men control women's reproductive capacities in part because men believe that fetuses are phallic—that the ejaculated leavings swelling up in utero are a symbolic and material extension of the precious penis itself' (Stoltenberg, 1990: 96). In the light of changes like these, and pace Anthony Giddens, the penis is still the phallus, and any feminist attempt to divide one from the other, to reduce the penis to just another bodily organ and abolish the phallus altogether, is still regarded as the unkindest cut of all. If male supremacy is to be challenged at its source, that source in the hyper-valuation of penis-possession must be named and identified.

***Ideology: Justifying Male Domination***

The general tenor of the arguments in the last section is that domination is routinely maintained through the willing consent of populations. That is not the only way it is maintained. Oppression is in no sense ‘caused’ by the consent of the subordinated; nor can it be abolished simply by withdrawing consent, although such a withdrawal is necessary if there is to be any challenge to relations of domination. Relations of ruling can operate without the consent of the ruled, through the use of violence, force and coercion, through the monopolisation of wealth and information, through the confining of goods and opportunities to small, elite segments of the population, through policies and practices which benefit some at the expense of others. But the social conditions of male supremacy function most efficiently to the extent that women (and men) accept the reality of their position, embrace it as natural and unalterable, desire its continuation and fear its destruction, and believe it is their own meaningful existence.

I have found the term ‘ideology’ useful for designating that form of systematic meaning which functions to legitimate relations of ruling. It is indebted to *The German Ideology*, especially the insight that ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas’ (Marx and Engels, 1974[1846]: 64). But the sense in which I use the term is not confined to ideas alone, chiefly because separating out ‘ideas’ from some other level of existence, usually designated ‘material’, is itself an ideological strategy serving to disguise actual relations of power. Such a strategy could be more accurately called ‘idealism’. (See chapter four, the section on ‘Idealism’). Ideology refers to whatever excuses, permits, legitimates and provides justifications for relations of ruling. It can be both (or either) ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, discourse and action, speech and behaviour, private and public, desire and aversion. It can operate unconsciously, although to the extent that it is recognised as ideology it has already been brought into consciousness and into language. It supplies meanings, values and purposes, provides reasons for acting, elicits feelings and desires, in short, it operates on every level of human existence. Ideology is whatever makes domination palatable or acceptable, or natural, real and unchangeable.<sup>20</sup>

---

20. Clearly I am confining my use of the term ‘ideology’ to one of its many meanings. Terry Eagleton, for example, at one point lists sixteen meanings, which he eventually reduces to six (Eagleton, 1991: 1-2, 28-31). However, my aim is not to give a history of the vicissitudes of the word, but to use it for a particular purpose. Although all the meanings listed by Eagleton have a certain currency, not all of them can be



There have been a number of objections raised to what has been called ‘the dominant ideology thesis’, but none of them provides convincing reasons to abandon the concept as the designator of attempts to justify domination. The chief reason for the inadequacy of these arguments is their failure either to recognise the existence of domination, or to accord it primacy as *the* social problem requiring analysis. They fail to see the overriding importance of domination, and hence to recognise the need for a term to designate those forms of domination which are not overtly coercive. As a consequence, they fail to allow that there is a meaningful connection between ideology and domination, even, oddly enough given the term’s origins in Marxism, capitalist domination. Marxism would seem self-evidently to be *the* theory of capitalist domination. But in fact it has too often tended to focus on an architectonics of capitalist society, or, as happens in *The German Ideology*, a grand theory of history. These enterprises take on the appearance of political and ethical neutrality, rather than a commitment to championing the interests of those subordinated within capitalist relations of power. In order to theorise domination, it is necessary to start from a moral and political standpoint of opposition. Although Marxism certainly did this in part, it was too often side-tracked into a fascination with a grand systematisation of the ways in which capital works or ‘history’ proceeds.

Objections to using the term ‘ideology’ fail to recognise crucial forms which domination takes. The arguments tend to insist that there is an inextricable connection between ideology and the Marxist ‘economic base/ideological superstructure’ construct, and that, because that construct is untenable, so is the concept of ideology. But the ‘base/superstructure’ model belongs with those attempts at systematisation. It is irrelevant to Marxism as an account of capitalist domination. The problem identified by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* was that tendency of Hegelian Idealist philosophy to ignore people’s real life activities, and as a consequence, to render itself oblivious to its own complicity with the self-justifications of the ruling class. The problem was real enough, and it continues to be a problem to this day. Although Hegelian Idealism has been consigned to the scrap heap of historical ideas, as long as domination continues to exist, so will that tendency for academic theorising to function

---

brought into play at the same time because some of them are mutually exclusive. For example, ‘ideology’ cannot mean at one and the same time an ethically and politically neutral system of beliefs, *and* a belief system which serves the interests of dominant groups at the expense of the subordinated. Hence any use of the term requires that its meaning be confined to a limited range of all its possible meanings.

as one of the sites of justification for relations of ruling. It could even be argued that academe is peculiarly suited for this purpose, given its tendency to divorce itself from the real world, however characterised. But addressing that problem does not require any grand overarching theory of history. The problem can be addressed as and when it occurs, from a standpoint of opposition to those forms of domination which exist at the moment. There is no reason why a distinction between the ideological on the one hand, and the economic on the other, should be made in the first place, no reason, that is, outside the more arcane levels of disputation within (or with) Marxism. From the standpoint of a critique of domination, it is quite feasible to hold that relations of ruling are maintained *both* ideologically *and* economically (and politically and by force). The ownership and control of wealth is only one way in which relations of domination and subordination are maintained, and they are maintained most efficiently to the extent that their nature *as* domination, their operation at the expense of the subordinated, is hidden from those subjected to them. Domination proceeds most smoothly to the extent that the interests of those who rule are successfully purveyed as the interests of all.

Abercrombie et al. couch the issue in terms of what they call, citing Parsons, “the Hobbesian problem of order” (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1980: 1). Although the ‘base/superstructure’ provides a background for their argument, it does not occupy a central position. Instead, their argument focuses on the question of whether ‘societies cohere or collapse’ (as the authors put it in their opening sentence). But the issue is not primarily one of social cohesiveness or otherwise, certainly from a feminist standpoint, but also from the standpoint of those who have only their labour power to sell, or of those whose labour power is not even saleable. Society could conceivably be delightfully cohesive without violating the rights of anyone at all; and it can be violently unstable without advancing the cause of liberation one iota, as in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and Serbo-Croatia and central Africa in the 1990s. Whether ‘society’ coheres or collapses is not the issue. What is at issue is whether the interests of some prevail at the expense of the basic human rights of others.

These authors have another objection, however, to the ‘dominant ideology thesis’. They argue that it is not the case that the cohesiveness and stability of capitalist society depend on the ‘ideological incorporation’ of the working class into acceptance of the status quo. To the extent that there *is* something like a ‘dominant ideology’, they argue,

its function is limited to maintaining cohesiveness and unity among the ruling class; it has no function 'in the explanation of the coherence of a society as a whole' (p.3). The 'quiescence' of the working class, their failure to resist capitalist relations of domination, is sufficiently explained by the coerciveness of the 'political and economic control'. People are often well aware of the nature of class society and their position in it, but they do not have the power to do anything about it. The authors say that 'workers may accept the economic order of capitalism and its class-based social organisation at a factual level, as an enduring system'. But, they go on to say,

this factual acceptance need not involve any signs of normative acceptance or indoctrination. Habituation and a realistic appreciation of the strength of the existing order do not add up to any form of commitment, nor even to a decline in workers' awareness of alternative and more desirable systems ... Compulsion is most obviously founded in the structure of economic relations, which oblige people to behave in ways which support the status quo and to defer to the decisions of the powerful if they are to continue to work and to live' (pp.122, 154-5).

This is true enough as far as it goes, and it is important to keep pointing out that relations of ruling are maintained through coercion. But it is not an objection to a dominant ideology thesis. It can be acknowledged that it is not possible to fool all the people all the time, without abandoning the dominant ideology thesis. The authors ask: 'if the dominant class really does control the means of mental production, then how *do* deviant, oppositional and radical views emerge?' (p.54). The answer is that in fact they do emerge despite control by the dominant class. But this apparent contradiction is not sufficient in and of itself to falsify the hypothesis of a dominant ideology, since it is also possible to adduce evidence of systematic behaviour by people which militates against their own interests and upholds the meanings, values and structures of domination. For example, women marrying men they know to be violent,<sup>21</sup> women remaining 'faithful' to husbands and boyfriends convicted of the most horrendous crimes of violence against

---

21. The question of why women *stay* with violent men is an ideological one, as is the 'explanation' that they stay because they like being beaten. Both question and answer ignore the structural constraints of economic dependence and male possessiveness which marriage still imposes on women. It also ignores the fact that many of the women killed by the men they have been intimate with, are killed after they leave, that is, they are killed *because* they have left.

women,<sup>22</sup> women excusing and justifying the violence of the men they 'love', women writing 'love' letters to convicted rapists and mass murderers, can *only* be explained with reference to something like women's own embracing of the male supremacist ethic which requires that women subordinate themselves in the service of men, at whatever cost to themselves and other women. Such behaviour only makes sense on the assumption that such women, too, believe that what men want men get, no matter how horrendous the price paid by women.

A further problem concerns the authors' identifying of a sphere of existence which is outside ruling class ideology, a domain of personal life where people get on with the business of living uninfluenced by the world view of the rulers. 'We have established', they say, 'that the everyday discourse, epistemology, or way of life, of subordinate classes, is largely formed outside the control and domain of the dominant class and its culture' (p.189). But that is certainly not the case with women, whose 'everyday discourses' and 'ways of life' are precisely lived within the male domain which reaches into the deepest recesses of the mundane. 'The personal is political' means that relations of ruling penetrate (the metaphor is deliberate) the most intimate levels of the everyday, damaging bodies, distorting minds, breaking hearts and deforming the spirit. What Abercrombie et al. have 'established' is nothing more than a reassertion of the public/private distinction, an ideological distinction which feminism has challenged because it operates to the detriment of women.<sup>23</sup> It enables the maintenance of male power over women by keeping its more immediate manifestations out of the public realm of contestation and sanction, and by confining women to the private and the domestic where they have few rights and little or no public voice. The ideology of 'public' and 'private', however, is not espoused only by men, but also by women to the extent that they willingly embrace what operates against their own interests in, say, personal safety or economic independence. To say as much is not to hold women responsible for the oppressive situations they might find themselves in. Sometimes no one is responsible because there is nothing anyone could have done otherwise; sometimes the individual responsibility lies with the men who bash, rape, maim, kill or generally treat women with contempt. But the fact remains, as feminism has been at

---

22. A recent example: On the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* there appeared a photograph of Fred Many and his wife shopping. Many had just been released after serving a prison sentence for the rape and near murder of a fifteen-year-old girl. The wife had married him while he was still in prison.

23. For the grain of truth in Abercrombie et al.'s raising of this point, see above.

some pains to point out, there is no sphere of personal life which escapes relations of domination. Unless, of course, the reality of that domination is acknowledged and opposed.

Michèle Barrett also raised objections to any concept of ideology which implied that the subordinated participated in their own oppression:

To say that those who lack the means of ideological production are generally speaking thereby “subject” to the ruling class is to invoke a whole series of difficult issues around popular consciousness and popular culture. These have been raised in their most striking form by feminist work on cultural phenomena such as soap opera, royalty or romantic fiction, where the traditional notion of ideological “subjection” ... does scant justice to the passionate enthusiasm of many women for the products of which they are alleged to be victims’ (Barrett, 1991: 10).

But ‘passionate enthusiasm’ is the way ideology *must* operate if it is to operate at all. To assert that women get pleasure out of romantic fiction, say, is not to argue *against* its nature as ideological, but on the contrary, to acknowledge the way it works *as* ideology. That women find pleasure in soap operas, romantic novels or reading about the royal family, is not an objection to characterising these things as ideology. If ideology is to exist at all, it must have effects and be effective. The effects of ideology do not have to be absolute, nor its effectiveness total, for it to be identified as such. That women willingly embrace something is not a sufficient criterion for judging that it is therefore not ideological. Neither does it rule out the possibility of ambivalence, that the pleasure might exist alongside doubt or a critical attitude. The only criterion for judging whether or not something is ideological is whether or not it reinforces relations of ruling.

Many years ago, at the beginning of this ‘second wave’ of feminism, Shulamith Firestone exposed the ideology of ‘romantic love’ as a crucial mechanism for ensuring women’s subordination to men. ‘A book on radical feminism that did not deal with love’, she said, ‘would be a political failure. For love ... is the pivot of women’s oppression today’ (Firestone, 1981[1970]: 126). The problem with ‘romantic (heterosexual) love’ was the unequal power relationship between the sexes, the way

‘love’ was constituted at women’s expense. Through ‘love’, women were excluded from the public realm of culture and confined to personal life, so that women’s creativity, energy and emotional work could be used in the service of men. ‘(Male) culture was built on the love of women, and at their expense’, Firestone said, ‘for millennia [women] have done the work, and suffered the costs, of one-way emotional relationships the benefits of which went to men and to the work of men ... *(Male) culture was (and is) parasitical, feeding on the emotional strength of women without reciprocity*’ (p.127—her emphasis). The contradiction between men’s need for emotional nurturance from women on the one hand, and women’s utter irrelevance to anything men define as important on the other, tended to remain hidden from men. Men managed the contradiction by elevating one member of the subordinate class of women above all the rest in order to dignify her as a worthy recipient of his affections: ‘A man must idealize one woman over all the rest in order to justify his descent to a lower caste’ (p.131). Firestone felt that women tended to be more realistic: ‘in their precarious political situation, women can’t afford the luxury of spontaneous love. It is much too dangerous’, she said (p.139). While both sexes needed emotional security, women also had their economic security and sense of identity and personal self-worth at stake. Despite their more realistic appraisal, however, women could not resolve the contradiction. The most they could do was to ‘make the best of a bad situation’ (p.145). And for many women, even the realistic appraisal made no inroads on their desire. As one woman quoted by Firestone put it: “‘All men are selfish, brutal and inconsiderate—and I wish I could find one’” (p.145). However overstated the appraisal, the ambivalence is clear. This woman knows about male power and its manifestations in male behaviour. But she can see no alternative to living intimately with a man because that is what she wants. It is her chief desire in life, what she must have no matter what.

It could be argued that Firestone’s account is culturally specific, that it only applies in cultures where ‘romantic love’ has a meaning. And it is true that, to the extent that the economic coercion of women into marriage is close to absolute, when women’s very lives depend on getting married and they have little choice in the matter, an ideology like that of ‘romantic love’ would be less important as a means of securing women’s compliance. Nonetheless, even the most coercively controlled social environments require pacifying ideologies. Such constructs as ‘female chastity’ and ‘male honour’, ‘wifely duty’, ‘filial piety’, ‘maternal instinct’, etc., are also ways of managing women’s

consent to their subordination to men. Like the ideology of 'romantic love' they, too, channel women's desire and commitment in ways detrimental to women's well-being. At the same time, there is a sense in which they are merely a gloss on the actual structures of social power. Sometimes, even the most aware woman has no choice because she is not provided with alternatives.

Perhaps the most famous exponent of an anti-ideology thesis is Michel Foucault, who provided a neat summary of the main objections:

The notion of ideology appears to me difficult to make use of, for three reasons. The first is that, like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false. The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think, necessarily, to something of the order of a subject. Thirdly, ideology stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant, etc. For these three reasons, I think that this is a notion that cannot be used without circumspection (Foucault, 1980: 118).

But Foucault's objections are otiose, not surprisingly given his tendency to conflate 'power' with social relations in general: 'Power is co-extensive with the social body' (p.142), a tendency which he shares with many a recent social theorist (see, for example, my discussions of the work of Anthony Giddens above, and Judith Butler below). While much of what Foucault said about power is accurate, his account is limited by his inability to conceive of alternatives to structures of domination. It can be admitted that present historical forms of power do not operate only in terms of what he called the 'juridico-discursive' model, in terms of the law and sovereignty, of prohibition, punishment and coercion. But that does not mean that they never operate that way. It can also be admitted that relations of power are not simply imposed from the top down,

that ‘power is exercised from innumerable points’, that ‘relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations)’ (Foucault, 1985: 94). One can agree that ‘there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of [the social] network’, that ‘power is “always already there”, that one is never “outside” it, that there are no “margins” for those who break with the system to gambol in’ (Foucault, 1980: 142, 141). One can even agree that ‘there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between the rulers and the ruled at the root of power relations’ (Foucault, 1985: 94). That does not mean, however, that there is no opposition at all between rulers and ruled, that it is not possible to identify whose interests prevail and at whose expense. Neither does it mean that ‘power comes from below’ (as Foucault remarked in the same context), whatever *that* might mean. But although Foucault asserted that it is not the case ‘that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what’ (Foucault, 1980: 142), he offered no way out of ‘the trap’, for the simple reason that the only form of ‘power’ he could see was ‘power-as-domination’. In his later work, this became converted into the power of the dominators to choose between oppressive ways of behaving and magnanimity (Foucault, 1988). He had no concept of power as the ability and capacity to control the conditions of one’s own existence, and to make a difference in the world, at no one’s expense. He had no knowledge and experience of oppression, and no ethical and political standpoint from which to champion the interests of the oppressed and to identify the structures and agents of domination, his own disclaimers to the contrary notwithstanding. As a consequence, social relations for Foucault were nothing but a war of each against all, a constant battle for ascendancy at every level of human existence—‘We all fight against each other. And there is always within each of us something that fights something else’ (Foucault, 1980: 208)—mitigated only by moderation and self-restraint on the part of the powerful.

Nonetheless, he does clearly state the main objections to the concept of ideology, and as such his objections need to be addressed. To take his third point first: as I pointed out above, using the concept of ideology does not necessarily entail any commitment to a ‘base/superstructure’ model of society. Michèle Barrett also argues against this model, while at the same time holding that the concept of ideology remains useful, although she, too, stops short of acknowledging domination as the primary defining characteristic of a concept of ideology. She says that ‘ideology’ has traditionally meant ‘mystification



that serves class interests'. In that sense, she argues, it serves no purpose in the context of social movements not based on class, movements she variously lists as 'feminism, anti-racism, lesbian and gay rights, peace, etc.', and, quoting Laclau and Mouffe, 'struggles as diverse as "urban, ecological, anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional, feminist, anti-racist, ethnic, regional or that of sexual minorities"' (Barrett, 1991: 64, 70). But she feels that the term is still a useful one as long as it refers to the idea of 'mystification' in general, rather than being confined to class. With this broadening of the concept of ideology, any reference to a 'base' and 'superstructure' vanishes, along with its consequential entailment of economic determinism. But she discards too much. She appears to believe that discarding class relations as the central defining characteristic of 'ideology' means also discarding references to agents or interests across the board. 'In such a usage', she says, 'the term ideology is clearly a general term referring to mystification: it refers to a function or mechanism but is not tied to any particular agent or interest' (p.167). And yet in the same breath she adds that the concept of ideology she is proposing is intended to apply to 'other (non-class) forms of social power and domination'. But to abandon the concepts of 'agents and interests' is to abandon politics. If there are no 'agents', there are no perpetrators and beneficiaries of relations of domination, and no one to be oppressed, no one whose human agency is blocked by powerful vested interests. If there is no one who acts, there is nothing to be done. If 'domination' is defined in terms of the interests of some prevailing at the expense of the interests of others (a definition Barrett does not address, however), to delete any idea of interests is to abandon any idea of domination, and hence any possibility of challenging it. Defining 'ideology' in terms of 'mystification' in general is a common usage. But without any connotations of dominant interests, it can be used to dismiss claims made on behalf of the oppressed on the grounds that they are 'only ideological'. Nonetheless, it is clear that, pace Foucault, the term 'ideology' is not intrinsically tied to the idea of an 'economic base' outside ideology and which determines it.

Foucault's second point—that the concept of ideology necessarily implies 'something of the order of a subject'—is correct. But rather than being an objection to using the term, that implication is one which should be retained. Once again it is not surprising that Foucault viewed with disfavour the idea of 'something of the order of a subject', since he worked so assiduously at demolishing any such notion: 'One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis

which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework' (Foucault, 1980: 117). But while it is politically important to challenge the ideology of individualism, because it operates in the interests of domination by preventing the perception of common interests among the subordinated, unless there is some idea of what it is to be human there can be no politics and no morality. Accepting the need for 'something of the order of a subject' does not entail accepting the other connotations which Foucault appears to believe are inextricably tied in to the idea of the individual. To acknowledge the importance of a concept of 'the individual' does not entail conceiving of 'the individual ... as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike' (Foucault, 1980: 98). Neither does it entail 'reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history' (p.117). These connotations belong with the ideology of individualism. It is possible at one and the same time to acknowledge that 'the subject' is historically constituted, *and* that each of us is a locus of moral choice and responsibility. This may indeed not be any 'great Refusal' (Foucault, 1985: 96), although it must be collective and mutually recognised, simply because we are not isolated atoms (or mad). But to leave the account of 'the subject' where Foucault does, with the individual as 'one of [the] prime effects' of power-as-domination, as both constituted by power and its vehicle (Foucault, 1980: 98), is to leave us trapped in domination, with no choice except inert subjection, active compliance, or magnanimity on the part of the powerful. While there may not be any 'source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary' (Foucault, 1985: 96), it is possible to refuse complicity, not always or once and for all, but over and over again, and wherever it *is* possible. And those refusals, sometimes tentative, sometimes adamant, sometimes partial, sometimes absolute, sometimes negotiable, sometimes permanent, are made by individual human beings who live with the consequences. Hence, the notion of ideology does require 'something of the order of a subject', although not one existing outside any system of meaning at all, but one capable of actively choosing among alternatives to the extent that alternatives are available and recognisable. (For a further discussion of these issues, see the section on 'Individualism' below).

To come finally to Foucault's first point: that the use of the term 'ideology' necessarily stands in opposition to something identified as 'truth'.<sup>24</sup> In the sense in which I use the term, 'ideology' is not one special kind of discourse among others (using 'discourse' in the broadest sense to mean a system of meaning). Rather, it is, as Jorge Larrain says, 'a level of meaning which can be present in all kinds of discourses ... [and which] may well be absent' (Larrain, 1979: 130, 235n2). Hence, it is not the case that, as Althusser once asserted, we are always in ideology. What we are always 'in' are systems of meaning. Whether meanings are ideological or not depends on whether or not they are used in the service of domination. That cannot be decided from a position of neutrality. Domination can only be seen from a position which involves a willingness to see it. Without such a position, manifestations of domination can always be interpreted as something else, as isolated instances, exceptions, idiosyncrasies, personal pathologies or trivia, or even as something it is not—defining pain as pleasure, for example, or degradation as dignity, humiliation as pride, oppression as freedom.

Because ideological meanings can appear anywhere, there is no need to posit an alternative to ideology, a discourse of truth with which to counter lies, falsehoods and distortions, the usual contender for this status being science.<sup>25</sup> The distinction between what is ideological and what is not, is not always a distinction between falsehood and truth. Although questions of truth and falsity are not irrelevant in deciding what is ideological and what is not, for a number of reasons they are not the same question. In the first place, given that relations of domination constitute the status quo, ideological beliefs are often true (at least in the referential sense) rather than false. Whether or not any particular ideological practice is true or false, depends on the standpoint from which it is viewed. From the standpoint of immersion in the male supremacist status quo, it is true, for example, that the only form of adult intimacy available to women is a sexual relation with a man, that women's lives revolve around 'getting and keeping a man'. Women (and men) believe it, act upon it, make choices based upon it, run their lives according to it. From a feminist standpoint, it is a lie. It involves a calculated falsehood

---

24. Or 'scientificity'. While Foucault's comment is an accurate representation of the way the ideology debate has proceeded within Marxism, from the writings of Marx and Engels to those of Louis Althusser, there is also a fairly long tradition of critique of the positivist notion which equates 'science' with 'truth'. (For example, see: Habermas, 1971[1968]). This is not the place, however, to go into a detailed discussion of what Habermas called 'scientism', i.e. 'science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as *one* form of possible knowledge, but must rather identify knowledge with science' (p.4—emphasis in the original).

25. For a discussion of the science versus ideology debates, see: Larrain, 1979.

which suppresses consciousness of alternatives, which obliterates the knowledge that women can also be intimate with women, as friends, lovers and kin, with children as human beings rather than as burdens or jailers, with men simply as friends, and that women can live happy and fulfilled lives without sexual relationships with men.

In the second place, ideology is rarely stated in the form of verifiable assertions. Even when it is, it is normally not verifiable by ordinary individuals going about their daily lives, and neither is it intended to be. For example, the recent rash of accusations of ‘false memory syndrome’ can supposedly in principle be verified. It would seem as though it were possible to establish whether women who insist that they were sexually abused as children actually were abused, or whether they imagined it. But whether any particular accusation is true or not is not the issue. The positing of a so-called ‘syndrome’ constructs the terms of the debate so that all those who name childhood sexual abuse are automatically presumed to lie unless they can prove otherwise. They are assumed guilty until proven innocent. It facilitates blaming the victims by requiring of them an extra burden of proof, and by locating the problem with the victims rather than the aggressors.<sup>26</sup> What the construction of this ‘syndrome’ is saying is that childhood sexual abuse did not happen, at least in a proportion of cases. And because it offers no way of deciding between the genuine cases and the ‘imagined’ ones, what is implied is that the sexual abuse of children does not happen at all. Feminist suspicion is aroused by the timeliness of this new phenomenon of ‘false memory syndrome’. It follows too immediately on the feminist exposure of the systematic nature and widespread incidence of men’s sexual abuse of children, especially female children. It is too conveniently in line with male supremacist interests in denying the reality and the extent of one of the more extreme manifestations of phallocratic cruelty. Given that there is a major social problem of men’s sexual abuse of children, a problem for which there is plenty of evidence at the time it occurs so that there is no question of memory involved, ‘false’ or otherwise, it is more than likely that accusations of ‘false memory syndrome’ are nothing but male supremacist ideology masquerading as ‘fact’.

But by and large, ideology is not stated in testable form. The belief that women need men for fulfilment, for example, is conveyed in a variety of ways—through the narratives of romantic novels, advice in women’s magazines, the stereotyping as

---

26. Thanks to Jocelyn Pixley for helping me clarify this issue.

pathetic or wicked of women unattached to men, the absence of positive depictions of women living with women or living alone and liking it. Mechanisms like these construct an ambience which colours ideas of women-without-men with negative feelings of distaste, disgust, disapproval, contempt, and ideas of women-with-men with positive feelings of pleasure and desire. Since the feelings are real, it is futile to engage in debates about whether or not it is true that women cannot live fully human lives without men. The feminist question is to what extent do relations between women and men operate at women's expense, at the expense of women's rights, autonomy, self-esteem, and human dignity. This is a question any woman can ask. Although only she can answer it, because the life involved is her own, it remains a feminist question because it is based on an awareness that male domination is a reality.

Or to take another example: the generalised belief that only men are 'human' is never stated in these terms. Indeed, to say it aloud is already to undermine its efficacy because it can only operate as long as it remains hidden. Saying outright that male supremacist conditions allot a 'human' status only to men, exposes the contradiction between the ideology and the fact that women are human too. Instead of being openly acknowledged, belief in the male as the 'human' norm shows itself in a myriad of disparate contexts, the coherence and consistency of which only appear from a feminist standpoint. It frequently operates through what might be called the phenomenon of female 'non-existence'. There are those occasions of everyday social life where women are habitually talked over and ignored, where matters of interest to women are either never raised or are dropped as quickly as possible, where men talk to each other as though there were no women present, where at best women are listened to briefly while the message is conveyed that their right to speaking-time is strictly limited. There are the literary productions of famous men which contain no female characters and that fact is never remarked upon. There are the pages of daily newspapers where the doings of men are writ large and women hardly ever appear.

The contradiction between the ideological belief that only men are 'human' and women are not, on the one hand, and the actual existence of women on the other, is not just a matter of logic. The belief that women are not quite, or not at all, 'human' gives men permission to manage the contradiction through violence against women. Men bash women because they can, because women have no redress, little or no access to the

means for protecting themselves or asserting their human rights. Individual incidents of exceptional violence will usually be overtly deplored. But they will also be covertly condoned by being trivialised, turned into jokes or argued away. There are a variety of ideological tactics for hiding the systematic nature of violence against women, for denying the function it serves in keeping women subordinate to men by demonstrating to women that their right to safety and security of person can be withdrawn at any time without warning.

Sometimes the violence is denied outright. The ‘false memory syndrome’ accusation is one example of this outright denial. What it is saying is that no sexual abuse occurred; the woman is simply the mouthpiece for ideas planted by her therapist. But child sexual abuse can be denied even when the question of recovered memories is not at issue. It is said that the child’s evidence is not reliable, that she’s too young to know what she is saying. It is said that the child was ‘seductive’ and ‘flirtatious’.<sup>27</sup> It is said that it is something that any man might do, that it is not possible to tell the difference between sexual abuse and affection. The rape of adult women is also denied in a number of ways. Although rape is universally deplored, it is extraordinarily difficult to prove that it occurred. It is said that it wasn’t rape because she wasn’t injured, or because she’s married to him, or because she’s a prostitute and prostitutes can’t be raped because that’s what they’re there for, or because rape is physically impossible, or because he thought she was consenting. Sometimes the violence is denied by blaming the victim. It is said that she ‘asked for it’, that she deserved to be harassed, raped, bashed, even murdered. It is said that she nagged him, provoked him, criticised him and undermined his masculinity. It is said that she is a whore, a slut, or any one or more of a number of nasty names women are called. It is said that she dressed invitingly, walked on the streets or caught a train at night, or accepted a lift home. It is said that she didn’t say ‘no’, or didn’t say ‘no’ often enough or loudly enough, or said ‘no’ and meant ‘yes’, and anyway, she didn’t struggle so how was he to know she didn’t want it. Sometimes the denial takes the form of excusing the offender. It is said that he was drunk and didn’t know what he was doing. It is said that he had a hard life, that his mother didn’t love him, that his wife refused to have sex with him. More generally, the perennial and systematic male violence against females is explained away by accounting for it in

---

27. For a brilliant critique of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* as an apologia for child sexual abuse, See: Jeffreys, 1990: 76-90.

terms of isolated, unconnected (and regrettable) incidents, perpetrated by admittedly nasty individuals, who could be of either sex but just happen to be male on each particular occasion.

It is certainly true that men who rape, bash, harass, violate, degrade or murder are grossly deficient human beings, whether their violence is directed against women and children, or against other 'inferior' males, e.g. homosexual men or Aboriginal men, or against each other in defence of slights to their masculinity. But that deficiency is not just a personal failing (although it is also that too, and they can be held responsible for their actions). Men's violence is a product of a phallocratic reality which constructs masculinity as something which has to be defended at someone else's expense. That someone else is always initially a woman, whom the burgeoning masculine persona must come to hold in contempt because she does not possess a penis, the only symbol of 'human' status allowed under conditions of male supremacy. Violent and arrogant males are those who have learned that lesson only too well, who have managed to continue denying the evident humanity of women, and whose own sense of 'humanity' extends no further than their genitals. The violence and arrogance express a subliminal awareness of the paltriness of the only justification they know for their own existence. The consequence for women is a permanent reign of terror, subdued most of the time, but always there curtailing our freedom of movement and action.

When the existence of women is acknowledged, it is interpreted in terms favourable to men. To be a woman under male supremacist conditions means to be the helpmeet and nurturer of males. To be a woman is not to exist in her own right. If she settles for her conventional role, she is confined to the constricted sphere of domesticity, financially deprived, emotionally and economically exploited, isolated from other women, restricted by the ever-present needs of the children, subjected to the whims of an individual man, her quality of life dependent on whether or not he is good to her, on his decisions, not hers. She may, by luck or good management, have chosen a good man who 'doesn't beat her', who is a 'good provider', who 'helps' her with the children and the housework (when he has the time), and who loves her (when he has the time). But even the best of husbands can only stand helplessly by if she disintegrates under the strain of providing for everyone's needs while no one, including herself, considers her own. When it is love which has sprung the trap of a self-abnegated life which is all

responsibilities and no rights, there are no acceptable alternatives. This does not mean that women are helpless victims of a fate over which they have no control. Women have developed countless stratagems for retrieving some sense of dignity and self-respect, or alternatively some modicum of power and domination, despite the limited domain within which they are allowed to operate. And caring for and relating intimately to children is a worthwhile and dignified project in itself, despite the low valuation it is given in phallocratic reality. What it means is that women's existence under conditions of male supremacy is expected to be confined to servicing men and children, preferably male.<sup>28</sup>

If she 'works', i.e. if she is paid for what she does, she will be unlikely to earn a living wage, because she 'works' (for pay) part-time, at home, intermittently, or in a 'feminised' industry. The most this still current male supremacist social order can do for women is to allow a small number into positions in the male hierarchy, as long as they can arrange their lives to resemble men as closely as possible. If she is one of the few women who have 'made it in a man's world', she will have a sufficient income which is wholly at her own disposal. But she will have to be at least twice as good at what she does as any equivalent male, and she will have to keep proving that she is. She will also have to keep her balance on the fine line between demonstrating her own competence on the one hand, and refraining from doing anything to threaten male egos on the other, an impossible balance to maintain since men threatened by female competence are everywhere and their reactions are vicious and demoralising. She will also find herself isolated from other women, surrounded by men, successful on their terms or not at all. She may even strive for a kind of 'super-masculinity' whereby she acts even more ruthlessly than men do (Margaret Thatcher being one famous example), doing the phalocrats' dirty work for them with single-minded devotion, unscrupulously sweeping aside any humanitarian considerations. For all these reasons, women's equality with men in the 'public' sphere is a dubious feminist aim, until or unless women take over in sufficient numbers to support each other and change it beyond recognition.

For the purposes of feminist politics, whether any particular ideological pronouncement is true or false, is not the issue. What a feminist politics has to decide is whether the

---

28. It is a fascinating exercise to ask oneself what is the sex of the 'children' portrayed in the public media—films, television, newspapers, advertisements, novels. They are almost invariably male, especially if the child is active and adventurous.



meanings which structure people's lives reinforce relations of ruling by reinforcing the interests of the dominators and suppressing the interests of the subordinated, whether meanings can be used to challenge or undermine domination, or whether they have to be changed or discarded altogether. These are decisions which cannot be made once and for all, but which will continue to need to be made as long as male supremacy lasts. But such decisions cannot even be made unless the existence of male domination is seen in the first place.

***Pleasure and Desire: 'Enabling' Male Domination***

Above all, ideology is intended to be made true. One of the chief ways in which consent to oppression is managed is through the cultivation of desire, the constitution of subjects who embrace relations of domination because they want to, because it is pleasurable to do so. Pleasure and desire 'enable' the continuation of the social conditions of male supremacy. Men must be made to desire to dominate and women to desire to be dominated. This cannot be left to chance or nature, but must be constantly reinforced and endlessly reiterated.

The medium which expresses male supremacist desire most clearly, without apology, equivocation or adornment, is pornography. In what follows, I locate the pornographic imagination with men because what I am criticising is the ideological construction of sex around the penis. As such, pornography and its practices operate in the interests of men in complicity with the belief that their 'humanity' depends on penis-possession, and at the expense of a human status for women outside male definition and control. But although the primary motivating force and *raison d'être* of pornography is the eroticising of men's domination of women, the pleasures and desires of domination are restricted neither to the male psyche nor to heterosexuality. The purpose of ideology is to purvey the interests of the dominators as the interests of all, and it serves its purpose to the extent that anyone can be complicit with the pornographic imagination. The meanings and values of domination, while they originate in the phallic mandate that women service the penis, can be, and are, generalised to any human interaction whatsoever. Women can be complicit with the ideology of pornography to the extent that they accept a second-rate 'human' status for themselves and eroticise their own subordination. This is exemplified in conventional heterosexual relations where women believe that they cannot live without a man, that they are empty and unfulfilled unless

they are in a relationship with a man, and who structure their lives around that desire. Alternatively, women can also be complicit to the extent that they strive to be like men, finding value only in men, holding women in contempt, and accepting an erotics of domination as their own desire. The latter is exemplified in lesbian sadomasochism. Although in lesbian relationships there is no actual penis present, sadomasochism is phallic desire. Not only are sadomasochistic practices the acting out of desire for domination and subordination, the penis is frequently present in effigy, as a dildo (Jeffreys, 1993: 28-30). Gay male sexual practices, too, can be complicit with phallic desire, even though there are no women present, to the extent that those practices are sadomasochistic; and again, women are frequently present in effigy, as 'drag'. Both lesbian and gay male relationships can mimic heterosexuality. Nonetheless, although the ideology of pornography reaches beyond the male psyche and the heterosexual context, I have confined it to that context in order to show the central significance of pornography most clearly and succinctly.

The central symbol structuring male supremacist desire is the penis-as-phallus.<sup>29</sup> As I have argued elsewhere (Thompson, 1991: 14-25), the chief meaning and value of male supremacist conditions is that penis-possession stands for 'human' status. Those who have penises are automatically 'human'; those who do not, are not, although that 'lack' can always be contested and frequently is. As Andrea Dworkin says: 'the penis is the man; the man is human; the penis signifies humanity' (Dworkin, 1981: 53-4). This is, she says, 'the central male reality in psyche and in culture'. This insight is confirmed, not surprisingly, by many a phallocratic apologist. Take Norman Mailer, for example, whose glorification of the phallic entwining of sex with the rape, brutalising and murder of women was exposed by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*. In *The Prisoner of Sex* he proudly asserts that 'a firm erection on a delicate fellow [is] the adventurous juncture of

---

29. Because the following discussion focuses on those social conditions under which the penis *is* the phallus, i.e. the chief value structuring the social conditions of phallocratic reality, I use the two terms, 'penis' and 'phallus', interchangeably. Used in this sense, 'the penis' is not simply 'anatomy'. I am not referring to it as some kind of 'in itself' biological organ, since such a usage (to the extent that it makes any sense at all) would mean that phallic domination is inevitable and unchangeable. Rather, what I am referring to is the *meaning* the penis carries under male supremacist conditions, a meaning which can be changed without doing any damage to the organ in itself. As should already be obvious, I believe not only that the penis *can* be severed from its role as primary symbol of domination, but also that that separation must be a present possibility (rather than a future hope), otherwise it would be inconceivable. But although it is already possible to conceive of the penis as just another bodily organ, possible on the part of both sexes although more possible for women because they have less at stake in the hyper-valuation of the penis and more to gain by reducing its significance, there is a great deal of feminist work still to be done before the penis-as-phallus is abolished and a genuinely human status becomes available to all.

ego and courage' (Mailer, 1971: 45). For Mailer, this is a good thing. He complains that the feminist 'female writers', whose work he has read for the purposes of his own book, lack 'comprehension' of this firm and delicate fact. For Mailer, as a leading apologist for phallocratic conditions, the penis is glorious, the epitome of courage when it is in good working order, the source of all that a man is and what he knows himself to be. Andrea Dworkin calls this a 'reductio ad absurdum', a diminution of the wealth of human possibilities to 'one piece of flesh a few inches long'. As Dworkin herself demonstrates in detail, however, it is an absurdity which is nonetheless not absurd in its consequences since it requires both sexes in thrall to the phallic imperative.

Because the penis is the central symbol of 'human' status under conditions of male supremacy, the chief pleasures and desires of those conditions centre around the penis. Because the penis means sex, the chief pleasures and desires of male supremacist conditions are those of sex.<sup>30</sup> The ideology of 'the natural' operates to keep sex out of the domain of the moral and the political, to render it beyond questioning and debate (unless it goes too far, in which case its excesses are located with isolated pathological individual men, or blamed on women). Under the ideological imperative of penis-possession, sex is the last bastion of the natural and men are its bearers. Although for most purposes male supremacist ideology equates women with nature, because both must be dominated by men, because both are resources to be mined to fuel male power, within the ideology of phallic sexuality, it is men who are entirely natural. That ungovernable 'male sex drive' must be allowed to operate at any cost because it is nature, only nature and nothing but nature. It is men's nature, therefore it is 'human' nature. It is beyond investigation, beyond political and moral critique. It exists and the lives of everyone must be structured around it. The problems resulting from its unchecked impetus—rape, prostitution, world over-population, enforced pregnancy, for example—can only be managed (usually by holding women responsible) not abolished, because the penis must never be hampered in its progress. Men cannot help themselves because the penis has a life of its own and is not subject to the conscious will. What the penis obeys is nature, its desire and activity a direct and automatic result of the effect of hormonal secretions on the male body. Hormones are natural, penile activity is caused by hormones, male sexual activity is governed by the rule of nature.

---

30. This has been noted by a number of radical feminist theorists, among whom are Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Sheila Jeffreys.

From a feminist standpoint, however, this is nothing but male supremacist ideology. Far from being 'natural', phallic sexuality is a moral and political activity. Men do have a choice and they can be held to account when they exercise their freedom to choose at women's expense. Men's sexual behaviour is not caused by hormonal dictates. It is because the penis serves the ideological function of symbolising 'human' status that it is so heavily charged with erotic energy, and not because it is driven by testosterone. Men must keep using it because they need to keep proving that they exist, that their 'humanity' is inextricably entwined with penis-possession; women must be constantly used by it to prove that men exist, that the sum total of a man is his penis. Because there is no humanity beyond the penis, what the penis can do, it ought to do. Anything and everything must be subordinated to penile activity if men are to be what phallic ideology requires them to be. Although there are penalties and sanctions against the worst excesses of the penis, ranging from disapproval to imprisonment, the culture of male supremacy still gives permission for those excesses. There are prison sentences for rape, the murder of women, incest, for example, but there is also a plethora of excuses provided to demonstrate nothing happened, or nothing of any importance.

Pornography is the ideology of male supremacist masculine desire writ large and shameless. It is the clearest, most unequivocal expression of male supremacist ideology in existence. As Sheila Jeffreys has said:

Pornography made it clear that what constituted sex under male supremacy was precisely the eroticised subordination of women. Inequality was sexy and the sexiness of this inequality was the grease that oiled the machinery of male supremacy. The sexiness of male supremacy ... was the unacknowledged motor force of male supremacy. Through sexual fantasy men were able to reinforce the sense of their power and of women's inferiority daily and be rewarded for every thought and image of women subordinated with sexual pleasure; a pleasure acknowledged to be the most valuable form of pleasure in male-supremacist culture (Jeffreys, 1990: 252-3).

Pornography is the ideology which reinforces the phallic desire of men who already want it because they seek it out and pay for it. It depicts the worst that men can do to women and encourages them to do it. It tells men they have a right to do whatever they

want to do with their penises. It tells them that women are infinitely available to men, that they are endlessly compliant, that they are enamoured of the penis and enchanted with what it can do, that they will take anything, anything at all, and beg for more. It says that women are there for men to fuck, that that is the sole reason for female existence. It says that women are nothing but things, a collection of fetishised body parts, breasts, buttocks, hair, faces and legs arrayed for male delectation, orifices serving as receptacles for the penis. Because it portrays women as objects, it gives men permission to harm women. It tells them that women are not human, that they do not suffer whatever is done to them. It tells men that they can hurt women because it is already being done and no one is complaining, including the women portrayed. Pornography is the theory; sexual violence, rape, prostitution and compulsory heterosexuality are the practices. This does not mean that pornography 'causes' male sexual violence, that it is separate from sexual violence and prior to it. Male sexual violence is not 'caused' by anything. To frame it in such a way is to be complicit with the ideological belief that male sexuality is 'natural'. Rather, male sexual violence is a moral evil for which the men who do it are responsible and about which they have choices. Pornography is an apologia for male sexual violence. It provides it with meaning, gives men permission for it, and deadens male ethical sensibilities.

The misogynist social implications of pornography, however, are still largely hidden from women, 'decensorship' (Jeffreys, 1990) notwithstanding. Although some of its less blatant icons appear in public media, especially advertising which cynically evokes desires already in place, the worst productions of the pornographic imagination are still closeted in 'adult' bookstores, video shops and movie houses. Although men bring it home, they do so as individuals, and hence its systematic nature is disguised. It is for this reason that the struggle against pornography has come to occupy such a central position in the radical feminist critique of male supremacist relations of power. Radical feminist campaigns against pornography are intended to tell women how men are willingly being trained to view them. As Andrea Dworkin said:

Women did not know ... I decided that I wanted women to see what I saw. This may be the most ruthless choice I have ever made. But ... it was the only choice that enables me to triumph over my subject by showing it, remaking it, turning it into something that we define and

use rather than letting it remain something that defines and uses us

(Dworkin, 1981: 304).<sup>31</sup>

From the standpoint of male supremacist ideology, the meaning of pornography is that it is only fantasy, nothing but images and text used by individuals for their own personal private satisfaction, and the business of nobody but the isolated individual using it. In a backlash to the feminist challenge, it has also come to mean 'free speech', both of those who produce it and those who consume it. From a feminist standpoint, however, it is very real activity indeed. It is real for the women who are used in its production; it is real for the women who are used by the men it trains; it is real for the men it teaches; and it is real when they apply what they have learned to themselves and in their relations with others. From a feminist standpoint pornography means women's oppression. It obliterates women's humanity by portraying them as nothing but objects for the gratification of the penis. Those whose speech is 'free' are those who validate and reinforce relations of domination and subordination. Those who protest against domination, those who expose domination *as* domination, are not only not free to speak and be heard, they are permitted no right of reply and no redress for the harm caused.

What is valued by the ideology of pornography are the values of sadomasochism. These values are obvious, they cannot be hidden. They are managed and purveyed by being interpreted as positive goods, as pleasures to be enjoyed, as the gratification of the needs of desiring individuals who have a 'right' to act on their desires, a 'right' to their own personal, private satisfactions, a 'right' to do anything and everything to avoid sexual frustration. That sadomasochism is the eroticisation of domination and subordination is not denied by the ideology of pornography. But instead of being rejected as a moral evil, it is validated and glorified as delightful and beneficial, as innocent fun and pure enjoyment. Humiliation and degradation, violence, physical pain and mutilation, even death, the use on people of chains, whips, bonds, weapons, the torture of human bodies, are all valued as pleasure, only pleasure and nothing but pleasure.

The morality espoused by the pornographic imagination is explicitly to transgress the morality of human dignity. As such it requires fetishism, what feminism has called

---

31. Unfortunately sometimes women do not want to know. For a critique of writings by self-styled feminists, either defending pornography outright as something women ought to want too, or equivocating on the issue, see: Thompson, 1991. For a similar critique, see: Jeffreys, 1990: 263-86; and in a lesbian context, see: Jeffreys, 1993.

'objectification'. Fetishism is the phallic desire which depends on an equation between human beings and things for its gratification. In the classic, psychoanalytic case, an object—an article of clothing, a part of the body—is substituted for a person. The sexual urge is focused on the object, and sexual gratification is impossible without it. In Freud's account, the fetish symbolised the penis: 'we may say that the normal prototype of fetishes is a man's penis' (Freud, 1927: 357). The fetish was a penis-substitute for men who could not have sex with women without feeling threatened with castration. According to Freud, the sight of the female genitals aroused castration anxiety in these men because females lacked penises. The fetish stood in for the absent female penis, and allowed these men to engage in heterosexual sex without fear that they might lose their penises. The price they paid (although Freud did not mention this) was an inability to relate to women as human beings. Although a woman must *be* a human being if the lack of a penis is so threatening, and hence although male castration anxiety is an acknowledgment that to be female is to be human too, the logic of male supremacy requires that the anxiety be managed by denying that women are human. Fetishism is a way of managing the contradiction between women as human beings, and women's lack of the symbol of 'human' status, i.e. the penis. It is both a recognition of women's humanness and a denial of it. The fetish manages the contradiction between women as human beings and their non-humanity required by phallocratic conditions, by deflecting male sexual desire towards objects.

Freud's fetishist coped with women's humanness by avoiding it, by erecting the barrier of the fetish between himself and importunate female humanity. Pornography turns women themselves into objects. If women are nothing but objects, their lacking penises does not matter because they are 'not human beings' anyway. They can be used and re-used endlessly without arousing male castration anxiety, because there is no non-phallic humanity there to elicit it. Within the pornographic scenario, both sexes are fetishised. Men are nothing but their penises, women are nothing but objects to be used in its service. But because men are the penis-bearers, everything is permitted to them as long as it contributes to the gratification of the penis; because women are not penis-bearers, nothing is permitted to them unless it contributes to the gratification of the penis. Since women are only things, they can be used as a means towards the end of sexual gratification of the penis. That end has an absolute and essential priority to which everything must be subordinated. As things, the human beings used in the pornographic

scenario have no rights. They exist simply as objects to be manipulated in the service of pornography's aim. The rights of human beings to be treated with respect, to be recognised as unique ends in themselves, to live free from coercion and harm, to engage in their own freely chosen projects, are all violated by the main motivating force of pornography, the gratification of the penis.

Within the terms of the pornographic imagination and under male supremacist conditions, sex is a male prerogative. Men want it, will fight for it, defend it at any cost, pay any price for it. This is not just a metaphor. Men do in fact pay money for sex. Prostitution exists. Male supremacist propaganda would have us believe that it has always existed. It is 'the world's oldest profession'. If it has always existed, it must serve an ineradicable male need. It must be a necessity, regrettable perhaps, but inevitable because male sexuality is a 'natural need' like hunger or thirst or sleep. Prostitution cannot be abolished because it is 'human' nature. But if the existence of prostitution is questioned from a feminist standpoint, it becomes a very bizarre thing indeed. From a feminist standpoint, prostitution exposes something very strange about male sexuality. Its sole reason for existence is so that men can pay money to have their penises stimulated to ejaculation by strangers whom they hold in contempt. These strangers are usually women, sometimes feminised males, and sometimes children of either sex. Prostitution involves human relationships which consist of nothing but penises stimulated to orgasm. It exists for men who need another human being to do the stimulating, but the other human being must then be fetishised into something less than human. Although the other human being is nothing but an object to stimulate the penis, not just any object will do. The object must be a human being because only a human being can recognise the paying customer as a penis-bearer, although the human being must be an object because she is there only to stimulate the penis. She has no desires, needs, feelings, thoughts or life of her own, or none that he is interested in or cares about.

Although the only reason for the existence of prostitution is to service male sexual desire, prostitution is, bizarrely, blamed on women. The persistent challenge which the humanity of the women poses to the continued existence of prostitution, is managed by holding women responsible for it. The dictionary definition of prostitution provides a telling example of how domination operates through the control of meaning. The



Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'prostitution' in the following terms: '1. Of women: The offering of the body to indiscriminate lewdness for hire (esp. as a practice or institution)'. In a figurative sense it means: '2. Devotion to an unworthy use; degradation, debasement, corruption'. The definition does not mention men at all, despite the glaringly obvious fact that serving male sexual 'needs' is the only reason the institution of prostitution exists. The 'lewdness' belongs with the men who require women offering their bodies for hire. It would not be possible for women to do the 'offering' in the first place unless men demanded it. And yet that crucial defining characteristic of prostitution is absent from the dictionary definition. Thus does the OED collude with the blaming of women for a corruption which actually belongs with men.

Concerned attempts to abolish prostitution are all directed towards women. It is the women who are arrested, fined, gaoled, confined to certain areas and excluded from others. It is the women who are bashed, raped, murdered, who are held in contempt, who carry the burden of opprobrium and who are visited with the effects of the disgust felt by 'decent citizens'. The blame for the disreputableness of prostitution is laid on the women who solicit ('prostitutes'), rather than on the men who maintain prostitution through their patronage and their desire (and for whom there is no name). The moral disgrace of prostitution is located with women, rather than with the men who continue to use female human beings as things, whose obsession with their penises and what they can do overrides any ethical considerations whatsoever. If prostitution is to be abolished, it is men who will have to change because it is male desire which maintains it, not female desire. What women want is sufficient income to live in comfort and dignity. And yet the disrepute of 'prostitutes' is intrinsically connected to the penis. Women who are 'prostitutes' are women who are used by the penis. If it is being used by the penis which brings women in to disrepute, then the negative values of degradation, debasement and corruption belong with the penis. If it is the penis which disgraces women, then it is the penis which is the original disgrace. Thus does male supremacy expose itself for those with the will to see. The same connection between disgrace and the penis can be seen in the social construct of virginity. To the extent that loss of virginity brings shame upon a woman, it is the penis which has brought it. The disrepute which is culturally located with 'whores', 'loose women' (etc., endlessly) is actually a moral lack in men projected, in a strict psychoanalytic sense, onto women.

As the reverse of the morality of human dignity, the chief value espoused by the ideology of pornography is contempt. Used in this sense, the term ‘contempt’ does not refer only to a personal emotion belonging to individuals. It must be that too if populations are to consent to relations of domination. Social values operate as psychic mechanisms as long as people embrace them—by accepting them as their own motivations, by referring to them as their own reasons for acting, by defending them when they are threatened, by ignoring or not seeing alternatives—and to the extent that people refuse to comply, those mechanisms fail to operate. But contempt is more importantly a social value which ensures the making of meaningful, systematic distinctions between categories of individuals. As a hierarchically ordered social environment, where some people are structurally defined as less worthy than others of access to the means for ensuring even the most basic level of human dignity, male supremacy is a culture of contempt.

Axel Honneth makes much the same point, when he argues from the standpoint of what he refers to as ‘the lower social classes’, that what motivates liberation movements are ‘feelings of social disrespect’ (Honneth, 1994). Honneth argues that social injustice is not experienced by people (‘human subjects’) as ‘distorted communication’, as restrictions on ‘linguistic competence’, as Jürgen Habermas and other critical theorists have argued. Instead, what motivates people to resist relations of domination are violations of ‘identity claims acquired in socialization’. Honneth says:

the social protests of the lower classes are not motivationally guided by positively formulated moral principles, but by the violation of intuitive notions of justice; and the normative core of such notions of justice is continuously constituted by expectations connected to respect for one’s own dignity, honor, or integrity. ... the normative presupposition of all communicative action is to be seen in the acquisition of social recognition: Subjects encounter each other within the parameters of the reciprocal expectation that they receive recognition as moral persons and for their social achievements (Honneth, 1994: 262).<sup>32</sup>

---

32. Thanks to Jocelyn Pixley for drawing my attention to Honneth’s work.

Within the parameters of male supremacy, under conditions where only men are 'human', social recognition of women as human subjects in their own right is lacking. Pornography and prostitution express and constitute that lack clearly and unequivocally. By defining women as nothing but things to be used in the service of the penis, they reinforce and maintain women's lack of social recognition. They function in accordance with the values of compulsory, i.e. normal, heterosexuality to keep women 'in their place' in the minds of men.

### ***The Ideology of Individualism: Disguising Male Domination***

An ideology of desire is also an ideology of individualism. If the interests of the ruling class are to be presented as the interests of all, their systematic nature as domination must be disguised. Where better to hide the dominating nature of relations of ruling than in the depths of the individual psyche? If domination is desired, it cannot be challenged and opposed. If it constitutes the very roots of personal identity, it cannot be seen as systematic. If it operates by means of feelings and emotions, wants and needs, it belongs in the realm of private satisfaction, not public politics. If domination is fragmented and dispersed among individuals, it cannot provide the basis for common interests among the oppressed.

The ideology of individualism depicts 'humanity' as a set of isolated selves, floating freely in a space which is 'social' only to the extent that there are many selves. Each self is detached from every other, and contains within itself all that is necessary for identification as 'human'. Desires, needs, interests, beliefs, actions, feelings, attitudes and behaviours, are perceived as personal properties intrinsic to each individual, and as arising fully formed within each individual psyche. The desires, etc., of any one individual can come into conflict or competition with any other, or can provide a reason for co-operation. But social interaction happens only after those desires, etc., have been identified, after they have been located as the inherent property of an individual person.

In contrast, a feminist politics needs to be able to see that male domination is a social system of ideological meanings and values which certainly influence the hearts and minds of individuals, but which are not co-extensive with them. Although that influence is not monolithic and inevitable, it is all the more inexorable to the extent that those meanings are perceived as essential attributes of individuals, rather than as ideological

requirements of relations of ruling. If relations of domination and subordination are interpreted as nothing but properties of individuals, they cannot be seen as relations of ruling at all. They become simply a matter of preferences and choices engaged in by discrete individuals who have no responsibilities beyond their own immediate pleasures and satisfactions. In this libertarian discourse, politics vanishes. If only individuals exist, political critique can only be seen as personal insult or annihilation of the self, and disagreement becomes assertion of the self against threatening and hostile others. 'Freedom' is reduced to the absence of constraint, either on the part of the self or of others. The damage done to self and others by relations of ruling is either not addressed, or is purveyed as a positive good emanating from within desiring individuals.

The clearest examples of this kind of unthinking commitment to the ideology of the atomised individual can be found in the libertarian defence of 'sex radicals', 'sexual outlaws' or 'erotic dissidents'. In Gayle Rubin's paper, 'Thinking Sex' (Rubin, 1984), this defence is couched in terms of an account constructed around a set of unjustly treated individuals—'paedophiles', 'fetishists', 'sodomasochists', etc.—who just happen to have a certain kind of intrinsic sexual desire which structures and informs their personal identity and makes them the kinds of individuals they are. As individuals with particular sexual needs, they have a 'right' to the expression of their sexual desire, a 'right' which they are unfairly prevented from exercising by moralistic prohibitions and sanctions which Rubin perceives as emanating both from the dominant heterosexual society and from feminism. Within the terms of Rubin's account, these sexual desires are self-evidently not socially constructed, because they are treated with social disapproval and moral outrage. Rubin assumes without question that these desiring individuals cannot possibly be socially constituted because they are despised and rejected. They are subjected to forms of social control only after they are recognised as the kinds of individuals they are. 'Society' only arrives on the scene once these individuals have been recognised for what they are, and the best thing 'society' can do is to leave them alone to exercise their individual rights and freedoms in peace and in private. It is no accident that Rubin's defence is couched in wholly individualistic terms, in terms of 'fetishists' rather than fetishism, 'sodomasochists' rather than sadomasochism, etc., in terms of 'people' rather than in terms of social practices with shared meanings and values. By keeping her focus firmly fixed on 'people', she can surreptitiously appeal to the whole range of assumptions embedded in the ideology of

individualism—the ‘public/private’ distinction, the dichotomy between ‘individual’ and ‘society’, and the idea of ‘freedom’ as lack of constraint, of ‘rights’ as the untrammelled exercise of the will, and of ‘desire’ as the personal property of single individuals. By avoiding addressing ‘desire’ as social practice, Rubin can avoid addressing the origins of desire in the social conditions of male domination.<sup>33</sup>

Another example can be found in the work of Tania Modleski. In the last chapter of her book, *Feminism Without Women*, Modleski mounts a defence of ‘female sex radicals like Gayle Rubin [who] have sought to reclaim the specificity of their experience as women who sleep with other women’. Her defence is not unambivalent. She acknowledges that the ‘sex radicals’ tend to ‘minimize the issues of power and violence’ (p.152). She finds Rubin’s account, at least in part, ‘naive’ (p.153). She feels that ‘the infliction of pain and humiliation by one individual on another’ is problematic, that it does ‘require explanation even if they *are* desired by all parties’ (p.154), although she does not provide one. And she is critical of two of the pornographic films shown by ‘sex radical’ Susie Bright, in the case of one because it ‘confirm[s] images of extreme woman-hating, homophobia, and racism’, and in the case of the other because it is a ‘fetishistic representation’ (pp.160-2). She is, however, she says, ‘fully persuaded by lesbian writings which argue that feminism has too often adopted the role of gender police by rebuking certain lesbians for engaging in politically incorrect forms of sexual activity’ (p.159). Like Rubin, Modleski, too, couches her argument in terms of a defence of individual women. She sees the radical feminist critique of dehumanising sexual practices like pornography and sadomasochism as a matter of ‘rebuking’ individuals. She sees herself as defending women’s ‘rights’ to sexuality and to the enjoyment of pornography (p.159). She utterly fails to see that the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (which she finds ‘unintelligent’—pp.136, 146) can be read as a critique of the institutionalised discourses and practices of male supremacy, rather than as the carping criticism of the behaviour of individuals. Not surprisingly, she condemns these authors for ‘promoting censorship’, although she does not tell us how they do this, nor what it is they do or say which can be interpreted as ‘promoting censorship’. (For a detailed discussion of what Dworkin and MacKinnon actually do say in relation to pornography and the law, see: Itzin, ed., 1993: Part Four. The civil rights ordinance

---

33. For an account of the ways in which the desires referred to by Rubin are socially constituted within conditions of male supremacy, see: Thompson, 1991: 178-82.

drafted by Dworkin and MacKinnon was intended to provide those harmed by pornography, chiefly although not only women, with an avenue of legal redress). Modleski also says that their analysis is ‘so totalizing that it leaves no room for differences’ between ‘mainstream and marginal representations’, so that both become ‘a manifestation of the *same* phenomenon of “woman-hating”’ (p.159—her emphasis and quotation marks). But if the connection is there, why should it not be made? If an instance of misogyny is demonstrably an instance of misogyny, no matter how ‘different’ each instance is from any other, why should that not be said? The status of something as ‘marginal’ does not magically debar it from feminist critique. The ‘marginal’ is also social after all. It is not simply a collection of individual desiring outcasts who have to escape their ‘socialisation’ in order to enjoy their ‘rights’. If ‘the marginal’ is implicated in the meanings and values of male supremacy, feminism needs to be able to say that without being accused of violating someone’s ‘rights’, censoring their ‘free speech’, or hurting their feelings.

The ideology of individualism masquerades as collective interests via the notion of ‘identity’. Within the terms of the ideology, ‘people’ can organise collectively around a common ‘identity’, but the source of that ‘identity’ is located within each individual. In this sense, ‘identity’ does not become social until it is recognised by other individuals, and either embraced as theirs too, or morally disapproved of and rejected. Another example of this form of individualism occurred in a book review in a recent issue of *Ms.* magazine. Reviewing *Out of the Class Closet: Lesbians Speak*, edited by Julia Penelope, Mina Kumar said: ‘In the strongest essays, rural lesbians reclaim their heritage from stereotypes about “rednecks”, the last permissible target of ethnic jokes. [One of the authors] worries that privileged lesbian-feminists’ “plan for getting rid of lesbian-bashing and womon-hating and racism is to get rid of my kind of people”’ (Kumar, 1994: 76). In this example, the moral and political phenomena of misogyny and racism are seen as inherent qualities of ‘people’, and political critique is interpreted as attacking individuals. Opposition to misogyny and racism is viewed as attempting to ‘get rid of people’. So intrinsic to their identity is ‘lesbian-bashing, womon-hating and racism’ that without it these ‘people’ would cease to exist as an identifiable, ‘ethnic’ group. But while it is certainly the case that the responsibility for harmful attitudes and behaviours lies with individuals, those attitudes and behaviours are not inalienable properties which ‘people’ just happen to have; they are systematic meanings and values about which

people have moral and political choices. Misogyny and racism are not of the same order as being a woman under conditions of male domination, or being black under conditions of white supremacy, or being deprived of a dignified standard of living under conditions of capitalism. It is not the mere fact of being a woman or being black which is the problem. One is not responsible for one's sex or one's ethnic origin, neither of which would be a cause for complaint were it not for the systems of domination which ensure that those so identified are deprived of human rights. Still less is one responsible for being poor. Characterising poverty as an inherent property of poor individuals is a favourite ideological ploy of the ruling class which thereby absolves itself of responsibility for economic policies which generate obscene accumulations of wealth at people's expense. In contrast to being a woman or a member of a minority ethnic group, misogyny and racism are moral failings for which people can be held responsible and which can be changed. To interpret them as something inherent in 'people' is to ignore the social and political milieu within which others are harmed by these attitudes and behaviours. To see them as an 'ethnic identity' is to obliterate their status as moral choices and to extract them from the social system of domination within which they arise in the first place.

There is a sense in which the above examples are instances of essentialism. Not only are they couched in terms of putative facts about individuals, those 'facts' are seen as inherent in individuals. They are thus placed beyond political contestation and moral debate. Sadomasochistic desire, or misogyny and racism, simply exist as a kind of bedrock beyond which no questions need to be asked, and about which no decisions need to be made. The third example exposes this point most clearly by making racist and misogynist meanings and values into a form of 'ethnic' identity. But all three examples characterise social values as 'natural', i.e. as neutral and inert, properties of individuals, rather than as forms of social interaction involving moral responsibilities and political quiescence in the face of conditions of domination. 'Essentialism', however, has become a politically bankrupt term as a result of its use within postmodernism to vilify radical feminism. And what is at stake is more accurately identified as the ideology of individualism since its political function is to purvey certain beliefs about what it means to be 'a person'. The ideology of individualism conveys messages about what people 'can' do and what they 'cannot'. It 'enables' what does not threaten relations of ruling, e.g. the 'choices' of supermarket consumerism (one

of the prime examples of which is that slipping and sliding concept of ‘gender’—see chapter four ); and it defines any challenge to current relations of power as impossible, meaningless or non-existent, as beyond the sphere of individual action and responsibility because it is not available for debate. Above all, the ideology of individualism must disguise the actual relations of ruling, and it does that by locating all agency within the domain of an atomised individual radically independent of others, and existing prior to any form of social interaction.

The ‘individual’ purveyed by the ideology of individualism is masculine. That should come as no surprise since the male is the norm for what counts as an ‘individual’ under male supremacist conditions. This is indeed the central recognition of feminism. (For an account of the ‘free and equal individual’ of liberal social and political thought as only male, see: Brennan and Pateman, 1979; Pateman, 1980; Pateman, 1983; Pateman, 1986; Gatens, 1991). In the sense in which I am using the term here, ‘masculinity’ is not just a personality characteristic of male persons. It is a social phenomenon, a system of meanings and values structured around relations of and with the penis, a system which women can embrace as well as men. It refers to ways of being a man under conditions of male supremacy although its maintenance does not depend only on men. Neither are men involuntarily implicated in ways outside their control. It is a moral and political phenomenon and hence resistible. It is nonetheless hegemonic in the sense that it constitutes the dominant reality for both women and men, for men as its bearers and for women whose exclusion from ‘human’ status is the unacknowledged prerequisite for its continued existence. This does not mean that women can *be* ‘masculine’ in any sense which implies that women can take on the rights, benefits and prerogatives of men (except in those rare cases where women have passed themselves off as men and been believed). It means that women can uphold the meanings and values of masculinity. This happens in the ‘normal’ case through the embracing of femininity and its function in shoring up the masculine ego. Masculinity and femininity are not complementary characteristics, attached, rigidly or otherwise, to their respective sexes. Rather, they constitute a value hierarchy whereby the male individual has the right to his own autonomous ‘human’ status and the benefits which flow from that, and the female has no rights other than to recognise, validate and maintain the ‘human’ status of the male. Femininity is not an ‘other’ to masculinity; it is a subset of it. Femininity exists to reinforce masculinity. It is the residual vestige of ‘humanity’ women are allowed, so



that men can continue to define themselves at women's expense. As Virginia Woolf expressed it: 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size' (Woolf, 1946[1929]: 53). Female support for masculinity can also take the form of women wholeheartedly embracing the projects and interests of male supremacy. Women are capable of doing men's dirty work for them, work which is 'dirty' to the extent that it functions to maintain and reinforce relations of domination. Female support can also take more 'transgressive' forms. For example, the sexual libertarianism which puts sex outside political critique, lesbian sadomasochism and 'lesbianandgay'<sup>34</sup> politics, involve women seeing the world and acting within it from a standpoint which, as Sheila Jeffreys points out, is palatable to men, a palatability which also involves a deliberate and active campaign of vilification of feminism. Whether 'normal' or 'transgressive', women's embracing of the ethos of masculinity involves a commitment to the ideology that only men are 'human'. Femininity is an acceptance of second-rate status for women; libertarian 'transgression', and working in organisations of domination, are futile attempts at 'equality'. But none questions the construct of the male as the 'human' norm.

As the product of male supremacist conditions, masculinity requires suppression of the knowledge that men depend on women for maintaining the basic necessities of human existence. Male domination requires that suppression if men are to continue to receive the services supplied by women without acknowledgment. The basic form of that suppression is denial of the maternal relation, the systematic forgetting of our infant origins in helpless dependence on a supremely powerful woman—mother.<sup>35</sup> That forgetting is engineered through glorification of the penis. Phallogocratic reality interprets the interdependence of the maternal relation as the mother's 'power-over' the infant, and fends off that perceived 'domination' through contempt for the female who need not be considered 'human' because she lacks the penis. Without knowledge of that primary social relation, 'society' consists of no more than scattered adult individuals who came

---

34. The term is Sheila Jeffreys', who 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 sex class positions of women and men and homogenise experience to create a universal gay theory in which lesbian specificity disappears' (Jeffreys, 1993: 18n2).

35. I am greatly indebted to Mia Campioni for countless conversations over many years on the male supremacist constitution of the maternal relation and the crucial part it plays in the management of male power. For versions of Mia's thesis, see: Campioni, 1987; Campioni, 1991; Campioni, [in press].

from nowhere because they have forgotten their origins. The ideology of individualism is entirely complicit with male supremacist conditions. The belief in the autonomous individual who can make and re-make himself at will depends on the obliteration of any awareness of the origin of all social relationships in our infant dependency on a woman. It also depends on obliterating knowledge of the social importance of women except to the extent that they provide the occasion for the exercise of the penis. With no memory of that primal helplessness, and with the systematic forgetting of the social contribution of women, social relationships are detached from their connecting links. From this standpoint, 'the social' appears as nothing but scattered entities, essentially antagonistic until they are brought together by fear or contract,<sup>36</sup> or by polite agreement to 'respect our differences'.

Despite the above-mentioned connection between the belief in the male as the 'human' norm and the ideology of individualism, that ideology tends to exert a subterranean influence within feminist discourse itself. This is evidenced by the examples discussed above. Another example is that inexorable slippage I mentioned in the Introduction, from defining feminism to defining who is and is not a feminist. There are numerous other examples. Feminist critiques of prostitution are attacked on the grounds that criticising prostitution demeans the women who are 'prostitutes', despite the fact that the feminist analysis make it perfectly clear that prostitution is a *male* institution established to service male sexuality. Feminist concern with women in prostitution is a concern with the harm done to women by this male institution. If it is to be asserted that women suffer no harm because they are only exercising their individual 'choices', feminism is depleted of its political force. That can only benefit the male supremacist social order which requires women to be degraded in the service of the penis. Another example is the tendency to define feminism only in terms of 'women'. (See chapter four, the section on 'Women'). This reduces feminism to nothing but a property of female individuals. It places contentious feminist issues, e.g. sexuality or race differences among women, beyond debate, and hence beyond any hope of resolution. It means that anything too threatening to anyone who identifies as a feminist will not be

---

36. Hence the preoccupation throughout the history of malestream social thought, from Hobbes to Foucault, with 'the problem of social order', a preoccupation which establishes conflict and antagonism as the primal reality, as that which must be overcome in order for 'society' to exist. Malestream social thought has focused on the question: 'How is society possible given the original antagonism of the war of each against all?' Feminism, however, starts from the diametrically opposite question: 'How do antagonism and conflict come about, given that we all originate from within a social relationship?'

addressed because there is nothing to appeal to beyond personal opinion. Individualism in this sense has a pacifying function. By obliterating anything threatening, it takes the threat out of 'feminism' and in effect abolishes feminist politics. By focusing exclusively on 'individuals', the ideology of individualism ensures that structures of domination remain unseen and unacknowledged.

But to criticise the ideology of individualism does not mean that feminism can dispense altogether with a concept of the individual. The feeling that our individual selves are unique and irreplaceable, that we have rights and dignities and are entitled to respect simply because we exist, is a vital ingredient of a feminist politics committed to creating a human status for women. Without some concept of what it means to be an individual, feminism would be left with no one to fight for. However, a number of feminist writers have addressed ways of theorising individuality appropriate for feminist politics. This theorising revolves around the idea of 'self-in-community'. This has two aspects to it. It refers both to investigating the ways in which women are situated within social relations of male domination, and to developing a communality of mutual recognition, support and respect between and among women.

Zillah Eisenstein argued that 'a conception of the individual as a person with autonomy is the starting point of feminism', because 'it lays the base for recognizing women's economic, sexual, and political independence from men'. But she also argued that this differs from the liberal view of the individual as isolated and competitive, because it does not 'premise women's isolation from each other' (Eisenstein, 1981: 154), and because it recognises 'woman's life within a sex class' (p.192).

Jean Baker Miller rejected the idea of 'autonomy' as appropriate for women, because it was too closely tied to the idea men had of themselves as separated out from relationships. Although women had a problem of self-effacement in relationships, the solution was not 'autonomy' in the sense in which it was conventionally used: 'the word *autonomy*', she said, 'seems possibly dangerous; it is a word derived from men's development, not women's'. Women, she said, did not want to abandon 'affiliation' in their search for selfhood. They wanted 'something more complete than autonomy ..., a fuller not a lesser ability to encompass relationships to others, simultaneous with the fullest possible development of oneself' (Miller, 1976: 99-100). Miller did not fully acknowledge that those 'affiliations' so neurotically embraced by women, and which

were so restrictive of women's lives, were relationships of subordination to men, although it is obvious from the examples she uses. But she is clear about one aspect of the solution: women 'joining together in co-operative action' (p.101).

Sarah Hoagland, too, rejected the concept of 'autonomy'. Instead she coined the term 'autokoenony', from the Greek 'auto' meaning 'self' and 'koinonia' meaning 'community', to convey the idea of 'a self who is both separate and related, a self which is neither autonomous nor dissolved: a self in community who is one among many' (Hoagland, 1988: 12).

But to leave the analysis of a positive concept of the individual there, says too little for feminist purposes. The 'self-in-community' under male supremacist conditions portrays the individual as no more than a bearer of social relations, and leaves no room for the possibility of individual freedom of action and responsibility (although to recognise the status quo as male supremacist is a necessary first step out). The 'self-in-community' as a woman among women gives no account of the constraints operating to ensure or enforce women's consent to oppressive conditions, nor of those forms of domination which undoubtedly operate between and among women, of the ways in which women can behave at the expense of other women.<sup>37</sup> To leave the analysis there is also to give no account of how we move from the 'self-in-community' of male supremacist conditions, to the 'self-in-community' struggling against those conditions.

Sarah Hoagland, however, does not leave the analysis there. She is concerned to argue for the possibility, and the present actuality, of what she calls 'moral agency under oppression'. This avoids both the determinism of a system of domination to which the individual is subjected and within which she is a passive victim of circumstances beyond her control, and the notion of a free will available to all without constraint. Hoagland argues against the idea that moral agency means control, of self, of others, or of situations. Given the reality of oppressive conditions, attempts at control are either futile since we are not in control, or complicit with the values of domination. Instead, she argues that

moral agency simply is the ability to choose in limited situations, to pursue one possibility rather than another, to thereby create value

---

37. For an insightful account of this, see: Russ, 1985.

through what we choose, and to conceive of ourselves as ones who are able to and do make choices—and thus as ones who are able to make a difference for ourselves and each other in this living ... *It is not because we are free and moral agents that we are able to make moral choices. Rather, it is because we make choices, choose from among alternatives, act in the face of limits, that we declare ourselves to be moral beings* (Hoagland, 1988: 231—her emphasis).

For Sarah Hoagland, then, the individual is the locus of moral choice, not absolutely, but within constraints. This means that, even under conditions of male domination, we do have alternatives and can make choices between them, and to the extent that this is possible, we are responsible for our actions and hence free agents. At the same time, however, to the extent that we are subjected under conditions of domination, not only through outright coercion (violence, economic deprivation, etc.), but also through ideological manipulation of our hearts and minds, there will frequently be occasions when we are not responsible, either wholly or in part. The individual, then, is she who makes decisions between accepting responsibility and refusing it, who acts when she can make a difference and refrains from acting, or withdraws, when she can't, and avoids de-moralisation by struggling constantly against succumbing to the meanings and values of domination and holding fast to the values of a genuinely human status for all.

This work of Sarah Hoagland's is in contrast to a number of other recent attempts to open up a space of effective action within the domain of everyday life (e.g. Habermas' 'life world', Wittgenstein's 'forms of life', Foucault's 'ethics of the self', Abercrombie et al.'s 'everyday discourse, epistemology, or way of life'), all of which fail because they fail to question the ideological structuring of everyday experience. Another example of such an attempt can be found in the work of Dorothy Smith. 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 primary project is an attempt to give sociology a human face by extricating it from 'the objectivised 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' (Smith, 1990: 97 and passim). Although she is avowedly a feminist, and identifies her work as a 'feminist

sociology', this central thesis is less than satisfactory for feminist purposes. Despite her clear perceptions of particular manifestations of male domination, especially in her earlier book (Smith, 1987), she sees domination only in its bureaucratic forms, and fails to see it 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.

On the other hand, however, there is an element of truth in these appeals to what Smith calls 'lived actualities', to the extent that they are attempts to open a space for resistance to domination in the domain within which people actually live. The problem with such accounts is that they say nothing about the ways in which domination already operates in this domain. As a consequence, they fail to recognise the vital role which the recognition of domination plays in the struggle against it. Nonetheless, it remains true that, if domination operates in the sphere of 'everyday/everynight lives' (wherever else it operates as well), it can also be resisted there.

Feminist politics requires the exercise of a political will, of conscious, rational deliberation and choice, on the part of those committed to the feminist project. Such deliberation does not come naturally and automatically. It must be struggled for, not once, but over and over again. That does not automatically mean exhaustion and 'burn-out'. The struggle does not always have to be deadly serious, especially to the extent that it takes place in the mundane world. Sometimes the most appropriate challenge is wit and humour, the light touch which soothes the sting with affection and respect. Sometimes it is necessary to refrain from comment, conserving one's energies for more important dimensions of the struggle. And there are some battles which are simply not worth fighting, either because the gain is minimal, or because they deflect attention from more important issues.

Within the terms of feminist theory, experience is 'agency within a life world'. It is the activity and receptivity for which the individual bears her own responsibility, insofar as she has access to the information which will allow her to decide whether or not she is responsible. For feminist purposes, experience is neither the passive reception of

internal and external stimuli, nor the value-free perception of 'what is', nor the mute acceptance of authorised versions of the world-taken-for-granted. It is an active presence in the world claiming the fullest possible responsibility for her place within it. That does not mean that we are responsible for everything that happens to us. To the extent that domination debars us from exercising the fullest possible control over our lives, obviously we are not. But we can still be responsible for how we act within oppressive conditions, and for deciding the extent and limitations of our freedom and constraint.

But if experience is no guarantee of the truth, accuracy, relevance or adequacy of theory, it is also the only guarantee there is. Although without theory, experience is at best a blind groping in the dark, at worst, a reinforcement of and collusion with the status quo, without experience, theory becomes an esoteric mystery, a game for academic troglodytes. That game has traditionally been played best by those who can demand the services of others to take care of their mundane needs. The detached, disinterested nature of malestream theory is a function of the amount of distance the theorist can put between himself (or herself) and the messy, tiresome demands of everyday life. That distance depends on someone else doing the work of necessity, traditionally a woman or women. Distancing oneself from the everyday world, as feminist standpoint theorists have pointed out, threatens to divorce intellectual work from human concerns. Hence, theory must be visibly tied to experience. But neither provides any guarantee for the other. Theory can be impeccably 'ideologically sound', and still do grave damage to experiential reality; experience can be intense, pleasurable and deeply felt, and yet require theorising which radically questions and undermines. Experience can be deceptive, and theory is only more or less adequate. Nonetheless, there is a stopping point, which is also a starting point, which gives meaning, purpose and coherence to feminist theory and beyond which the questions and explanations must cease. That point is ethical. Feminist theory is, above and beyond anything else, a moral commitment to the kind of world we want to live in, and a moral resistance to the kind of world which, by and large, it actually is.

For we are not always in ideology. Not all meaning and value serve domination. For those not in the direst straits, for those who have access to the basic necessities of human existence—food, shelter, physical safety, freedom of movement and association,

etc.—there is always the possibility of manoeuvre, negotiation and innovation, and meanings and values can be changed, although not easily. In that sense, anyone can be complicit and anyone can resist. But the two are not, of course, symmetrical. For the most part compliance requires no more than unthinking acceptance of what ‘everyone knows to be the case’, proceeding as usual without deliberation or reflection, knowing ‘how to go on’ without thinking about it (Giddens, 1984; Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]). Even so, there is room to move. As Giddens points out, it is frequently the case that ‘what social phenomena “are”, how they are aptly described, is contested’. He goes on to say that ‘awareness of such contestation, of divergent and overlapping characterizations of activity, is an essential part of “knowing a form of life”’ (Giddens, 1984: 29). Resistance, however, requires a greater degree of self-reflection and deliberate choice, questioning the ‘world-taken-for-granted’, espousing some values and rejecting others, seeing the world in one way and not in another. It involves recognising both freedom and constraint, both the extent to which one is responsible and the extent to which one is not. And because these decisions cannot be made once and for all, it involves a constant readiness to reconsider.

What any particular individual might or might not do, ought or ought not to do, given the on-going reality of male domination (and it is still a reality, recent allusions to ‘post-feminism’ notwithstanding), cannot be stated in general terms. Feminism does not lay down rules and regulations, prohibitions and prescriptions, for individuals to follow or avoid. What actions follow from any particular critique is for each of us to decide for herself (or himself). I would assert, as an ethical first principle, that human beings ought to be free to choose between alternatives, and that, as a matter of fact, we frequently are, at least those of us who are already provided with basic necessities. The individual is a free agent to the extent that she has access to alternatives, allows herself to recognise that alternatives exist, and acts with knowledge of the extent and limits of her responsibility. No one can do it completely alone. Non-compliance with dominant meanings and values involves risking social rejection, non-acceptance or irrelevance, and sometimes violence, or (because ‘society’ is not only ‘out there’ but also ‘in here’) madness. Effective refusal to comply requires an alternative body of mutual knowledge, of shared meanings and values, which provides a social context for resistance. This is what feminism supplies.



But just as male domination is not monolithic, rigid and static, neither is feminism an absolute alternative. Feminism's primary commitment is to the interests of women (and, not incidentally, also to the interests of men, to the extent that men can see that a human status achieved at no one's expense is in their interests too). Feminism is not concerned to criticise current social arrangements as long as they do not operate against women's interests either by including women as men's subordinates, or by excluding women from humanly valuable forms of life. Neither is feminism critical of current arrangements which do not validate domination, which allow for mutual recognition, respect and caring between people. 'Male domination' is a theoretical construct devised for a certain purpose, to focus attention on those aspects of reality which must be denied if the social system that is male domination is to be maintained. The feminist focus on male domination provides a standpoint from which certain questions can be asked, and certain answers and actions can become conceivable. Because those answers and actions rebound on forms of life, they cannot be dictated. Everyone must decide for themselves. But the decisions cannot be made unless the questions are asked in the first place. The role of feminism is to provide the questions which allow the possibility of resistance and challenge to relations of domination.

## Chapter Two: Defining Feminism

### *On Definition*

Understanding what feminism is is not a straightforward task because there is a reluctance among feminist writers to engage in explicit definition.<sup>38</sup> On the whole feminists tend, often quite deliberately, not to say what they mean by ‘feminism’. ‘That word’, wrote Alice Jardine, ‘poses some serious problems. Not that we would 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). Rosemarie Tong remarked, ‘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). Rosalind Delmar asserted, ‘The fragmentation of contemporary feminism bears ample witness to the impossibility of constructing modern feminism as a simple unity in the present or of arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism’ (Delmar, 1986: 9). Karen Offen quoted one feminist writer as saying that “‘definition is a male prejudice” and that “the day we start defining feminism it’s lost its vitality”’ (Offen, 1988: 121n4).<sup>39</sup> Even compilers of feminist dictionaries are reluctant to engage too rigorously in definition. 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). And Rosi Braidotti wrote:

In many ways, it is still too soon to write the history of feminist thought, and besides, feminism is neither a concept, nor a theory, nor

---

38. Except when the purpose is to set up a typology of feminism (or ‘feminisms’). A typical endeavour of this kind would include some or all of the following: liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, radical/‘cultural’ feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, postmodernist or poststructuralist feminism. (Eisenstein, 1984; Segal, 1984; Alcoff, 1988; Jaggar and Struhl, 1978; Jaggar, 1983; Weedon, 1987; Tong, 1989). But these typologies are inadequate as definitions because they misrepresent feminism. They do so both by subsuming feminism under other frameworks, and by portraying radical feminism as one form of feminism among many, rather than as the only form of feminism which clearly challenges male domination. For other exceptions, see Part II.

39. Offen herself disagrees with the writer she quotes, Melanie Randall. She says: ‘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*) [quoted above]. Knowledge is not well served by [assertions like those of Randall] ... The utility of definition depends on how it is done’ (ibid.). For Offen’s own definition of feminism, see chapter four.

even a systematic set of utterances about women. It is, rather, the means chosen by certain women to situate themselves in reality so as to redesign their “feminine” condition. It would be dangerous to propose a purely theoretical representation of this multiple, heterogeneous complex of women’s struggles. I think that the best possible way of reading feminist thought today is by drawing a map rather than an attempt to classify (Braidotti, 1991: 147).

Although Braidotti is not arguing against definition as such here, the indeterminacy she recommends—‘a map rather than an attempt to classify’—disqualifies definition.

These warnings against definition would have some point to them, were it not for the special circumstances of the current condition of feminist theorising. Definitions do set up a priori rules, and in doing so, they bring with them the ever-present danger of a dogmatic appeal to slogans and catch-phrases. When there are shared understandings about fundamental issues, there is no need for explicitly formulated rules, because it is always possible to gain access to reasons when reasons are required. As Sarah Hoagland put it in the context of ethics: ‘At most, [principles] serve as guides for those who already can act with integrity’ (Hoagland, 1988: 10). But the present situation of feminism is such that there is very little common agreement about what feminism means, even to the point where positions in stark contradiction to each other are equally argued in the name of ‘feminism’, with little hope of resolution as things stand at the moment. Given the extent to which attacks on feminism are masquerading as ‘feminism’ itself, the need to define feminism has become pressing. Definition, in the sense of the explicit assertion of meaning, has an important role to play in the feminist struggle.

To define feminism is to take responsibility for what one says about feminism. It is a way of situating oneself and clarifying the standpoint from which one approaches the feminist project. And it is not only the author who must decide on the accuracy or otherwise of her own definition, but also the reader. By defining feminism, the author is providing for the reader the opportunity to enter into debate. No discourse belongs solely to its author. Readers are not inert sponges merely soaking up the text. Readers too participate in the creation of meaning. A definition sets up a dialogue, and it does that best when the author gives a clear and unambiguous account of what feminism is in

the context of her own discourse. Definition is a clarifying device. Saying clearly what is meant by feminism is to make provision for challenge and debate. Definitions are tentative, open to challenge, must be argued for and substantiated, and can always be modified. Because the problem of dogmatism is a very real one, it is as well to remember this. Defining something is not to fix it irrevocably and for all time. A definition is not the essential and only true meaning. It is not authoritative, only more or less accurate for the purpose for which it is intended.<sup>40</sup> Far from rigidifying meanings, definitions are devised in particular contexts for particular purposes. The context in this case is that of a feminism under attack from within, and the purpose is to clarify what is at stake in feminist politics. While a definition certainly closes down some alternatives, it also opens up others. Hopefully, the alternatives which are closed down by the definition I propose are those anti-feminist positions paraded as 'feminism', while the alternatives it opens up are those of a feminism which is truly in the interests of women.

As I argued in the last chapter, we are never outside systems of meaning. Although definitions are useful for certain purposes, meanings, as Ludwig Wittgenstein has pointed out,<sup>41</sup> are not established by way of definition, but through the actual usages of language. Hence what follows is a 'definition' only in the sense that it is an explicit

---

40. '[A]ll definitions are essentially *ad hoc*. They are relevant to some purpose or situation, and consequently are applicable only over a restricted field or "universe of discourse"' (Ogden and Richards, 1922[1923]: 111).

41. In defining feminism in terms of the central idea of opposition to male domination, I am obviously in disagreement with Wittgenstein's arguments against constructing meaning around a common theme, arguments which occurred in his discussion of what is involved in the concept of a 'game'. Because it was not possible to identify what all 'games' had in common, he said, it was more accurate to see meaning as a kind of 'family resemblance' between all instances of a concept, rather than as something they all had in common. By this he meant that, although the different meanings of a word were related, it was through a continuum of overlapping similarities rather than a common thread. The qualities of some instances had a close resemblance to each other while being markedly different from other instances. Those which were close in likeness were not identical, otherwise they would be the same 'game' and not distinct instances at all; while those which were unlike were still linked into the concept of 'game' by their common, if differing, resemblance to other 'games'.

But Wittgenstein's argument against postulating a unifying theme as the basis of meaning is flawed by his choice of example. The concept of 'game' does in fact have a common theme, and that is that a 'game' is something that is time out from real life. The usual, positive implication is of something engaged in for leisure, pleasure, play and fun, an activity other than work, duty and responsibility. Sometimes it has negative connotations, implying a lack of seriousness or something artificial or trivial. In some uses it also has implications of the inauthentic, of manipulative ploys to avoid dealing with real issues and to hide one's true motives from others. But whether positive or negative, a game is an activity which is detached from what people do in the usual way of going about their lives. Wittgenstein failed to see this because of the overall purpose of his discussion of 'games', which was to suggest the metaphor of 'language-games' as a way of depicting the variety and systematic nature of human activities. But the force of his metaphor is weakened if games are not usual activities, if instead they stand as a kind of contrast to everyday life. If his argument against definition in terms of a central theme does not work in this case, then it cannot be extrapolated to definition in general. On the contrary, if all games do share a common characteristic, Wittgenstein's argument against using 'definition' in this way fails.

clarification for that ‘certain purpose’ delineated above. In fact it is rather more than a definition. It is an extended account of the ways in which the discourse of feminism makes sense. It is an account of how the term ‘feminism’ is used. But although my reference point for the meaning of feminism is the way the discourse of feminism is used, it should already be obvious that just any usage will not do. As I argue throughout, there are some usages of ‘feminism’ which either make no sense of the feminist project, or are actively antagonistic towards it. Hence, simply pointing to the way the term ‘feminism’ is used is insufficient for the purpose of clarifying the nature of feminism. Feminist theory and practice also has a coherent logic which is structured first and foremost by its political and moral (or ethical—I use the terms interchangeably) concerns. To the extent that uses of the term ‘feminism’ contradict or confuse the ethical and political aims of feminism, they cannot be said to count as feminism.

### ***Defining Feminism***

The definition proposed here characterises feminism as, in the first place, a politics and a morality. In calling feminism ‘political’, I am not restricting the term to the conventional malestream meaning of ‘all that characterizes or touches upon the domain of public policy’ (Montefiore, 1990: 201), a convention which derives from the Greek word ‘polis’, meaning ‘city-state’. Given the notorious exclusion of women from the domain of ‘politics’ as conventionally understood, certainly from the rights and obligations of citizenship in the Greek ‘polis’, but also still to a large extent from the domain of ‘public policy’, such a restriction of the term ‘political’ is inappropriate for a feminism concerned with every aspect of women’s lives under conditions of male domination. While it is certainly in the interests of women that feminism should note women’s exclusion from public life, that is not the only sense in which feminism is political.

One of the earliest insights of feminism was the recognition that the public/private dichotomy is an ideological construct of male supremacy, which confines important aspects of the subordination of women to the domain of the ‘private’, and allows some of the most violent manifestations of the power of men over women to go unrecognised and unchecked. As an ideological construct, the distinction operates differently in the case of women and men. For women, it enforces their confinement to the ‘private’ sphere and their exclusion from the ‘public’ world and from its rights, benefits and

dignities, including that of protesting against 'private' injustices; for men, it facilitates their participation in and domination of both spheres. Men can participate in the 'public' sphere because they are freed from the burden of having to provide for themselves the basic necessities of human existence, which are provided for them by women in the 'private' sphere. And men dominate the 'public' sphere because women are excluded (apart from token female exceptions who must adopt the male model by also freeing themselves of domestic burdens by employing other women). Men's participation in the 'private' sphere involves having their desires and needs met by women; and they dominate it to the extent that those desires and needs are catered for at women's expense without reciprocity.

To confine the referent of 'political' to the 'public' sphere alone while leaving the public/private distinction intact, would be to exclude feminism, in its role of champion of the cause of women, from the domain of politics. But as feminism has pointed out, the distinction is one of the ways in which the social order of male supremacy is maintained. The slogan 'The personal is political' serves both to acknowledge and to challenge the dichotomy. It involves struggling to make the 'private' woes of women 'public', a struggle waged against the enormous odds set by the male monopolisation of what is permitted entry into the 'public' sphere. It involves identifying the numerous ways in which the 'public sphere' men value is dependent for its continued existence on the unpaid, unacknowledged and unreciprocated work of women. It involves elucidating the ways in which the 'public' penetrates the 'private'—home, family, bedroom, and the individual psyches of women *and* men. In this sense, feminism is as 'public', in principle at least, even if the odds are massively stacked against it, as anything so designated in the conventional malestream sense, and hence as 'political'.

But there is a further dimension to politics which does not appear in the bland term 'public policy', and that is the dimension of power. The public sphere is an arena of contestation, of who is to be victorious at whose expense, of who is to win and who lose, of hierarchies of prestige, influence, and sometimes, force. Power in this sense involves battles to decide who will dominate and who will be subordinated. It is true that the public arena is also, ideally, the domain of consensus, since it is not possible to reach agreement unless the debate happens out in the open. It is this ideal of consensus which feminism appeals to in its attempts to bring the wrongs done to women under

public scrutiny. But consensus is impossible as long as the domain within which it is purported to happen remains dominated by men and male interests at women's expense, and the consensus which is sought constitutes a challenge to that domination. Since feminism is opposed to relations of domination and subordination, it is political in this sense too, in the sense of the struggle against the meanings and values of a social order wherein the identifiable interests of some prevail at the expense of the interests of others. But as I pointed out in connection with Anthony Giddens' account of 'power' and 'domination' (p.17), 'power' also has a positive meaning (which is nicely illustrated by the French word, 'pouvoir', which means 'power' as a noun, and 'to be able' as a verb). 'Power' also means ability, and in this sense feminism's concern with power is also a struggle for the capacity and opportunity for everyone to control the conditions of our own existence. Feminism's approach to power is two-fold: it opposes relations of power-as-domination and enables relations of power-as-ability.

Hence, feminism's claim to be political is both similar to and different from malestream politics. It is similar in that it aims to put women's interests onto the public agenda. It is different in that it challenges the male monopolisation of the public domain. It does this by insisting that there are crucial dimensions of the 'private' sphere which ought to be matters of public debate and rectification, and in so doing, brings into question the split between 'public' and 'private' on which malestream politics depends. Feminist politics requires that the nature of politics in the conventional sense be radically changed to include the interests of women. This requirement cannot be met by a tokenistic fitting of some women into positions which continue to serve male supremacist interests. Women cannot be 'equal' with men as long as there is no equality among men. In feminist terms, what women want is a human status where rights, benefits and dignities are gained at no one's expense, and where duties and obligations do not fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women. Such a project promises to transform politics altogether.

Feminism is a moral commitment in that it starts from and continually returns to questions of value, of good and evil, right and wrong, of what is worthwhile and significant and what is not. Feminism is centrally concerned with judgements of what ought and what ought not to be the case, with what constitutes right action and the good life and with what operates to prevent that, with the nature of the human conditions

within which we want to live and those which must to be resisted because they are evil. Just as the 'political' is not confined to the 'public', so the 'moral' is not confined to any 'private' sphere of the isolated individual. Although the locus of moral choice certainly lies with the individual, i.e. is 'private', *what* is there to be chosen is not under the control of any one of us, i.e. is 'public'. To paraphrase another of Marx's insights: we *can* make our own history (although some own and control more resources than others with which to make, not only their own history, but also that of others), but we do so under conditions not of our own choosing.

Morality is not a set of proscriptions and prescriptions laid down for others who are cajoled or coerced into compliance. Nor is it something imposed on us by more powerful others. That could more appropriately be called 'moralism' rather than morality. Morality has no coercive power, its only force is a moral one. It is not something that can be enforced and still remain ethical. Once force is brought to bear to ensure compliance, the ethical vanishes because morality requires freedom of choice. Morality is what each of us decides about what constitutes the good life and how to live it, because moral judgement and choice is located in the hearts, minds and actions of human individuals. That does not mean that morality is an individualistic phenomenon in any sense which implies that 'individuals' are discrete entities, existing in isolation, prior to and outside social relations. Individuals exist only intersubjectively, interpersonally and socially. (That it could ever have been thought otherwise, as indeed it has been throughout the history of Western philosophy, is a consequence of the masculinist hegemony which systematically 'forgets' his origins in and continuing dependence on the love and work of the women who maintain human existence). As individuals are social beings, so the moral beliefs which structure human life are collective. That need not, indeed must not, imply actual universal agreement, because in that case there would be no decisions for people to make, no room for choice or for resistance to relations of domination. Neither does it imply a seamless, monolithic 'society' which reproduces 'individuals' in set patterns or roles, the only function of which is the maintenance of the social order. As Immanuel Kant pointed out at the end of the eighteenth century, human beings are ends in themselves, and not a means to some other end (Kant, 1990[1785]).<sup>42</sup> Or rather, they *ought* to be unique, irreplaceable

---

42. Kant located the primary end of human existence in 'Reason'. But as Genevieve Lloyd pointed out (Lloyd, 1984: 66-9), Kant excluded women from 'Reason', and hence from 'human' existence.



ends in themselves, although as a matter of fact under conditions of domination, people are treated as nothing but things used and manipulated for purposes not their own. It is this reality of domination which feminism resists with its commitment to the belief that human beings have the right to exist in freedom and dignity simply because they exist. It is not a right which has to be earned, or rather, it ought not to be, although again under present conditions of world-wide male supremacist capitalist accumulation, that right is not in fact available to all, and the few ‘earn’ it at the expense of the many. Neither is it a right which can be rescinded, although it is constantly violated under conditions of domination.

The relations of domination which feminism opposes are those of male domination (or, to use some synonyms, male supremacy, the male hegemony, male power, phallographic reality, mainstream thought, the phallographic social order, phallographic, the Patriarchal Universe of Discourse (PUD—Penelope, 1990), heterorelations and heteropatriarchy (Raymond, 1986), or ‘the boys’). In other words, the main enemy named and identified by feminism is the domination of women by men (and of some men by other men). Like Catharine MacKinnon, I had originally thought that feminism already provided a theory of male dominance. Like her, I too found that this was not the case. Early radical feminism certainly named male domination and exposed many of its mechanisms and effects. But it tended to locate the ‘cause’ of male domination in female biology, in particular, women’s child-bearing capacity, rather than treating it as an autonomous social order with its own justifications, requirements and coercions.<sup>43</sup> And so my project changed from ‘locating and explicating such a theory’, as MacKinnon put it, ‘to creating one’ (MacKinnon, 1991: x).

As should already be clear from the discussion in the last chapter, I do not mean by male domination what one writer referred to as ‘unrelenting male drives for dominance and mastery’ (Hawkesworth, 1989: 543). Male domination does not mean that all men are invariably oppressive to all women all the time. Nor does it mean that all men are motivated by dominance and mastery over others. Nor does it mean that in every interpersonal situation, a man will always have his way uncontested, that men are invariably successful in asserting their needs and desires over against women (or other

---

43. This is a point I did not make clearly in *Reading Between the Lines*. I attributed this approach solely to Shulamith Firestone, whereas the location of the ‘causes’ of male domination in women’s child-bearing capacity was common to all the early radical feminists, at least in the US.

men). Nor does it mean that women are invariably the passive, peaceable victims of a male will to power. Male domination is a social structure, a matter of meanings and values, politics and morality, and not a series of personal failings. While social structures are maintained through the commitment and acquiescence of individuals, and can be eroded by the refusal of individuals to participate, they have a life of their own, and can continue to exert their influence despite the best efforts of the well-intentioned. *Which* is the case, whether particular actions, desires, etc., maintain the social structure, or whether they erode it, is the responsibility of the individual agent to decide, a responsibility which remains even when evaded. The manifestations of male domination, although they are sometimes horrifically violent and dehumanising, are also subtle, mundane, ordinary, unremarkable, and, moreover, very deeply embedded in the psyches of individuals, and not just male individuals either.

Neither is male domination monolithic and inexorable. No system of domination, even the most totalitarian, functions without contradictions, ambiguities and resistances. The chief contradiction structuring and rupturing male supremacist conditions is the existence of women. Female existence continually gives the lie to the male as the standard of 'human' existence. As 'the everlasting irony of the (male) community',<sup>44</sup> the existence of women must be disavowed. Under conditions of male supremacy, women can be acknowledged only to the extent that they serve men's interests. It is not possible, after all, to deny women's existence altogether (although the instances where that happens are many and various and rarely commented upon). Moreover, women have many and varied strategies for resisting male domination. Some of these merely reverse the power hierarchy. Some are complicit with the meanings and values of domination while defeating a particular individual or individuals (male or female). Other strategies of resistance on the part of women radically undermine the belief in women's inferiority and availability to men, and manifest a power and capability far beyond anything permitted to women within the confines of the conventional female role.

'Domination' refers to a hierarchical social order wherein the interests of some prevail *at the expense of* the interests of others. It is maintained partly through ideological means to ensure the consent of the oppressed to their own oppression and to provide

---

44. The reference is to Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, sec. 475, p.288.

justifications for maintaining the status quo, partly through the threat, and periodic actual exercise, of violence. Male domination means that the male represents the 'human' norm at the expense of a human status for women. Men's interests and values are set up as universal 'human' interests, and genuinely human values like reason, virtue or courage are appropriated as exclusive to men. At the same time, male domination means that the female is regarded as subsidiary, subservient, ancillary to, or absent from, the 'human' norm, while the interests, values and rights of women are denied, trivialised or derided, and women's time, energy and attention are expropriated for men's use and pleasure. Under conditions of male supremacy, women are allowed, at best, a second-rate 'human' status acquired through relations of subordination to men; at worst, women's needs and interests are ignored, and women are treated as if we had no rights and no claim to be accorded human respect and dignity. As Simone de Beauvoir put it over forty years ago (and a certain ennui steals over me at the thought that it still has to be said, for she wasn't the first and she is by no means the last):

A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man ... In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity ... it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity ... this world, which has always belonged to men, is still in their hands ... Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth (Beauvoir, 1970[1949]: 15, 164, 175).

Male supremacy, that view of the world which insists that only men be recognised as 'human', condones, permits, even at times recommends (as, for example, in pornography) harm to women. Because women are not 'human' within the terms and under the conditions of male supremacy, they are not allowed access to the rights and dignities of being human. Because women are not recognised as 'human', they can be treated with contempt. What happens to them does not matter, their needs do not have to

be considered, their interests can be trivialised and denied. Because women are not 'human', they become nothing but objects for men's use. This creates a contradiction at the heart of the world order that is male supremacy, for if women are not human, men cannot be genuinely human either. Tyranny corrupts. It corrupts the tyrannised by requiring of them the values of subservience, but (as Hegel pointed out) it is even more corrupting for the tyrant. By failing to recognise the humanity of his female other, the tyrant destroys his own human status. Because he will not allow her her own unique self, he deprives himself of anyone to recognise him. Because everyone's first 'other' is female, i.e. mother, the process of dehumanisation starts at once, from the beginning of each human existence. 'Humanity' under male supremacist conditions is flawed from the outset. Hence, although the first model of dehumanised 'other' is female, men cannot recognise each other either if they have already been rendered incapable of human recognition.

Men's monopolisation of 'human' status bestows enormous benefits on men. It supplies them with a sure sense of self, a certainty about the world and their place in it, which enables them to perceive themselves and their own projects as important. Although women's notorious 'failure' to achieve greatness is partly a function of the lack of recognition of the achievements of women, because women are not seen, and do not see themselves, as important, they lack the arrogance necessary to promote themselves and their projects. There is much for women to envy in the world of men (although it is not that egregious construct, 'penis envy'). What women can quite rightly envy is that sense of belonging in and to the world, which overrides obstacles to the expressing of the self because it never questions its right to exist and to act to make a difference. But, as feminist object relations theorists have pointed out, the maintenance of the masculine sense of self tends towards rigidity. To the extent that masculinity is defined over against the female, if to be male is to be not-female, the masculine persona is defended and defensive. Masculinity requires holding the female at bay, whether in the form of the 'feminine qualities' of passivity, vulnerability and weakness, or in the form of actual real life women. That requirement establishes a split in the masculine psyche between the need for recognition perceived as dependence, weakness, and helplessness, and the male supremacist 'need' to be autonomous, self-sufficient, self-created and beholden to no one. But because the interdependence of mutual recognition cannot be evaded, the invulnerability of the defended psyche is perennially threatened with disintegration.

Those threats must be warded off, often violently, and the self reinforced and strengthened. Under male supremacist conditions, masculinity is a mighty fortress barricaded against the importunate demands of others.

Not having such an overriding need for defence, women tend to have a keener sense of the rights of others. While for men, other people are too often among those obstacles to be brushed aside, or objects to be used and discarded, for women, others are fellow beings deserving of consideration. Under present conditions of male supremacy, that female concern for others is expected to be unequal. Women are expected to subordinate their own concerns to those of men (and children, especially male children). But concern for others does not necessarily entail self-abnegation. To the extent that it is already conceivable for women to have a sense of self-worth, it is already possible for women to maintain the balance of mutual recognition between self and other, despite current conditions which dictate otherwise. It is also possible for men. Even under present dehumanising conditions, men have choices about how they relate to women (and other men). As long as the dehumanisation of women persists, that choice is one aspect of male power. It operates as a kind of intermittent reinforcement, keeping women unsure about where they stand in relation to men. If women's experience of male power is sporadic, alternating with acts of common decency, they will tend to doubt their own perceptions of male contempt. Nonetheless, the recognition of women's humanity is not a utopian dream waiting on future events as yet unforeseen, but a present actuality as long as relations of male domination are acknowledged and resisted.

What feminism is fighting for, then, is a world in which women have, and are seen to have, a fully human status. It is this aspect of the feminist struggle which has received the most attention, to the point where feminism has tended to be implicitly defined solely in terms of 'women'. This focus of attention is vitally important. It is necessary to rescue women from historical oblivion, to insist on women's human rights and dignities, to expose the injustices and harm done to women, to assert in a multitude of ways that women are human beings deserving of respect. But although many of the feminist enterprises devoted to women display insight into the social system of male domination even when it is not stated explicitly, focusing on women in and of itself says nothing about the male supremacist relations of ruling which makes this focus necessary. As a result, defining feminism only in terms of 'women' has given rise to a number of futile

debates, about what is involved in the category of 'women', for example, or about whether women are the same as or different from men, or about 'essentialism', 'false universalism' and the 'white and middle-class' nature of feminism. It has also had the unfortunate political consequence of dividing women into a multiplicity of incompatible social categories. Hence, although defining feminism in terms of women is necessary, it is not sufficient as the unifying factor of feminist politics. It is the opposition to male domination which makes feminism relevant to women wherever they are situated, however differently they are excluded from recognition as human.

Because the male monopoly of the 'human' is still too little recognised, because it is still veiled by hegemonic meanings and values which authenticate maleness and depreciate femaleness, the creation of a human status for women requires that women seek recognition from each other, that women live in connection with women and recognise each other in ways which are outside male control and definition. From the beginning of this 'second wave' of feminism, it has been argued that lesbianism is central to this project, as long as lesbianism is itself defined as women identifying with women, women loving women, women seeing each other as human individuals lacking nothing (Abbott and Love, 1972; Myron and Bunch, eds., 1975; Johnson, 1973; Hoagland and Penelope, eds., 1988; Thompson, 1991). Lesbianism is central to both aspects of the feminist project, as a challenge to male supremacy because of its challenge to the dominance of heterosexual desire, and as the redefining of the category of women, for women and by women and outside the male hegemony. This does not mean that all feminists, or all women, should be lesbians (any more than 'all women' should be any other one thing in particular). What it does mean is that lesbianism, as mutual recognition between women, should be accorded an honoured place within second wave feminism, so that it is available to women.

Initially, during the 1970s, it was argued that lesbianism was also central to feminism because it was a *sexual* practice and because of the kind of sexual practice it was, i.e. sexual desire and activity without the penis, and hence a sexuality with a potential for equality rather than domination. But with the rise to prominence of lesbian sadomasochism, along with a sexual libertarianism which defines sex only in terms of 'bodies and pleasures' and which demands that sex be placed beyond political critique, it has become clear that lesbian sex too can be implicated in forms of domination and

subordination. This development should have come as no surprise, since feminism had early identified the connection between sex and domination at the heart of male supremacist meanings and values. We had not, however, gone far enough in our analysis, and investigated the ways in which women, too, can be complicit with eroticised domination. Lesbian sadomasochism has brought this complicity urgently into the feminist arena.

Insistence on the genital sexual nature of lesbianism is a radical stance only to the extent that lesbianism remains connected to the interests all women have in eroding the dominance of phallic sexuality (Thompson, 1992). Lesbianism defined merely as sex, as no more than the sexual preference of some (few) individual women, takes the politics out of lesbianism. Such a purely sexual definition ignores the social context of phallocratic reality within which 'sex' is still embedded, and reproduces the meanings and values, desires and needs, of domination. As Sheila Jeffreys has pointed out in relation to lesbian sadomasochism, sexual desire which reproduces relations of erotic domination remains 'heterosexual' in meaning and value (Jeffreys, 1991).

Nonetheless, to the extent that lesbianism still challenges the primary mechanism for ensuring women's consent to their own subordination—heterosexual desire—it remains crucially important to the feminist project. It is through heterosexual desire, often women's as well as men's, that women are fitted into their subordinate roles in relation to men. As a social system of domination, male supremacy functions most efficiently to the extent that individuals unwittingly consent to the status quo, rather than being overtly and forcibly coerced. In the interests of reproducing systematic domination, individuals must embrace the sphere allotted to them within the hierarchy and see it as the only reality. Under conditions of male supremacy, women's lot is to serve men, to see no alternative to their subordinate roles in relation to men, and to recognise only males as 'truly human' subjects. Heterosexual desire puts the excitement and the reality into women's subordination to men.<sup>45</sup> Lesbianism challenges male supremacy by challenging the exclusiveness and 'naturalness' of heterosexual desire as the only form of intimacy women are allowed, by refusing to serve or service men, by withdrawing

---

45. I am indebted to Sheila Jeffreys for the idea that heterosexual desire puts the excitement into women's subordination. (Jeffreys, 1991) See: Dworkin, 1988 for a sustained critique of heterosexuality, which Dworkin calls 'intercourse', and the central part it plays in maintaining the subordination of women.

from men recognition as the only ‘human’ individuals, and by finding nothing lacking between and among women.

What I am talking about here is separatism.<sup>46</sup> Although it is lesbianism as a feminist commitment (but not otherwise) which gives to separatism its central focus and meaning, separatism is not confined to lesbians. It is, rather, a continuum of feminist politics, available to all feminists because it involves identifying male supremacy and refusing to participate. It is a withdrawal of consent to male supremacist relations of ruling. In arguing in favour of separatism, I am not suggesting that it is some kind of revolutionary end point. Rather, separatism is a present strategic necessity, a feminist requirement as long as the male remains hegemonically the ‘human’ norm, as long as male supremacist conditions require female compliance, and as long as women are permitted no alternative to their roles in serving men. Male supremacy not only excludes women—from ‘human’ status, and from highly valued forms of life, e.g. government, wealth, creative and artistic endeavour. It also *includes* women—in roles confined to the support and nurturance of males, as mothers, wives, receptacles for the penis, as the mainstay and support of masculinity, as the unrecognised recognisers of male subjectivity, required to silence their own interests in the interests of masculine importance, status and reality. It is this *inclusion* of women within male supremacist meanings and values which requires women’s exclusion from those spheres men value, spheres which could not exist without the work women do in providing basic human necessities. Women’s exclusion from positions of power and influence has a purpose—to keep the majority of women tied to men, promoting male interests, nourishing and fostering male subjectivities, doing the work and providing the ground from which men can launch themselves into those projects so highly valued within male supremacist conditions.

It is this inclusion of women within phallographic reality which is expressed in Ti-Grace Atkinson’s concept of ‘metaphysical cannibalism’ (Atkinson, 1974: 57-63). Atkinson started from the premise that the human condition involved an inescapable dilemma of rationality. On the one hand there was a need for physical freedom and autonomy, while on the other hand there was an inevitable restriction imposed on this autonomy by the

---

46. For ‘separatism’ as a continuum of feminist commitment, see: Thompson, 1991: 91-8. For separatism as women’s refusal of male access, as women taking control of the definition of female existence, and as mutual recognition between women, see: Frye, 1983: 95-109, 152-74.



limitations of bodily existence. What the human individual could actually achieve always fell far short of what the imagination could conceive. Atkinson argued that men resolved this dilemma by ‘cannibalising’ the consciousness of women:

The male-female distinction was the beginning of the role system, wherein some persons function for others. This primary distinction should properly be referred to as the Oppressor (male)—Oppressed (female) distinction, the first political distinction ... The role of the Oppressor is to resolve his dilemma at the expense of others by destroying their humanity (appropriating the rationality of the Oppressed) ... Given an Oppressor—the will for power—the natural response for its counterpart, the Oppressed (given any shade of remaining Self-consciousness), is Self-annihilation ... While men can “cannibalize” the consciousness of women as far as human Self-construction for the woman is concerned, men get no direct use from this except insofar as they *believe* it gives them magic powers (Atkinson, 1974: 61-2—her emphasis).

Atkinson believed that men were able to achieve their super-ordinate position over women because women suffered from a periodic weakness, the ‘*social* disability’ (her emphasis) of bearing ‘the burden of the reproductive process’ (p.60). There are a number of problems with Atkinson’s account, for example, the lack of clarity around what constitutes the ‘dilemma of rationality’, the postulation in the first place of an inescapable dilemma which structures cultural life, and locating the cause of male domination in women’s child-bearing capacity. Nonetheless, she did recognise that women were included within a male supremacist social order, and that that female inclusion served a purpose for the benefit of men.

It is this *inclusion* of women which separatism contests. While separatism has been criticised for exacerbating women’s exclusion from male dominated domains, in fact feminism has never been unequivocally in favour of women’s equality with men. The public domain is hierarchical, exploitative, structured by invidious distinctions between categories of human beings, motivated by subjectivities domineering and contemptuous, or obsequious, envious and resentful. Women’s entry into statuses and positions structured by the requirements of male prestige and power, would do no more than set

up among women the same hierarchies already existing among men, and reproduce current invidious distinctions among women. Hence feminism's challenge to women's exclusion is not unambivalent. Feminism's refusal of women's inclusion, however, as female auxiliaries to projects designed in the interests of men, as supporters and exponents of male supremacist meanings and values, is clear and unequivocal. It is in that sense, as this very refusal, that separatism is the chief strategy of 'second wave' feminism, not, however, as a refusal to have anything to do with men. Such an interpretation is not only unrealistic, it is also individualistic. It rules out the possibility of important feminist projects which engage with, and hence directly challenge, the social conditions of male supremacy.<sup>47</sup> Separatism is a withdrawal of allegiance to these conditions. That may or may not involve withdrawing from some forms of relationships with men, crucially, although not only, sexual relationships. But because men are not the only bearers of the social relations of male supremacy, withdrawing from men (even if that were possible or desirable) is not sufficient as a withdrawal of consent to male supremacist meanings and values.

In the most general terms, feminism is a struggle in the domain of meaning, in contrast to, for example, women violently overthrowing the present ruling classes, or taking over the means of production or the world's wealth. Given how little social power women have, such enterprises are wildly beyond our capabilities or resources. Meaning is everywhere because we are language users. To say that feminism is a struggle in the realm of meaning is not to say that feminism is, therefore, not concerned with mundane matters like rape, child care, equal pay, parliamentary representation, etc. It is simply to say that those matters have a different meaning from a feminist perspective than they do from any other. It is also to say that, because meaning is everywhere, so is the possibility of feminist struggle. It is to say that feminist politics is not confined to the kinds of issues conventionally defined as 'political', but that it can happen anywhere with whatever tools are closest to hand. It can happen in the deepest recesses of the psyche as well as world-wide, in the most intimate of personal relationships as well as nationally and internationally. It is to say that feminism is available wherever women are, and advances wherever women do. The gargantuan accumulations of wealth in the hands of a few men at the expense of the majority of people, the all-pervasive systems of mass propaganda pacifying whole populations with banal, misogynist stupidities, the

---

47. I am indebted to Renate Klein for drawing my attention to this point.

mass starvation and destruction of the environment generated by international capitalism, the nation states legislating in the interests of the powerful and stockpiling lethal weapons sufficient to wipe out the human race, and everywhere men on the rampage, raping, maiming and killing—all this is far too much for anyone to cope with, even collectively. But that is not cause for despair. The struggle is also against the meanings and values of the world ‘that is the case’, and that struggle takes place within each individual committed to the task of refusing compliance. While individuals can often do very little about the facts of domination, we can all radically bring the meanings into question and refuse to embrace the values.

In defining feminism as the struggle against male supremacy and the struggle for a human status for women identifying with women, I am not making the weak claim that this is only ‘my’ definition, that everyone has her own definition, and that anyone’s definition is as good as anyone else’s. I am making the much stronger claim that this is what feminism *is*. I am claiming that the definition I am proposing is *the* definition of feminism. It is a definition which makes sense of the feminist project. It addresses the logic of feminist politics, theory and practice; and it is broad enough to include most of what is recognised as feminism, while being specific enough to allow anti-feminist arguments and assertions to be identified and excluded. It is true that I am a single individual making the claim, and that I speak on no one’s behalf but my own. But that does not debar me (or any other individual) from saying what feminism is. This does not mean that the definition proposed here is unchallengeable and beyond argument. On the contrary, because it is argued for in the clearest possible terms, it is very much open for debate. Disagreements, however, cannot be resolved by means of well-intentioned decisions to respect our individual differences of opinion. Although polite agreement to disagree may sometimes be the only civilised option, it does not resolve the contradictions, but simply postpones them. While individual feminists are the participants in the debate, feelings and opinions are not sufficient referents for feminist theory, which must be argued through with reference to the logic and evidence of feminist theory and practice.

Neither is the definition I propose confined to one type of feminism. The tendency to refer to ‘feminisms’ in the plural is an evasion of the real and important contradictions between competing assertions made in the name of feminism. To the extent that

arguments are mutually contradictory, the conflicts will never be resolved by separating the antagonistic positions and allocating them to different 'feminisms'. Respect for differences can be carried too far, especially when those 'differences' are not just differences but glaring incompatibilities. I intend that the definition I have proposed here will allow the conflicts to be addressed directly.

### Chapter Three: A Feminist Standpoint

What I have been arguing for in the previous chapter is a feminist standpoint, although the sense in which I use the term differs crucially from the way it is already being used within feminist writings (Hartsock, 1987; Hartsock, 1985; Jaggar, 1983: 369-89; Smith, 1987[1972]; Smith, 1987; Smith, 1990; Harding, 1986; Harding, 1987; Harding, 1986; Harding, 1991; Flax, 1983; Keller, 1978; Keller, 1983; Keller, 1985; Keller, 1982; Rose, 1983). I do not ground a feminist standpoint in women, women's experience, women's pain and oppression (Jaggar), women's life activity (Hartsock, Smith, Harding), women's empathy (Keller), women's more integrated (than men's) ways of knowing (Rose), nor in any postulated unique access women might have to nurturance, relationship, or peculiarly female forms of knowledge. The concept of a feminist standpoint could only have come from women, and it must never lose sight of women and women's interests. But women's social location alone is not sufficient guarantee of feminist commitment, vide women's embracing of right-wing, fascistic, misogynist values, for example, and the myriad of ways in which women can embrace our own oppression because it is the only reality we know. And men are capable of understanding a feminist standpoint, although not capable of contributing to one, I would suggest for strategic reasons—men still tend to dominate wherever they are included, not always because of a male will to power, but because male supremacy is still the way the world is and its patterns and habits still too deeply engrained.

A feminist standpoint, as I interpret it, starts from the question which is prior to any discussions about women's nature, women's abilities, women's life situations, etc. That question is: *why* are women and their concerns problematic? It is the answer to that question—because of male supremacy—which constitutes the revolutionary potential and actuality of feminism. A feminist standpoint is grounded first and foremost in acknowledging the existence of male domination in order to challenge and oppose it. This consciousness arises out of the social positioning of women because the problems of women's exclusion from 'human' status are more pressing for women (although, as I have already pointed out, in the long term everyone stands to gain a human status which is at no one's expense). But women's consciousness of their life situations does not become feminist until it develops into an awareness that women's social positioning is structured by male domination, and unless the male monopolisation of 'human' status is resisted consciously, deliberately and continuously.

Most of the above-cited proponents of a feminist standpoint are to some extent aware that women's consciousness of their social location alone is insufficient for feminist politics. Jane Flax says that 'women's experience, which has been excluded from the realm of the known, of the rational, is not in itself an adequate ground for theory. As the other pole of the dualities it must be incorporated and transcended' (Flax, 1983: 270). Nancy Hartsock says

A standpoint is not simply an interested position (interpreted as bias) but is interested in the sense of being engaged ... the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations (Hartsock, 1987: 159-60).

Alison Jaggar points out that

the standpoint of women ... is not something that can be discovered through a survey of women's existing beliefs and attitudes ... Instead, the standpoint of women is discovered through a collective process of political and scientific struggle ... The daily experience of oppressed groups provides them with an immediate awareness of their own suffering but they do not perceive immediately the underlying causes of this suffering nor even necessarily perceive it as oppression. Their understanding is obscured both by the prevailing ideology and by the very structure of their lives ... "false consciousness" is generated by the structure of women's everyday lives as well as by ideologies of male dominance (Jaggar, 1983: 371, 382, 383).

Sandra Harding frequently points to the limitations of experience as a basis for politics. She says, for example:

Having women's experiences—being a woman—clearly is not sufficient to generate feminist knowledge; all women have women's experiences, but only at certain historical moments do any of us ever produce feminist knowledge. Our experience lies to us ... [because]

dominant-group experience generates the “common sense” of the age ... All of us must live in social relations that naturalize, or make appear intuitive, social arrangements that ... have been created, and made to appear natural by the power of the dominant groups ... It is ... necessary to learn how to overcome—to get a critical, objective perspective on—the “spontaneous consciousness” created by thought that begins in one’s dominant social location (Harding, 1991: 286-7).

But the feminist standpoint theorists are vague on the question of how we get from ‘experience’ to theory and politics. How does a feminist consciousness arise out of ‘women’s life activity’ when all women are not feminists, and some women are actively anti-feminist? What is it that has been achieved with the commitment to a feminist standpoint? What is it that is being struggled against and what is being struggled for? What is it that a feminist standpoint aims to liberate us from?

That these questions are unresolved is partly a consequence of an uncritical reliance by feminist standpoint theorists on the Marxist concept of ‘the standpoint of the proletariat’. The problems were not resolved within Marxism, largely because Marxism itself failed to place the principled opposition to capitalist domination at the centre of its critique,<sup>48</sup> concerned as it was to present itself as ‘science’, and hence as disinterested, objective and value-free. In the case of Georg Lukács, the Marxist theorist who provides the primary reference point for feminist standpoint theory, this commitment to ‘science’

---

48’ There are exceptions to this scattered throughout the writings of Marx himself. For example, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels said:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class ... insofar ... as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch ... do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age (Marx and Engels, 1974[1846]: 64—emphasis in the original).

See also the following quotation from Marx’s *The Holy Family*, cited by Lukács:

The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-alienation. But the former feels at home in this self-alienation and feels itself confirmed by it; it recognises alienation as its own instrument and in it possesses the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels itself destroyed by this alienation and sees in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence (Lukács, 1971[1922]: 149).

was channelled through such Hegelian concepts as ‘the contradictions of history’ and ‘objective social relations’. In Lukács’ terms, the clearer vision of the proletariat, its ‘objective understanding of the nature of society’, is a consequence of its ‘special position in society and history’, and not a consequence of its ethical opposition to the dehumanisation entailed by capitalist relations of power. This was despite the fact that Lukács himself developed a theory of this very dehumanisation. In his analysis of ‘reification’, which took as its starting point Marx’s analysis of ‘the fetishism of commodities’ in volume one of *Capital*, Lukács pointed out that the real live human beings who were workers under capitalism were transformed into things to be consumed in the production of surplus value: ‘the worker is forced to objectify his labour-power over against his total personality and to sell it as a commodity’ (Lukács, 1971[1922]: 168). But he did not attribute this dehumanisation to the domination of the proletariat by the capitalist ruling class, but to the ‘different’ social locations of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Nonetheless, a critical theory of ethical opposition to capitalist domination is contained within the Marxist project, not least because such a morality is a prerequisite for exposing the consequences for the lives of human beings of capital accumulation. It is only once this moral and political commitment has been made that the ‘social location’ of the workers under capitalism can be seen as dehumanised, rather than as an inevitable consequence of the circulation of commodities, for example, or as nothing but a ‘free contract between equals’. On this interpretation, the referent of Marxist politics is not the ‘material life activity’ of the (male) worker, but capitalist relations of domination. The social relations of capital ensure that the interests of capital, and of those who benefit from the capitalist mode of production, will prevail at the expense, not only of ‘workers’, but also of the unemployed and the ‘unemployable’. (Among the latter are included, not only the sick and debilitated, but also children and their mothers, the non-elites of third world countries, and anyone who will not or cannot contribute to the generation of profit and its ideological apparatuses). If the feminist standpoint theorists had read the Marxist project in this way, as the moral and political opposition to capitalist relations of power, they may have been in a better position to identify the moral and political opposition to male supremacy as the defining principle of a feminist standpoint. What is needed, above and beyond any experiences one might have as a



woman, is a commitment to acknowledging the existence of male domination, and by opposing end it.

None of the feminist standpoint theorists unequivocally identifies engaging with male supremacy as the link which transforms 'women's experience' into feminist politics. They certainly recognise the existence of, and oppose, male domination. They also apply this recognition to their analyses. But they do so only implicitly or tangentially, while at the same time failing to acknowledge that it is this very challenge to male domination which provides the structuring principle translating a consciousness of women's lives into feminist politics. In the absence of any explicit naming of what the feminist political struggle is about, their task is confined to finding something intrinsic to women's lives which in and of itself leads to a feminist consciousness. But to the extent that they do find this 'something', they do so, not because it is there in any objective sense, but because their prior commitment to acknowledging the existence of male supremacy allows them to see it.

Nancy Hartsock, for example, states that 'women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy' (Hartsock, 1987: 159). She then proceeds to examine what she refers to as 'women's life activity' and 'the sexual division of labour' in order to find that privileged vantage point. But her account of 'women's life activity' is already informed by her commitment to opposing male supremacy. She finds a challenge to male supremacy in 'women's life activity' because she already implicitly interprets it as structured by male supremacy. From a male supremacist standpoint (which is never acknowledged as such because it constitutes hegemonic reality) 'women's life activity' appears differently from the ways in which Hartsock can see it from her own feminist standpoint. It is her feminist standpoint which allows her to identify the different ways female and male individuals are 'socialised' so that women will continue the unacknowledged provision of the vital necessities of human existence and leave men free to engage in those activities which bolster their 'human' status at someone else's expense. It is also that standpoint which enables her, for example, to perceive 'the sexual division of labour' as a political problem rather than a fact of nature, women's unpaid work and women themselves as appropriated by men rather than freely given by women, and 'household labor ... as work rather than as a labor of love', as Alison Jaggar put it (Jaggar, 1983: 384). Hartsock is not examining 'women's

life activity' per se, in order to find a basis for feminist politics, as she herself interprets her task. She is presenting women's lives from a perspective which already includes a feminist commitment.

Sandra Harding explicitly refuses to place the opposition to male supremacy at the centre of the feminist political agenda. She says:

Increasingly replacing the focus on male supremacy that preoccupied much feminist writing of the 1970s are new analyses of gender relations as they have historically been constructed through imperialism, class exploitation, and the control of sexuality. These studies ... take a broader and more reflexive field for their own analyses: they historicize, contextualize within history, the male supremacy that has been the particularly prevalent and insufferable part of gender relations.(Harding, 1991: x).

Her reason for doing this is her belief in the pluralism of oppressions: '[Feminist] tendencies that focus on male supremacy and gender relations without giving equal weight to other important aspects of social relations can provide resources for Eurocentrism, racism, imperialism, compulsory heterosexism, and class exploitative beliefs and practices', she says (p.11). But by couching the political problem in this way, she commits herself to confining oppressions within discrete and unrelated categories. In her account, male supremacy is not only something other than 'Eurocentrism', etc., struggling against it is antagonistic to any project of struggling against other forms of 'oppression'. Focusing on male supremacy, she implies, happens at the expense of other forms of political struggle. She does not consider the possibility that these other 'aspects of social relations' also have male supremacist aspects, and hence that struggling against male supremacy is also to struggle against all forms of relations of ruling. (These issues are discussed in more detail in chapter five.)

Harding's feminist project is to demonstrate that knowledge grounded in women's lives can give 'less partial and distorted' accounts of nature and social relations than knowledge produced by 'men of the dominant groups'. But whether or not feminist knowledge is less partial and distorted than mainstream thought is not the issue. The main problem with ideologies of domination is not that they are partial and distorted,

although they are both, but whose interests their partiality serves, and the ways in which their distortions operate at the expense of those they subordinate. Moreover, Harding's own argument convincingly demonstrates that there is no transcendent vantage point from which to decide relative degrees of partialness and distortion. The feminist challenge to malestream knowledge is its exposure as partial of that which claims to be impartial and disinterested. Feminism does this, not because it is less partial, but because it enters the discourse from another direction, the interests of women in opposing male domination. Harding herself is aware that knowledge cannot be disinterested and value-free, but she equivocates on the next logical step—explicitly characterising feminism in terms of the struggle against the meanings, values, discourses and practices of male domination.

At one point, she supplies eight reasons why knowledge from the standpoint of women's lives is superior to current hegemonic forms of knowledge (pp.121-33). But once again, as in the case of Hartsock's account, it is possible to characterise 'women's lives' in the way Harding does, only because of her implicit acceptance of a framework which already identifies the manifestations of male domination, her disclaimers notwithstanding. It is only that prior commitment to a critique of male supremacy which enables us to see, for example, that women's lives and activities are 'erroneously devalued and neglected' (rather than revered and protected), that women are 'strangers' to and 'outsiders within' the social order (rather than beloved helpmeets and nurturers), that women have 'fewer interests in ignorance' (because the status quo works against women's interests), that women's daily activities provide the support and nurturance necessary for men's more highly valued activities, that 'it is the right time in history' for the 'conflicts and contradictions' in women's lives to appear, and that women are oppressed. Despite Harding's own attempt to jettison 'the focus on male supremacy', it is only that focus which gives her her feminist insights.

Alison Jaggar gives the most detailed account of the political limitations of confining what she calls 'a women's standpoint' to women's experiences. She is clearly aware that appeals to 'women's life activity' are not alone sufficient for feminist politics. She says that 'the standpoint of women ... is not something that can be discovered through a survey of women's existing beliefs and attitudes' (Jaggar, 1983: 371), and that 'all aspects of our experience, including our feelings and emotions, must be subjected to

critical scrutiny and feminist political analysis' (p.380). She discusses the case of right-wing women whose thinking about their lives and experiences, far from leading to a feminist consciousness, has resulted in a militant anti-feminism. She concludes the discussion by saying: 'Simply to be a woman, then, is not sufficient to guarantee a clear understanding of the world as it appears from the standpoint of women' (pp.382-3).<sup>49</sup> But although she is aware that it is political struggle which transforms women's experience into a 'women's standpoint', and although she is also aware of male dominance as one of the problems addressed by feminist politics, she does not identify the struggle against male dominance as the crucial defining factor of that politics. She acknowledges the insight 'that the prevailing culture is suffused with the perceptions and values of male dominance' as 'one of the main contributions of radical feminism'. But she seems to believe that this insight entails attempting 'to create an alternative women's culture' which is unrealistic, elitist and incomprehensible to most women. She says that it is only socialist feminism which 'is able to explain why this culture is dominant and to link the anti-feminist consciousness of many women with the structure of their daily lives', because socialist feminism is 'explicitly historical materialist'. But at this point male dominance drops out of her account—'this culture' is simply 'dominant'—and we are left with nothing but 'women's daily lives' and a 'political and scientific struggle' which has lost its central focus (p.382). As a consequence, Jaggar's 'women's standpoint' is still too deeply immersed in 'women's lives', the 'materialist' grounding for her 'women's standpoint'. Without male domination as the inimical adversary of feminist politics, there is no possibility of identifying the ways in which women's lives are imbued with the meanings and values of male supremacy, and hence no possibility of engaging in any political struggle at all.

She postpones the recognition of male domination to some revolutionary end point when it will be overthrown, rather than locating it as the reason for feminist politics from the beginning:

The standpoint of women is that perspective which reveals women's true interests ... Those who construct the standpoint of women must

---

49. Her discussion of right-wing women relies on Deirdre English's 1981 paper, 'The War Against Choice: Inside the Antiabortion Movement', in *Mother Jones* no. 11. She does not mention Andrea Dworkin's 1979 paper in *Ms*, 'Safety, Shelter, Rules, Form, Love: The Promise of the Ultra-Right', a paper which became the first chapter of Dworkin's book, *Right-Wing Women*, published in the same year as Jaggar's own book.

begin from women's experience as women describe it, but they must go beyond that experience theoretically and ultimately may require that women's experience be redescribed ... by generating a systematic feminist alternative to the prevailing masculinist ideology. Such an alternative can only be the product of a long process of political and scientific struggle in the pursuit of feminist goals. Only such a struggle will reveal the intricate and systematic reality of male dominance ... In the end, an adequate representation of the world from the standpoint of women requires the material overthrow of male domination (p.384).

Jaggar is correct in emphasising the long and protracted nature of the feminist struggle to 'reveal the intricate and systematic reality of male dominance'. But we do not have to wait until the battle is ended to represent the world in the interests of women. That is what we have been doing all along, and will continue to do as long as it is necessary. Women's experience is already being 'redescribed' by feminism. That redescription is not 'ultimately', but now, as long as the opposition to male domination is kept in the centre of feminist politics.

Nothing more than this acknowledgment is needed for a feminist standpoint, since to expose, name and describe male domination is already to acknowledge women's interests in opposing it. Certainly there is no need for something 'more basic' and 'neutral', like 'science' or 'the sex/gender system' or 'the sexual division of labour' or 'the public/private distinction' or any other kinds of 'dualisms', 'binaries' or 'dichotomies'. It is at this point, once the existence of male domination has been recognised, that all the really hard questions start: What counts as male domination? How do we recognise it? Is this particular phenomenon an instance of male domination or is it not? What does sexuality have to do with it? What is my responsibility? Can anything be done about it? Should anything be done about it? It is certainly part of the feminist enterprise to insist on the recognition of women's 'contribution to subsistence, and their contribution to childrearing' (to quote Nancy Hartsock—Hartsock, 1987: 164). But to leave it there is far too restrictive of feminist aims. To confine the feminist standpoint to what women already know or do, is to leave women no better off than we already were, still holding the baby and doing the housework, still men's auxiliaries, propping up male egos and supporting male enterprises, still included in the human race

on men's terms or not at all. Although feminism certainly demands that women's traditional activities be valued, it is also, and more importantly, a thoroughgoing critique of male domination wherever it is found and however it is manifested. It is a working towards ending male impositions of whatever form, and the creating of a community of women relating to women and creating our own human status unencumbered by male needs and definitions. That can only be done from a standpoint which recognises the existence of the meanings and values of the social order of male supremacy which allows a 'human' status only to men, a standpoint which involves a struggle to reinterpret and rearrange the world so that women can be human too.

### *Relativism*

The word "relativism" is used, probably more often than not, as a term of abuse; and discussions of the issues involved are apt to be bad-tempered (Winch, 1987: 181).

the temptations of relativism ... can be overcome either by resisting them *in toto* or by giving in to them with abandon. The situations of the consistent Puritan and of the uninhibited voluptuary are at least unambiguous. It is the *partial* resistance to temptation that causes anxiety and a lingering sense of dissatisfaction (Lukes, 1977: 174).

Characterising feminism in this way, as an ethical and political standpoint, gives rise to questions about the status of the knowledge claims made by feminism, questions which have traditionally been canvassed under the heading of 'relativism'. Those questions arise because feminism is admittedly not disinterested or value-free. For example, how does feminism avoid partiality, bias or prejudice if it is explicitly committed to the interests of women and opposed to the interests of men, at least in some sense?<sup>50</sup> What criteria of judgement are there which would enable feminism to avoid pernicious forms of relativism, such as the belief that there are only personal opinions and anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's, or that there are no criteria for deciding between different standpoints because all points of view are equally worthy of consideration or because they are incommensurable? What is the nature of feminist truth, if the only truth feminism allows is that which is already structured by its commitment to certain

---

50. For an interesting discussion of what she calls the 'partiality debates', see: Friedman, 1991.

meanings and values? If feminism is avowedly committed to certain values and meanings, what determines whether those meanings and values are preferable to others which conflict with them?

Some of the answers to these questions should already be clear from preceding discussions. On the question of partiality, it can be acknowledged that feminism is committed to the interests of women and opposed to the interests of men, while at the same time arguing that that does not constitute bias or prejudice because the interest women have in opposing male domination is also in the interests of men, although in a quite different sense from any interests men might have in the maintenance of the social system of male supremacy. The interests of women and men are opposed only to the extent that men have an interest in maintaining their 'human' status at women's expense. To the extent that both sexes have an interest in a human status available to all, they have interests in common, although the chief barrier to recognition of those common interests, male power and its benefits and privileges, is yet to be overcome. On the question of those forms of relativism which allow no criteria of judgement at all, it is obvious that feminism is not relativist in this sense because its ethical and political status already supplies it with criteria of judgement. Feminism has its own logic of theory and practice which is not reducible to a matter of personal opinion, and which provides it with standards of relative worth. It is certainly the case that there are standpoints with which feminism is radically incompatible, standpoints which validate or glorify domination, for example. But far from constituting feminism as 'relativist', that incompatibility is the very essence of the feminist struggle for a world where such interests would no longer prevail.

As for the question of truth, a truth claim on the part of feminism is no different from any other sort. It is verified in the same way, subject to the same requirements for argument and evidence, just as fallible and challengeable. It is feminist only in the sense that it is discovered with women's interests in mind from the standpoint of opposition to male domination, and by asking the kinds of questions made possible by this feminist standpoint. But if feminist truth claims are no different from any other sort, then by the same token, there are no other kinds of truth claims which differ from feminism in owing allegiance in the first place to identifiable meanings and values which determine what questions can be asked by whom and in whose interests. In fact it is becoming

increasingly apparent that knowledge in general can be neither disinterested nor value-free, whether that is acknowledged or not, because all knowledge arises out of systems of meaning already constituted in terms of values and interests.<sup>51</sup> Hence, feminist knowledge is no different from malestream varieties of thought in its reliance on a system of meaning which generates its truth claims, although it does differ in its explicit acknowledgment of that reliance. If ‘relativism’ means an absence of criteria of judgement, either evidential or ethical, then feminism is not ‘relativist’ in this sense.

If, however, we ask what ‘relativism’ is being contrasted with, a different answer appears. If relativism is the opposite of a timeless, universal, disinterested truth, then feminism is located on the relativist side of the contrast. If relativism is the only alternative to ‘absolute authority, ... practice of all practices, ... scheme of all schemes’, as Lorraine Code put it (Code, 1991: 3), then feminism is relativist. If the opposite of relativism is to espouse ‘the putatively self-evident principle that truth once discerned, knowledge once established, claim their status *as* truth and knowledge by virtue of a grounding in or coherence within a permanent, objective, ahistorical, and circumstantially neutral framework or set of standards’ (p.2), then feminism must be relativist because it has been explicitly critical of such an espousal. As to whether or not feminism is ‘relativist’ in any sense which implies the opposite of attempts ‘to determine necessary and sufficient conditions for the possibility and justification of knowledge claims’ (p.1), the question must remain undecided. Malestream philosophy, whose question it is, has been unable to decide, and some forms of philosophy have even abandoned the question altogether.<sup>52</sup>

To the extent that feminism can be characterised as ‘relativist’ in this sense, it is not a lapse or an oversight, but a positive and deliberate stance. It is a direct consequence of

---

51. I have argued elsewhere (although less clearly, coherently and extensively than I would now) that all knowledge in the social sciences is based on morality, and that the positivist requirement that the social sciences be value-free is an inappropriate application of the methodology of the natural sciences to the domain of the social (Thompson, 1974; Thompson, 1976). The possibility of a disinterested, value-free knowledge even within the domain of the natural sciences has also been extensively questioned, both from within malestream philosophy of science (for a good overview, see: Phillips, 1977—my thanks to Amparo Bonilla Campos for drawing my attention to Phillips’ book), and by feminist philosophy of science, e.g. Harding and Hintikka, eds, 1983; Harding, 1986; Harding, ed., 1987; Harding and O’Barr, eds, 1987; Harding, 1991; Keller, 1983; Keller, 1985; Haraway, 1988; Tuana, ed., 1989.

52. This seems to be one of the main implications of ‘postmodernism’, although it is not confined to that context. The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein has the same implication. If ‘meaning’ and ‘truth’ are discoverable only through investigating the ways in which the terms are used and the claims made, there can be no overall ‘necessary and sufficient conditions’ for knowledge.



its critique and repudiation of the above canons of malestream thought. Lorraine Code, for example, recommends what she calls a ‘mitigated’ or ‘critical relativism’ (Code, 1991). By this she means a form of knowledge which makes no claims to universality or absolute authority, but which is not thereby ‘relativist’ in any sense which implies there are no criteria of judgement. What qualifies this position as ‘mitigated’—its commitment to the everyday realism of ‘material objects and social/political artifacts’, its willingness to question ‘mechanisms of power ... and prejudice’, and its ‘self-critical stance’ (p.321)—is also what provides it with criteria of adjudication. In Code’s account, there is no need to choose between incontrovertible knowledge on the one hand, and a complete absence of truth claims on the other. To set the question up in this way is to misrepresent the nature of the truth claims which can be made. But while this conclusion is basically correct, her argument is weakened by her characterisation of feminism as an ‘identity politics’ (pp.292-304). She fails to realise the importance of the insight that women’s ‘identity’, ‘positionality’ (pp.180-1) or social location, are rendered problematic in the first place by the ideological construct of the male as the ‘human’ norm. As a consequence of failing to locate feminism’s moral and political significance in the opposition to male domination, she fails to recognise the crucial factor which supplies feminism with its criteria of judgement, and which enables feminism to avoid ‘relativism’ in the pernicious sense.

The same problem appears in the feminist philosophy of science critiques. They remain too closely tied to the ‘feminist/women’s standpoint’ accounts to which they are related, and hence to the idea that knowledge claims can be accounted for in terms of social locations. While these arguments have some cogency in exposing how the meanings and values of the traditional malestream canons masquerade as ‘objective knowledge’, they are less successful in their attempts to demonstrate the greater adequacy of knowledge claims made from positions of social subordination. They fail altogether to provide criteria of adjudication for deciding between conflicting claims made by members of subordinated populations, claims which contradict each other in the sense that if one is true the other is false, and vice versa. To take some examples: some women say that pornography is a positive good and women have a right to enjoyment of it, while other women say that pornography is an aspect of women’s oppression and an evil to be resisted; some prostituted women say that prostitution is just one kind of work, while others say that it is inherently degrading and harmful to women; some Aboriginal

women say that feminism is irrelevant to their lives because it is white and middle-class and does not deal with racism, while other Aboriginal women say that feminism is a vitally important part of their lives because they too are struggling for their own human dignity against male violence and contempt. How is it possible to decide which is right if the only criterion of judgement is whether or not women say it out of their own experiences of oppression? The feminist philosophy of science literature, like standpoint theory, recognises that there can be no knowledge without a prior moral and political framework (the phrase ‘moral and political’ occurs frequently in the work of Sandra Harding, for example), in other words, that knowledge is neither value-free nor disinterested. But it does not unequivocally identify the moral and political framework of feminism as the challenge to the male monopolisation of ‘human’ status, which is entailed in the insistence that women are human too. As a consequence, again like standpoint theory, it cannot give an account of how social locations become converted into awareness of oppression and political opposition to domination.

One of the primary sites within the ‘academic feminist’ literature of a principled commitment to a kind of relativism is to be found in the multifarious attempts to divest feminism of ‘false universalism’. But despite a certain superficial appearance of significance, this construct is too confused to be helpful, although its meaning is assumed to be self-evident and not in need of further clarification. One typical example occurs in the paper, ‘Social Criticism Without Philosophy’, by Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson. The authors assert that some ‘modes of theorizing’, which they identify as ‘philosophy’ and some forms of feminist theory, ‘are insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity, and they falsely universalize features of the theorist’s own era, society, culture, class, sexual orientation, and ethnic, or racial group’ (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 27). But it is unclear what this charge involves. Is it an instance of redundancy—if ‘universalism’ per se is false, it does not need to be named as such? Or does it mean exactly what it says—if ‘universalism’ needs the qualifier ‘false’, then there must be forms of universalising which are true? Given the frequency with which it is asserted that feminism must ‘include all women’, it might be assumed that it is the latter meaning which is intended, i.e. that there are some true universals, at least as far as women are concerned. But those who level the charge of ‘false universalism’ do not provide any instances of ‘true universals’, and they are invariably dismissive of those ‘universals’ they do encounter (or believe they do). Hence, it is more likely that the

charge means that ‘universalism’ per se is false, that is, that any attempt to ‘universalise’ must be false because it cannot be done. In that case, the charge both accuses (some forms of) feminism of ‘universalism’ and at the same time asserts its impossibility. But if it is not possible to ‘universalise’, how can anyone be doing it?

But there is also a further confusion. As well as an assertion of empirical impossibility, the ‘false universalism’ charge is an expression of moral disapproval. The ethical judgement that ‘universalism’ is wrong is never named as such, but it is obviously a moral injunction addressed to women who are perceived as relatively privileged, women referred to as ‘white and middle-class’, to refrain from imposing their own world views on third world women, black women, women of ethnic or cultural minorities, or poor women. ‘False universalising’ is something which *ought not* to be done. But if it is something which *cannot* be done, the question of whether it ought not to be done does not arise. There is no point in disapproving of something which does not happen because it cannot. If ‘universalism’ does not exist, it is absurd to judge it as ethically wrong.

Empirical universals are indeed not possible, in the sense that no one can ever be in a position to know every instance of anything (although it is reasonable to allow that there are some human empirical universals—that everyone is born of woman, for example, and that everyone dies). But theory and politics require empirical *generalisations*. And if no generalisation can be universally inclusive, neither can its limits be specified a priori, because to do so would require that very universal vision which is impossible. To the extent that excluding something involves saying what it is that is being excluded, it is *included*. Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed this point as follows, in the Preface of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

The book will ... draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense (Wittgenstein, 1951[1922]: 27).

Attempts within feminism to avoid ‘false universalism’, by requiring that what the feminist theorist can say be confined to her own cultural and historical context, fail to take account of this kind of caveat on the limits of meaning. At best, the requirement is nothing but a ‘tick the boxes’ exercise, delineating a set of social characteristics which say nothing at all about the moral and political, and hence the feminist, stance of the speaker. At worst, it is ‘simply nonsense’—I cannot know what is only mine unless I also know that it is not yours, and to do that I would have to know what is and is not yours; but that is just what I cannot know, according to the requirement that I remain confined to what is mine. The requirement that I confine myself to my own social location is impossible. In order to draw the boundaries, I would need to know what is outside as well as what is inside; but if I know what is outside, then it is already inside. If Wittgenstein is right, as I think he is, then the only possible boundary is that between comprehension and incomprehension. Across that boundary, I could not hear what was said since I could not understand it. Once I have understood it, there is no longer any boundary. That does not mean that there are no longer any problems. There is the possibility of misunderstanding (which is still a kind of understanding, a false one—it is not the same as incomprehension). It is still possible to disagree, to dispute or reject. To understand is not necessarily to forgive, to tolerate or to accept. Neither does understanding automatically bring equality, since it might arise out of a framework which bolsters my own superiority at someone else’s expense. Nonetheless, when I listen to what others say from their own different locations (Lugones, 1987), it is incorporated into my own world. When I engage with it, it becomes part of the way I situate myself in the world. Whether that understanding reinforces relations of domination, or whether it challenges them, is a separate issue which must be addressed with reference to the particular instance in question. It is not resolved by reciting a list of social indicators.

It is true that I (or anyone else) can speak only from within my own culture and experience. But to say as much is to say nothing substantive, since it is unavoidable. No one can do otherwise. It is not possible to speak from ‘outside’ the only form of life one knows. (‘There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe.—Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off’—Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §103). But in that case, it makes no sense to insist on remaining ‘inside’, because without an ‘outside’

there is no 'inside' either. Moreover, feminism is also a form of life, a community of shared understandings, of mutual knowledge about the world and its meanings and values. It is available to anyone willing to engage with it. It cannot be imposed because it only exists wherever women (and men, but differently) see it as in their own interests. Just as the situations of women differ culturally and historically, so do the particular social problems which must be addressed in women's interests. But just as male domination is everywhere the same in its insistence that only men are 'human', so do women have a common interest in combating it. The forms that opposition takes may differ, but their meaning and value will be the same, a struggle for the human status of women at no one's expense.

Nonetheless, despite the confusions, it is clear that the 'false universalism' accusation is attempting both to warn against feminist complicity with Western and capitalist imperialism, and to recommend that any such complicity be rejected. But as it currently stands, it evades the question of male domination. It focuses on the differences between women, instead of women's common interest in opposing male domination whatever its particular manifestations, and it locates relations of domination primarily among women. It sets up a dichotomy between those women who have the power to hear, those labelled 'white and middle-class' or 'Western', and those who have no obligation to listen because they do not have the power to be heard, those identified as black women, third world women, women of colour, indigenous women. The dichotomy sets up two antagonistic categories of women, with all the duties and obligations on one side, and all the rights and entitlements on the other. All it can recommend is magnanimity on the part of the former towards the latter, while from the latter nothing is expected. It creates a fantasised category of women—'white and middle-class' or 'Western'—who are portrayed as more powerful than women have ever been. It is an attribution of power to women who, in the grand scheme of things, have relatively little. Women do not have the power to 'universalise' because women are not even 'human' in our own right, a state of affairs which feminism is centrally concerned to address. Women can, and frequently do, support men in their projects, embrace men's interests as their own, set aside, ignore, deny or actively seek to destroy their own needs, and in so doing, acquire some modicum of recognition and some small participation in the 'universal human' that man has made to suit his own interests. But no women anywhere have the power to 'universalise' in their own name. The most women can do is reproduce male

supremacist ‘universals’. If that is what is being done in the name of feminism, then it certainly needs to be addressed. It is not, however, self-evident. If it is the case that feminism is complicit with racism and imperialism, that needs to be demonstrated. As I argue at length later in this present work, that is not what happens in the context of ‘differences among women’. Either the grounds of the criticism are not clear; or the work criticised is an inaccurate depiction of the author’s own social location, much less anyone else’s; or the work is seen as problematic simply because its author is relatively privileged, i.e. ‘white and middle-class’; or the criticism amounts to an outright rejection of the relevance of feminism to the lives of women who are not ‘white and middle-class’. Since the ‘false universalism’ accusation occurs within the context of ‘differences among women’, especially in relation to ‘race’, a fuller exposition of these issues can be found in the chapter dealing with those questions.

For a feminism grounded in women’s lives and committed to women’s interests in challenging male supremacy, ‘universalism’ is not a problem. That does not mean that feminism is therefore ‘relativist’ in the pejorative sense. For at least two reasons I would argue that feminism needs to claim a universal relevance. In the first place, feminist questions involve questions about the human condition, questions about the extent to which the ‘human’ condition is formed by the belief that only males are ‘human’, and about the possibilities of a genuinely human status for all at no one’s expense. And in the second place, given that the nature and extent of the domination of women by men is still being explored and uncovered, feminism cannot afford to exclude anything from the scope of its investigations, by confining itself to ‘women’ or ‘women’s issues’, for example, or ‘sex discrimination’, or ‘gender’, etc., or alternatively to specific geographical locations, e.g. the West, the USA, Australia, etc. The ‘nonsense’ of the ‘false universalism’ accusation arises from construing ‘universal’ in the sense of all-inclusive as a matter of fact. But any such assertion is meaningless, since no content can be given to any claims about ‘all the facts’ of human existence. Feminism does not need to try and confine itself to one particular cultural context in order to avoid (empirical) ‘universalism’. If ‘universalism’ is not possible, nothing needs to be done to avoid it. But in claiming a universal relevance for feminist theory, I am not using the term in that sense. The sense in which feminist theory is universal does not entail that feminism is as a matter of fact all-inclusive, either of women or the human race, but that it is open-ended and non-exclusionary. It rules nothing outside its scope of influence a priori. It

specifies no limit or boundary beyond which it cannot go or within which it must be contained. This is not to say that it is never possible to decide that something is or is not a feminist question. It may be that for certain purposes some things will need to be identified as not relevant to the feminist project. But that cannot be decided beforehand if feminism is to remain open-ended and ready to recognise male supremacy wherever it appears. Because feminism is centrally concerned with the problem of male domination and its dehumanising effects on women (and men, but differently), its influence reaches exactly as far as the influence of male domination. To the extent that we cannot specify any limits to male domination, neither can we specify any limits to feminism.

Feminism also has a universal relevance because it addresses itself to the human condition. It is an ethical insistence on the human rights and dignity of women (and of men too to the extent that they can divest themselves of their phallogocratic interests). As such, it is precisely *non-empirical*, since if women were already in fact recognised as full members of the human race, there would not only be no need for feminism, it would be inconceivable. As Marx and Engels pointed out in *The German Ideology*, each new revolutionary class speaks in the name of the universal human. In its project of challenging the dehumanisation inherent in current relations of ruling, and asserting for its constituency a human status denied by domination, it presents a model of the human which reaches beyond the confines of the ruling class to include those previously excluded. One example of this can be found in the anti-racist and anti-colonialist struggle, which is entirely clear about the dehumanisation intrinsic to colonialism and European imperialism, and about its own claims for the full humanity of third world peoples oppressed, exploited, starved, tortured, murdered and deprived of human dignity by the colonisers (Fanon, 1970[1952]; Fanon, 1970[1961]; Said, 1987[1978]; Said, 1994). Unfortunately, with the exception of feminism, all revolutionary classes have fought only for the ‘humanity’ of men and at women’s expense. Nonetheless, if it is the case that the oppressed, those deprived of human dignity and status under conditions of domination, must appeal to a universal human in making claims for their own humanity, then to demand that feminism dispense with universal claims is to demand that feminism refrain from claiming a human status for women.

Assertions to the effect that feminism is ‘white and middle-class’, assertions which are linked to the construct of ‘false universalism’, purport to demonstrate the falsity of

feminism's claims to universal relevance. They are attempts to demonstrate that feminism, too, is limited in its ethical claims, that it confines itself to the interests of comparatively privileged women, and by so doing is complicit with domination. But, as Marx and Engels pointed out, the claim by the revolutionary class to represent the interests of all the non-ruling classes is true 'in the beginning', that is, it is true as long as the revolutionary class does not become the new ruling class. The claim to universal relevance only becomes an 'illusion' when the revolutionary class acquires a vested interest in domination, and defends *that* interest as the interests of all (Marx and Engels, 1974[1846]: 65-6). It is unlikely that feminism's claim to universal relevance has yet developed into this kind of illusion, given that nowhere are women the new ruling class (although they can be complicit with the old male supremacist one), and given that so far, feminism has demonstrated a readiness to oppose any and every form of domination. That opposition is a direct consequence of the fact that all forms of domination harm women, including that form which no other revolutionary class has ever recognised, male domination.

It is those peculiar parameters of male supremacy which constitute the problem so confusedly indicated by the charge of 'false universalism'. For Fraser and Nicholson, 'philosophy' is the primary site of 'false universalism'. The feminist writings they criticise are implicated only derivatively, to the extent that those writings continue to cling to the canons of traditional Western philosophy. Fraser and Nicholson purport to demonstrate this continuing complicity of 'some feminists' with traditional philosophy. This complicity remains, they argue, despite feminist criticisms which have in their view exposed 'the contingent, partial, and historically situated character of what has passed in the mainstream for necessary, universal, and ahistorical truths' (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 26). But although the feminist critique may have these implications, that is not primarily what it is about. The problem with Western philosophy from a feminist standpoint is not primarily that it claims the status of necessary, universal and timeless truth, but that it operates in male supremacist interests while defining itself as in the interests of all. As Fraser and Nicholson point out, this involves philosophy's self-presentation as something like 'a "God's eye view" which transcends any situation or perspective'. In order to speak in the voice of the 'universal human', philosophy has had to exclude *all* human particularity, including that of the men of genius themselves. Constructs of the 'universal human' are false to the extent that they are ideological, that



is, to the extent that they purvey the interests of domination as the interests of all, by constructing reality in such a way that relations of ruling vanish from sight because they are the only relations given meaning and value. At the same time, however, it must also be acknowledged that, because even men of genius are human, it is possible that 'the great thinkers' have had insights which reach beyond their own vested interests. Whether or not this is so cannot be decided once and for all, since to do so would require that very 'universal' vantage point which is at issue. Feminism's task in relation to the Western intellectual tradition is to evaluate whether or not and to what extent frameworks are committed to male supremacist interests, meanings and values.

This is not the way Fraser and Nicholson characterise feminism, however. Rather, they regard feminism as a concern with 'women'. It is this focus of attention solely on 'women' which lies behind their criticism of the 'false universalism' of 'some feminist theorists'. These theorists, they say, 'theorize in terms of a putatively unitary, primary, culturally universal type of activity associated with women, generally an activity conceived as domestic and located in the family' (p.29). To the extent that the theorists they discuss also interpret feminism solely in terms of 'women', and perceive their own task in terms of analysing the 'causes' of 'women's oppression', Fraser and Nicholson have at least identified a problem. (For a discussion of the problems involved in defining feminism only in terms of 'women', see chapter four, the section on 'Women'). But they have not identified it adequately for feminist purposes because of their deletion of the question of male domination. And because of their reliance on the 'false universalism' construct, all they can recommend as a solution to the problem is attentiveness to a plethora of disparate 'oppressions'. They see this as already exemplified in 'postmodern-feminist theory'. This framework, they assert, 'would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation' (pp.34-5). But this limitless multiplication of separate tasks is unnecessary if feminism is construed as the struggle against male domination. If feminism's concern with women is a consequence of that struggle, the question of 'feminine gender identity', whether 'unitary' or 'multiplicitous', does not arise. Or rather, it does not arise as a general theoretical problem for feminism, although it certainly arises for each individual feminist grappling with the problem of how to locate herself in relation to male

supremacist relations of ruling. But that process cannot even begin unless male supremacy is recognised in the first place.

What saves feminism from the more crass forms of relativism—the naive pluralism of ‘anything goes’, or the repressive tolerance of all opinions as equally valid—is exactly what gives rise to questions about relativism in the first place, i.e. its self-characterisation as an interested standpoint, its expressed commitment to a moral and political framework. To take a moral and political stand already provides criteria of adjudication. To embrace a standpoint is to clarify what counts as morally acceptable and what does not, not a priori, but continuously, as long as the process lasts, and to situate oneself explicitly in opposition to domination. Feminism’s stance in opposition to male domination, and its insistence that women are human too, provides both a starting point for deciding which issues are important and how reality is to be perceived, and an ethical outer limit beyond which feminism refuses to be implicated. It is this stance which enables feminism to say what is wrong and must be actively resisted, and what it is that is being struggled for. This ethical starting point and outer limit provides feminism with the means of avoiding moral relativism. It is also what defines the system of meaning that is feminism, the framework through which the world is viewed and interpreted in just this way rather than another. Whether or not this qualifies as ‘cognitive relativism’<sup>53</sup> must depend on how ‘relativism’ is construed. However, there does remain one important question about the relation between feminism and truth, a question that arises out of a perceived connection between truth and domination. It is to this question I now turn.

### ***Truth and Domination***

There is a certain reluctance to allow that feminism might be concerned with truth, although the question of feminism and truth is not often addressed in feminist writings. However, there are some writers who are explicitly opposed to the idea that feminism

---

<sup>53</sup> The distinction is Steven Lukes’, in ‘Relativism: Cognitive and Moral’ (Lukes, 1977). Lukes argues that there are cognitive universals, but that morality is essentially relative. He says ‘that there are conditions of truth, rules of logic and criteria of rationality which are universal and fundamental’ (p.159), but that ‘the concept of morality is ... irreducibly and indefinitely diverse’ (p.173). He then proceeds neatly (and deliberately) to undermine his own argument by suggesting that ‘there may be, at least within certain ranges, no morally (and politically) neutral cognition of social facts’ (p.173), and that there is an important element of cognition required in deciding what counts as moral.

can make claims to truth, on the grounds that such claims are inherently complicit with domination.

This is the position Jane Flax takes in *Thinking Fragments* (Flax, 1990: 222-3), for example. She tells us that she herself was greatly preoccupied with the question of ‘how to justify—or even frame—theoretical and narrative choices (including my own) without recourse to “truth” or domination’. She asks: ‘What *are* the relations of knowledge and power? Does all knowledge necessarily inflict violence on things, ourselves, and other persons?’ (p.236—her emphasis), a question she has already answered by equating ‘a claim to truth’ with ‘a will to power’ (p.12). For Chris Weedon, too, claims to truth are inexorably implicated in domination:

“Truth” is by definition fixed, absolute and unchanging. It is the final guarantee of the way things are. It offers stability and evades questions of interest ... Social recognition of their truth is the strategic position to which most discourses, and the interests they represent, aspire. To achieve the status of truth they have to discredit all alternative and oppositional versions of meaning and become common sense ... It is in making claims to truth that discourses demonstrate their inevitable conservatism, their investment in particular versions of meaning and their hostility to change (Weedon, 1987: 131).

But such arguments are self-contradictory. The assertion that truth is complicit with domination is itself a truth claim, and hence, within its own terms, complicit with domination. But the manifest purpose of the claim that truth is complicit with domination is to avoid complicity with domination. If that complicity is to be avoided, then some kind of distinction needs to be made between the truth of the claim that truth is complicit with domination, and the truth that is complicit with domination. In the absence of any such distinction, the argument collapses under its own self-contradiction. Although there is a very real problem being alluded to by arguments like these, involving the dominance of male supremacist versions of reality and the suppression of counter-hegemonic versions, that problem is not addressed by dispensing with claims to truth altogether, since any claim to be heard is also a claim to truth. Apart from the inherent absurdity of the argument, the demand to abandon any claim to truth

whatsoever can only weaken the cause of those who have no right to be heard under conditions of domination, including the cause of feminism.

Another version of an anti-truth argument is Elizabeth Grosz' discussion of the work of Luce Irigaray. Grosz argues that it is inappropriate to apply judgements of truth and falsity to Irigaray's work. She says:

[Irigaray's] work is not a *true* description of women or femininity, a position that is superior to *false*, patriarchal conceptions ... This image [of the "two lips"] ... is in no way a "true" or accurate description of women ... (which, of course, is not to say that it is false either—it is neither true nor false, for it is not within the realm of truth at all) (Grosz, 1989: 110, 116, 117—her emphases).

She tells us that Irigaray's aim is 'quite different' from any enterprise which claims to be giving a true picture of the world. That aim, she says

is to devise a *strategic* and combative understanding, one whose function is to make explicit what has been excluded or left out of phallogentric images. Unlike truth, whose value is eternal, strategy remains provisional; its relevance and value depend on what it is able to achieve, on its utility in organising means towards ends ... Its function is not referential but combative ... a new emblem by which female sexuality can be positively *represented* ... In other words, her writing always refers to other texts or discourses, not to a non-discursive or "real" corporeality, experience or pleasure (pp.110-11, 116, 117—her emphases).

There is a sense in which Grosz is quite right to argue that Irigaray is not centrally concerned with the truth or otherwise of her account. Irigaray's work is concerned with questions of *meaning* rather than truth (although this is not a distinction Grosz makes). Meaning and truth are connected—truth claims are not isolated entities, but can be formulated only within the languages within which meanings are both produced and limited. But it is important to maintain a distinction between meaning and truth (for reasons which I discuss below). Irigaray's purpose is not to 'tell the truth' about female sexuality, female corporeality, or female existence in general. Her purpose is to

challenge the social domination of the phallus by positing an alternative genital metaphor of female existence based on women's bodies rather than men's. As Grosz says, Irigaray's work offers 'a powerful metaphor for women's potentially excessive pleasures to hold up against the confining representations granted them in dominant discourses' (p.117).

However, while it is true that Irigaray's work is more appropriately characterised as addressing questions of meaning rather than questions of truth, that does not mean that questions of truth are therefore entirely irrelevant. Irigaray's writings are not only metaphorical and poetic, they are also theoretical and political in intent and implication. They do not proceed only by means of metaphors, and neither does the 'dominant phallic economy' Irigaray intends to challenge. The phallocratic social order is not just metaphorical, but comprises actual social relations of power as well. Unless the social relations are changed to allow women a human status too, the phallic metaphor of 'human' status will continue to prevail, although to name it as such is already to start undermining it.

Moreover, Irigaray's framework does generate truth claims about the way the world is, for example, that women experience their bodies in the way she describes. That is, she does claim certain facts about female sexuality. She is also claiming that women's recognition of these facts will enable women to break out of the constraints of phallic dominance, either wholly or in part. Her work has implications for feminist politics and makes recommendations for feminist practice. Although, as Grosz says, Irigaray's work may indeed be 'strategic' and 'combative' (what feminist work is not?), if we are debarred from judging whether or not what Irigaray says is true, we lose an important criterion for evaluating it. Appealing to utility begs important questions. Should we embrace a position without making a prior judgement about its truth or falsehood, just because it might be useful in combating male supremacy? How can it be useful if it is not true, or if we have grounds for believing that it is not? What kind of strategy is it which deliberately undermines our own position by withdrawing from any claims to truth at all? Truth may not be the ultimate arbiter of the rightness of the feminist cause, given the existence of phallocratic reality and the male interests which dominate in the 'world-taken-for-granted' and define what counts as real. Nonetheless, a strategic retreat from making claims to truth is a strategy which can only weaken the force of feminist

arguments. In the truth stakes, the status quo may win most of the time. But that is not a good enough reason for withdrawing from claims to truth, even though what counts as true or false cannot be decided without prior commitment to certain kinds of meanings.

So where does that leave us with the postulated connection between truth and domination? The first thing to be said is that truth is not a function of domination. Might is *not* right in any sense which entails that those who dominate monopolise the truth, or that only the dominant have access to the truth, or that truth is what serves dominant interests. Whatever ‘truth’ might mean (and the debate is over two thousand years old, and looks like being endless), and however it is established, the fact remains that it *is* possible to make judgements of truth and falsity. Those judgements are not ‘fixed, absolute and unchanging’ (pace Chris Weedon), neither do they have ‘eternal value’ (pace Elizabeth Grosz), whatever that might mean. They are always justified in some way, although those justifications are probably never based on ‘necessary and sufficient conditions’. Such judgements may indeed not ‘set us free’ (Flax, 1990: 42), but no emancipatory project is conceivable without them. Judgements of truth and falsity can be made anywhere, at any time, by anybody—‘It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §241). And something remains true (or false) whatever anyone may say, whatever anyone wants (or does not want), whatever force or arguments are brought to bear. Nothing and no one can make something false if it is true, or true if it is false. There is always the possibility of being wrong, i.e. of fallibility. There is always the possibility of lies, mistakes, deceptions, delusions, and it may not be possible to know on any particular occasion whether or not something is true. But truth is truth and not some other thing, and so is falsehood.

Moreover, unless it is possible to judge whether or not something is true, it is not possible to judge whether or not it is false either. Neither is it possible to say that something is a lie, or a mistake, or that one has been deceived or deluded, since all those concepts require that it could have been otherwise, that is, that the lie, the mistake, the deception, the delusion could have been true but was not. Jane Flax tells us that Sandra Harding has suggested that it might be possible to retain an idea of falsehood that is ‘not dependent on a notion of truth’ (Flax, 1990: 264n1). Although she gives no reference for this, it may be that she is referring to Harding’s preference for the terms ‘less false’ and

'less partial and distorted' over the term 'true' (Harding, 1991: esp. pp.185-7). But there is a logical connection between truth and falsehood in the sense that the meaning of each is dependent on the other. It makes no sense to talk about 'falsehood' without a concomitant idea of 'truth'. Both are judgements about what is asserted. Unless both are possible, neither is, because the basis for the judgement, the existence of an alternative, has vanished.

The question of truth is not an esoteric matter. That it could ever have been thought so is a consequence of that tendency in philosophy Wittgenstein identified as 'language going on holiday'. Feminism need not get caught up in that malestream philosophical tendency. What 'truth' means can be discovered by investigating how it is used. The word has perfectly serviceable connotations. Dressing it up in party clothes with a capital 'T' and the qualifier 'absolute' is to take it on vacation, away from the workaday world where it functions unobtrusively. If it causes problems, that is where they must be addressed.

The problem of domination is not a problem of truth at all, or not in the sense that those who challenge relations of domination must eschew all claims to truth. Far from being complicit with domination, truth claims on the part of feminism are a crucial aspect of its political opposition to male domination. The advent of 'second wave' feminism was accompanied by a sense of outrage at how we had been lied to and deceived. If we were to expose lies and deceptions, we had to claim to be speaking the truth, and to identify the states of affairs which verified our claims and falsified the claims of male supremacist ideology. The question is not whether or not feminism should make, and be seen to be making, truth claims. The problem is how to get the truth uncovered by feminism heard, how to get feminist truth onto the public agenda and into the arena where the wrongs done to women can be addressed and rectified. The problem is how to bypass, undermine or overthrow male supremacist ideology and its ownership and control of the means of information distribution. Feminism exists under hostile conditions where it so often cannot even make itself heard, much less be understood and its truth claims evaluated.

*Meaning and Understanding*

It is not through its monopolisation of truth that domination operates, but through what might be called the control and manipulation of meaning. Domination is control over systems of meaning, as well as over wealth, resources, populations, etc. It is *control over* (which is never absolute), in the service of vested interests, in any sphere. Within the domain of knowledge (that resource so assiduously mined by Michel Foucault), it is *meaning* which can be complicit with domination, not truth<sup>54</sup> (a distinction Foucault did not make). Domination must include control over meaning if relations of ruling are to be purveyed as in the interests of all. (This is the significance of the term ‘ideology’). That control is effected by keeping any oppositional framework out of the realm of meaning, by denying it access to the public media of communication, by interpreting it as derisory, trivial or contemptible, by misrepresenting it, caricaturing it, or converting it into something which it is not. In relation to the dominant discourses themselves, that is, to ideology, control over meaning operates both through familiarity and through incomprehensibility, although in different domains. Ideology presents itself as familiar in the domain of the everyday world-taken-for-granted; while in the prestigious sites of knowledge, the universities, it presents itself as a scarce commodity, available only to the initiated few. (I will be saying more about the familiar below, p.128). Meaning is logically prior to truth in the sense that it is not possible to decide whether or not something is true unless what it means is understood in the first place. Questions of truth and falsity cannot even arise unless what is said is comprehensible. And something cannot be understood if its role is to justify relations of ruling by disguising them.

Comprehensibility has been an issue within ‘second wave’ feminism from the beginning. The issue has largely been addressed in the form of complaints about the difficulty and elitism of ‘feminist theory’ emanating from the academy. Here are some recent examples of such complaints:

---

54. Interestingly, Jane Flax concludes her book, *Thinking Fragments*, with a distinction between meaning and truth. She suggests the possibility of ‘displac[ing] truth/falsity with problems of meaning(s)’ (p.222). She does not discuss in detail what that might involve, and she is doubtful about its feasibility. ‘Perhaps it is better only to analyze desires for meaning and to learn to live without grounds’, she says (p.223). However, having located domination wholly on the side of truth, she does not perceive that questions of meaning, of how the world is known and understood, of communication, clarity, intelligibility and accountability, also involve questions about domination.



Is this PSEUDO-INTELLECTUAL GARBAGE feminism? ... I'm getting fed up of reading feminist theory. How much more analysis do we need? ... Can someone please tell me what feminists are DOING? (Kathy, 'Letter', *Trouble and Strife* 22, Winter 1991).

To me, feminism means the personal is political, however, this is totally opposite to the ethos of Academia. Academia means being detached, objective, theoretical, impersonal, non-political and abstract ... By theorizing feminism I feel removed from the day to day reality of women's oppression (Nanette Herbert, 'Letter', *Trouble and Strife* 25, Winter 1992).

As I read [a critique of postmodernism] I was struck by how abstracted feminist and other political theory has become, so much so that it becomes hard to follow the line of argument ... theory is becoming so far removed from everyday experience that it is incomprehensible to the ordinary woman and is symptomatic of the growing exclusivity of feminism (Connie Palmer, 'Letter', *Trouble and Strife* 26, Summer 1993).

These complaints are not new. In 1976, the women of the Dalston Study Group in Britain, in a paper called 'Was the Patriarchy Conference "Patriarchal"?' (Dalston Study Group, 1978), criticised aspects of the Patriarchy Conference, held in London in that year, as 'intimidating and mystifying'. They said that certain papers presented at the conference were no different in kind from those presented in 'a male academic environment'. The organisation of the sessions, involving 'long papers read out word for word like at a lecture plus questions at the end', did not allow the listeners to intervene or contribute; the language within which the ideas were expressed was 'the impoverished depersonalised analytical language of intellectuals', which bore no relation to 'day to day language', and which 'had the effect of *making* large numbers of women feel inadequate, stupid or angry'; and the papers made no reference to debates within the women's movement on the very issues those papers were supposedly addressing: 'the papers directly theorising about women's language and sexuality were written as if none of these things in the movement had happened'.

They suggested that the problem was partly a result of the paper-givers' failure to make their theoretical framework clear and accessible to those who were not acquainted with the particular theoretical constructs being used; partly a result of 'the isolated social position of radical intellectuals vis-à-vis the groups ... whose interests their theory seeks to represent and sharpen'. They themselves were not opposed to theoretical work per se, even theoretical work grounded in such undeniably patriarchal contexts as the writings of Freud and Lacan. But they felt that theory needed to be linked to 'struggles and strategy' and to 'controversies within the movement', that arguments needed to be stated as clearly as possible and terms not in everyday use explained, and that the theoriser should incorporate her own process into her theorising, clarifying her agreements and disagreements and acknowledging her own confusions. They concluded with a number of questions about some of the terms frequently used in the papers at the conference, terms like: 'patriarchy', 'sexism', 'capitalism', 'conscious and unconscious processes', 'language', and 'ideology'. Although they felt that these terms had been insufficiently clarified at the time, the authors themselves did not clarify what they might mean.

The problems identified by the Dalston Women's Study Group remain unresolved nearly twenty years later. If anything, they have worsened under the influence of postmodernism. The inaccessibility of feminist theory was a problem then, and it is still a problem now, because the original problem has not been overcome. The original problem is the requirement that feminism subordinate itself to malestream thought, within either the traditional academic disciplines or whatever intellectual fashion is current. At the time the Study Group were writing their criticisms of the 'patriarchal' implications of the Patriarchy Conference, the vogue was Lacanian psychoanalysis; earlier it had been Marxism; now it is postmodernism.<sup>55</sup>

There is a sense in which combining feminism with already recognised academic disciplines is a reasonable endeavour. Feminism did not start as an academic discipline, but as a groundswell of discontent arising out of women's changed perceptions of their own experience. This discontent was inchoate and untheorised, sometimes confused and confusing, sometimes prematurely closed off to debate. Already established academic

---

55. At least in Britain and Australia. The US has a different academic history, although postmodernism would appear to be rife there too, if what is being published as 'feminist theory' is any guide. I am not in a position to know about non-Anglophone contexts.

disciplines seemed to promise intellectually rigorous ways of organising and managing the changing consciousness of the world and women's place in it. But as the members of the Dalston Study Group pointed out, those best placed for doing the theorising failed to stay in touch with the women's movement and their own experience of feminist politics. They allowed themselves to be seduced by the intricacies and sophistication of what they encountered in the institutions of 'higher learning'. They failed to take adequate account of the complicity of malestream intellectual traditions with the 'Man of Reason' paradigm identified by Genevieve Lloyd in the context of Western philosophy. The construct of 'Reason' explicitly excludes the feminine, along with women who are the traditional bearers of the social relations of femininity (Lloyd, 1984). This exclusion remains even when 'Reason' itself is supposedly under attack, as in postmodernism. This does not mean that there is an irrevocable incompatibility between feminism and academe. It does mean that there needs to be far more clarity and decisiveness about what feminism is, and constant watchfulness against inadvertent support for male supremacist ideology.

The women of the Study Group were partly aware of this. They pointed out that the theory presented at the conference made no reference to struggles and debates which had already occurred in the movement around the very issues the theory was supposedly addressing (although they did not characterise the feminist struggle as a concern with male domination). But they did not identify the lack of connection between feminism and academic theorising as the central problem. Rather, they tended to emphasise the responsibility of the theorist to make her theory as clear as possible. This advice cannot be heeded, however, if theory's lack of clarity is a function of its origins. If feminist insights cannot be allowed to erode the hegemony of malestream thought, confusion is unavoidable. In that sense, complaints about the incomprehensibility of what passes for feminist theory are entirely justified.

There is another form of objection to theoretical work, however, which is not justified. That is the objection that theory, like truth, is inevitably dominating. This accusation implies that theory is some kind of private possession of the ruling class, and not something that women who are concerned about oppression ought to do, because it sets up invidious distinctions between women and privileges some women over others. This kind of argument contains a grain of truth. Systems of formal education, especially

university education, favour the economically privileged, and it is difficult to get access to formal education without money. Nonetheless, theorising as a deliberate, conscious activity is a skill like any other, and can be acquired, and not necessarily through the established educational system, although that too has benefits, which is why it is not readily available to all. Moreover, theory is vital if feminism is to clarify where it has come from, its meanings, values and aims, and if it is not to become bogged down in dogma, infighting, irrelevance and eventual silence.

Demands for instant comprehensibility rest on this belief that theory is inherently dominating, that difficulties in understanding are invariably the result of powerful vested interests. But understanding is not a 'natural right' from which we are alienated by the difficulties of theoretical texts. Confusion and incomprehension are only sometimes symptoms of an oppression imposed by powerful others. Sometimes the lack of understanding is our own, and hence so is the responsibility for clarity. As Vicki Kirby pointed out, there is a difference between doing the work and not doing the work (Kirby, 1993: 26). Unfortunately for the cogency of Kirby's point, it was directed against women who had 'done the work', women who were experienced academics and who still did not understand the terminology of postmodernism. In Kirby's eyes they had not done the right sort of work, which she characterised as 'the difficult complexities of continental philosophy' (p.33).

Questions of which work, and how much, are always open for debate. Intellectual work is hard and time-consuming. Reading for comprehension is not simply a matter of casting one's eyes once over the pages. It involves going over and over texts, following arguments through and comparing new ideas with what one already knows. This process often requires suspending belief in 'what one already knows' in the interests of doing justice to the text in its own terms, while re-arranging the familiar in order to incorporate the new or clarify the grounds for rejecting it. Given the investment of time and energy required to do this work, all of us have to make decisions about the worthiness or otherwise for our own purposes of any particular field of investigation. Those decisions must always be made on more or less insufficient grounds. Because they are decisions about where to direct one's work priorities, they have to be made before doing the work. Nonetheless, it is possible to get a sense of the general tenor of debates, especially of academic fashions which tend to proliferate mightily for a time

before being consigned surreptitiously and without acknowledgment to the scrap heap of intellectual fads. (Althusser who?).

Nonetheless, Kirby's point remains. As Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman put it, in their commentary on this point, the demand for instant accessibility is often a demand that 'everything ... be rendered in terms of what is already known, and it is hegemonic discourses which tend to define the familiar' (Gunew and Yeatman, eds, 1993: xx). Unfortunately, the authors then proceed to ruin their point by characterising 'mainstream feminism', along with 'patriarchal matters', as 'hegemonic'. To describe feminism as 'hegemonic' or 'mainstream', without argument, is bad scholarship and worse politics. Certainly there are many things said in the name of 'feminism' which can be thus characterised, but to do so needs careful argument and documentation instead of bald assertion. Feminism is constantly under attack. For self-identified feminists to join the onslaught is to lend support to an already powerful antagonist, and to engage in destroying feminism from within. There is no equal footing between 'patriarchal matters' and feminism, however characterised. While the former are the status quo, the practical, everyday, common sense ideology of the male supremacist ruling class, even the most tentative reformist feminism draws vitriolic attacks from the guardians of phallographic reality. Such a cavalier coupling of 'patriarchy' and feminism is a failure of feminist insight.

However, once again the point remains. Appeals to the familiar are typically couched in terms of experience. The difficulty of theory is criticised on the grounds that it does not relate to women's experience. But such a criticism rests on the assumption that experience, that which is well-known and easily understood, is some kind of realm of authenticity, a safe and secure haven which provides all the answers as long as we remain true to it (and to ourselves). Such appeals to 'experience' ignore the fact that experience (everyday life, common sense, the world-taken-for-granted) is already constituted within the meanings and values of the social order into which we are born. Given that that social order is male supremacist (however else it may be characterised), the familiar will tend to be that which operates in the service of domination. That tendency is not inevitable. No system of domination, even the most totalitarian, is monolithic and inexorable, without conflict, contradiction, ambiguity, resistance and refusal. The very existence of feminism is sufficient evidence that challenging

domination is possible. But if the challenge is to be sustained, appeals to experience need to be couched in terms which clarify what is at stake morally and politically.

The view that theory is intrinsically dominating, and that all we have to do to avoid complicity with domination is rely on our own experience, is a common argument among feminists. Joyce Trebilcot, for example, depicts academic theory as ‘the ideology of dominant western (white, male, capitalist) culture’ which operates ‘like a huge and complex machine’ within which ‘we’ are ‘mashed to pieces’ (Trebilcot, 1991: 46). ‘This concept of theory’, she says, ‘belongs ... to the kind of thought that assigns to the writer the role of God’. She says that she ‘would prefer to abandon the idea of theory/theorizings and speak instead of telling stories’ (p.49). But Trebilcot does not follow her own advice. Her own account does not avoid grand generalisation, despite her expressed intention to do so. Her reference to ‘the ideology of dominant western (white, male, capitalist) culture’ is not a story, but a theoretical (and moral and political) generalisation. It is a theoretical construct, a short-hand reference to a grand theory which explains oppression.

The putting of experience into words is not sufficient for feminist politics. The choice is not between theory on the one hand, and experience, the familiar, the already known and easily grasped, on the other. Rather, the choice is between different forms of theorising, between familiar and largely automatic and unconscious categories, meanings, values and reality on the one hand, and deliberate structuring and restructuring of the world in accordance with a feminist morality and politics on the other. Experience, that which feels most our own,<sup>56</sup> is already theory-laden by interests which alienate us from the potentialities opened up by feminism. Although Trebilcot asserts that stories contain ‘lots of general claims’ (p.49), it is not clear what distinction she is drawing between theoretical generalisations and the kinds of generalisations that arise out of stories. Her account allows no way of deciding, for example, between stories which reinforce male supremacist meanings and values, and those which illustrate the meaning of feminism for women’s lives. She appears not to be aware that the experience which generates the stories is already theory-laden, not least by an ideology of individualism which obliterates any general standards of moral and political

---

56. This is a variation on Catharine MacKinnon’s statement at the beginning of MacKinnon, 1981: ‘Sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away’ (p.1).

judgement. Simply telling stories without any analysis or critique threatens to allow free rein to those meanings and values which already constitute experience as real. To fail to acknowledge the social conditions within which experience is already embedded is to reduce the political to the personal, to a matter of opinion with no way of adjudicating between conflicting accounts of the way the world is. This outcome is entirely functional in maintaining the dominant status quo. If conflicts cannot even be addressed, because everyone is simply entitled to her own opinion, they cannot be resolved. Theory is what provides the moral and political meaning, purpose and value of experience. If the theorising is not done deliberately, it happens anyway; and since structures of domination operate most efficiently through the acquiescence of subordinated populations, opposition to relations of power requires constant vigilance if they are to be challenged and complicity avoided. Theory in this sense is vital to the continued existence of feminist politics.

The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein throws some light on the allure of the appeal to the familiar. Wittgenstein's account of the ways in which language is actually used, and hence the ways in which meaning and understanding are generated, centrally involved the notion of a 'rule' (Winch, 1958). Because meaning involves contexts of agreement, and agreement involves regularities in the sense of the possibility of deciding whether or not something is (or is not) the same as something else, meaning and understanding can be characterised as proceeding according to 'rules'.

—Only *uniform* connexions are *thinkable* (Wittgenstein, 1951[1922]: 6.361).

—The word “agreement” and the word “rule” are *related* to one another, they are cousins. If I teach anyone the use of the one word, [she]<sup>57</sup> learns the use of the other with it.

—The use of the word “rule” and the use of the word “same” are interwoven (Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §224, §225—emphases in the original).

---

57. Wittgenstein did not of course use the feminine pronoun.

These ‘rules’ are not, however, the kinds of rules which are deliberately devised and consciously applied:

—When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*.

—One does not feel that one has always got to wait upon the nod (the whisper) of the rule. On the contrary, we are not on tenterhooks about what it will tell us next, but it always tells us the same, and we do what it tells us.

—”But surely you can see . . .?” That is just the characteristic expression of someone who is under the compulsion of a rule.

—The rule can only seem to me to produce all its consequences in advance if I draw them as a *matter of course* (Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §219, §223, §231, §238—emphases in the original).

Although these understandings are already in place, and are shared, they are not readily accessible because they happen automatically. They are familiar, they arrive ‘as a matter of course’. They are like the rules of grammar. Although language speakers ‘know’ these rules, in the sense that they use them correctly and can identify mistakes, they do not usually know what the rules are in the sense of being able to verbalise them. The rules do need investigation in order to be made explicit, although the need does not arise in the normal course of events.

Wittgenstein has supplied us with an account of the inherently conservative nature of the familiar, although the Wittgensteinian account is not an apologia for conservatism, despite his remark that philosophy ‘leaves everything as it is’ (Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §124). His appeal to the usages of ordinary language—‘everything as it is’—was a salutary counter-weight to the more arcane flights of fancy of traditional philosophy. But Wittgenstein’s account of ordinary language usage also allowed for the possibility of change because it argues that meaning and understanding are matters of convention. They are not arbitrary in the sense that just any meaning will do. In that sense, there would be no possibility of shared understandings and communication. Meaning is conventional in the sense that there is never any fixed reference point which would settle disputes once and for all. Disputes are settled with reference to shared



understandings, and to the extent that shared understanding is absent, so is the possibility of settling disputes (although Wittgenstein did not discuss this corollary). Because language is a matter of convention, understanding can fall into disarray so that the world comes to be viewed in a new light:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes). The real foundations of [her] enquiry do not strike a [woman] at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck [her].—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful (Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §129).

The everyday, taken-for-granted worlds people live and act within, are unstable. Having no fixed boundaries which contain and exclude, they tend to leak in all directions.<sup>58</sup> ('A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction'—Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §525). There are no guarantees of stability because circumstances are not always normal:

It is only in normal cases that the use of a word is clearly prescribed; we know, are in no doubt, what to say in this or that case. The more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say. And if things were quite different from what they actually are— ... if rule became exception and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of roughly equal frequency—this would make our normal language-games lose their point (Wittgenstein, 1958[1953]: §142).

Meaning production and reproduction is rule-like in another sense too (although Wittgenstein did not address this other sense). Rules have sanctions, both positive and negative. 'Correct' meanings are rewarded with recognition and belonging; 'wrong' meanings are punished. Shared understandings provide numerous ways of managing threats to the shared reality: platitudes, jokes, scornful laughter, active silencing or ignoring, re-arrangement and distortion of challenges to make them fit the ruling paradigm, the rendering meaningless of what cannot be made to fit. Sometimes this

---

58. I am indebted to Jeannie Martin for the idea that everyday life is unstable.

involves violent reactions against threats to the stability of the status quo, but under normal circumstances violence is unnecessary. Nonetheless, even though at one point a 'form of life' fills the whole world, providing the comfort, certainty and security of what everyone knows to be the case, at another, there is a sense of unease, a momentary flicker hurriedly suppressed, or a disjunction so great that the world tilts and exposes hitherto unsuspected aspects of reality and a new awareness. One 'form of life' can incorporate another, rendering it relative rather than absolute, exposing its limits and limitations, modifying or even destroying its meanings and supplying it with new ones. This is what feminism has done to many of the 'language-games' of male supremacy. For example, the deadly serious aspects of the 'game' of male sexuality has been exposed by feminist campaigns against pornography and male sexual violence against women and children, as hatred and contempt rather than the love and protection it purports to be, and as systematic oppression rather than the bad behaviour of isolated individuals. The male supremacist backlash has responded to feminism by attempting to make it lose its point in the hearts and minds of women, and trying to make it meaningless by co-opting it, misinterpreting it as 'prudery' or 'political correctness', and silencing it by refusing it a public voice.

But even counter-hegemonic meanings, like feminism, need to be taken as a matter of course, already linked in with experience and the familiar, with desire and emotion, feeling and perception. Although they need to be struggled for because the forces arrayed against them are so powerful, and in that sense created, unless they feel authentic, they can rigidify into dogma. If feminist theory does not arise out of experience and an intuitive feeling for what is at stake, it can stultify into taken-for-granted tenets which serve as rallying points but which evoke no sense of belonging. But feelings of authenticity alone are no guarantee of political commitment under conditions of domination which structure feeling and emotion, beliefs and ideas, as much as they structure access to wealth, power and influence. Neither are appeals to familiar usage, i.e. experience, a sufficient guarantee of feminist politics. The only guarantee of a political commitment is the political commitment itself. The value of that political commitment will depend on what it is one has committed oneself to, that is, on the meaning given to feminist politics. Hence, not just any use of the term 'feminism' will do (as I argue at length in Part II). Feminism also has its 'rules' (in the sense of regularities and common understandings, not in the sense of 'regulation'), and hence its

own logic of theory and practice. If something labelled 'feminism' ignores or actively denies the existence of male supremacy, it is working against women's interests in opposing male domination, and hence cannot be called feminism at all.

Feminism gives rise to certain kinds of questions, names the kinds of things it names, uncovers certain kinds of facts, and interprets the world in the way it does, because of its prior moral and political commitment to opposing male domination in the interests of women first, a priority made necessary by current male supremacist conditions which place women last or nowhere at all. The feminist project involves both meaning and truth. It is feminism's politics and morality which give it its meaning, that is, the ways in which feminist understanding happens and the world makes sense from a feminist standpoint. The truth of feminism arises out of its system of meanings, in the sense that, with the advent of feminism, certain questions could be asked, certain facts appeared, and certain answers became possible, which were previously inconceivable. Feminist knowledge acquires its meaning through its political understanding of phallographic relations of power, and through its project of re-interpreting and changing reality in order to create possibilities for women to control the terms of our own existence, a project which proceeds at the expense of men only to the extent that men remain committed to a 'human' status acquired at women's expense. Feminism uncovers certain facts about the world, and in that sense, can lay claims to truth. But although feminist theory is an empirical endeavour, concerned with discovering facts about the world and organising and explaining those facts, the empirical content of feminist theory is not its most important aspect. Given the enormity of the forces of male supremacy, the facts will frequently be against us anyway.

Since feminist knowledge is explicitly neither value-free nor disinterested, the knowledge which it generates is based on, and productive of, identifiable interests and values. It is formulated in the interests of women, in particular women's interest in seeing an end to male domination, and in opposition to those vested and powerful interests which maintain the male as the 'human' norm, and which enforce the interests and 'human rights' of some individuals at the expense of others. The moral values which feminism espouses are those of a genuinely human status available to all. The primary feminist value is a commitment to the ideal of human dignity, of the right of every human being to a dignified standard of human existence. The question of human

dignity is an ethical one, not an empirical matter. That the ethic of human dignity is constantly violated in fact does not invalidate the moral judgement that people *ought* to be treated with respect. This commitment starts from the standpoint of women, because the exclusion of women from human rights and dignities is the most systematic and widely distributed of all human exclusions, because men have too much to lose, namely their masculinity defined at women's expense (although everything to gain), and because women already provide a model of the human unencumbered by the rapacious demands of the phallus. Women can be complicit with the meanings and values of male supremacy, and men can resist. But women's lack of the supreme value of phallographic reality (p.51n20), suggests that women also lack the chief barrier to connecting with other human beings as unique and valuable ends in themselves, and provides a starting point for a revolution in the terms and conditions of human existence.

In Part II, I discuss a number of other ways in which feminism has been interpreted, other, that is, than defining the feminist political project in terms of the opposition to male supremacy. Many feminist texts have an ambivalent relationship to the concept of male domination. No feminist text can avoid acknowledging its existence, in however tangential, peripheral or covert a fashion. Feminism's evident concern for women means that even the most cursory examination of the situation of women is going to uncover the workings of male supremacy in women's lives. But in too many texts labelled 'feminist', the significance of that insight is missed, so that male domination either becomes just one problem among many; or it is reduced to a secondary phenomenon caused by something more basic, capitalism, perhaps, or pregnancy and childbirth, or women's mothering, or 'the public/private distinction', 'binary oppositions' or 'dichotomies'; or it is confined to one particular social context—'the family', or the work place, or the role of wife; or it is displaced entirely in favour of something else, usually 'women's oppression' or 'gender'; or it is given a neutral-sounding title like 'the sex-gender system'. Part II is an extended discussion of some of these ways of evading what I have argued is feminism's central problematic, the existence of male domination.

## **Part II: Misunderstanding Feminism**

## Chapter Four: Other Definitions

Explicit (although not always intentional) definitions of feminism do exist scattered throughout the feminist literature, some examples of which are discussed later. The obvious place to look for definitions is, of course, a dictionary, and feminist dictionaries do exist. But they are no more useful for clarifying the meaning of feminism than any other text. Because their purpose is to provide as comprehensive an overview as possible, their main criterion for selection is anything called 'feminist'. As a consequence, they tend to reproduce the conflicts and contradictions without resolving them. In *A Feminist Dictionary* by Cheri Kramarae and Paula Treichler, the entries under 'feminism' are so disparate as to be useless for getting any coherent sense of what feminism is. This was a deliberate strategy on the part of the compilers, whose aim was to include as wide a range as possible of what women have said about each topic designated by a word entry. But the word 'feminism/feminist' has a different status from all the other entries, because it appears in the dictionary's title and so provides the definitional focus for everything else. Hence, the place to look for this dictionary's definition of 'feminism' is the compilers' statement of their aims and intentions. Kramarae and Treichler initially stated their 'several purposes' largely in terms of 'women', e.g. 'to document words, definitions, and conceptualizations that illustrate women's linguistic contributions' (Kramarae and Treichler, 1985: 1). However, they were aware that for the purposes of a *feminist* dictionary, references to women alone were not sufficient. They said that they called the book a feminist dictionary rather than a women's dictionary because they were particularly interested in what has been said 'in opposition to male definition, defamation, and ignorance of women and their lives' (p.12). In other words, they were aware that the need to focus on what women have said arises out of male supremacist conditions, although in the interests of diversity that does not appear clearly and unambiguously under the entry 'feminism' within the text itself.

The definition of 'feminism' in Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Humm, 1989) interprets it in terms of women—'equal rights for women', 'in general, feminism is the ideology of women's liberation', 'the theory of the woman's point of view', etc. This definition is reinforced by her Preface where she also characterised feminism in terms of women: 'to understand women's oppression in terms of race, gender, class and sexual preference and how to change it' (p.x), 'feminist theory is fundamentally about women's experience' (p.xi). She appeared to be unaware that there

might be problems with defining feminism solely in terms of women (see: 'Women', this chapter). She also appeared to be unaware that feminism might have something to do with opposing male domination. The two examples she gives of 'the causes, or agents, of female oppression' are 'the sexual division of labour' and 'sexuality'. The single reference to 'male power' occurs in the context of 'sexuality', in her citation of the work of Catharine MacKinnon. But this is to misinterpret MacKinnon's arguments, which are not primarily about a (gender neutral) 'sexuality', but about male power and how it is manifested in *male* sexuality. Hence, on the question of what feminism means Humm's text is worse than useless, it is actively misleading.

I know of only one text which explicitly addresses the issue of defining feminism, Karen Offen's paper 'Defining Feminism' (Offen, 1988). In this paper Offen had no difficulty at all in defining feminism in terms of male domination as the crucial issue for feminist politics. For her it was unproblematic that feminism was 'a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society', that it 'opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them', that it was in sum, 'a political challenge to male authority and hierarchy in the most profound sense' (pp.151, 152). The problem she attempted to address in her text was the question of why the word 'feminism' so often evoked fear. She suggested that the reason was that the individualist emphasis of 'late twentieth-century' feminism had alienated many women (and men), because of its dismissive approach to women's traditional experience and women's differences from men. She argued that the solution was to recognise the important role of what she called 'relational' feminism had played historically. 'Relational feminism', she said, 'emphasized women's rights *as women* (defined principally by their childbearing and/or nurturing capacities) in relation to men. It insisted on *women's* distinctive contributions in these roles to the broader society and made claims on the commonwealth on the basis of these contributions' (p.136—her emphases). She acknowledged that arguments for 'women's distinctiveness and complementarity of the sexes' had often been appropriated 'once again to endorse male privilege' (p.154), and that 'the appeal to human freedom that underlies the individualist tradition' was important for feminist purposes (p.156). But she believed that a feminism which valued women's traditional capacities for nurturance and relationship would appeal to more women than one which relied solely on abstract (and male-defined) concepts of

individual rights and personal autonomy. However, while she was right to argue that there is much that is valuable in women's traditional capacities, she misperceived the source of the fear of feminism. Feminism is feared, not because it is too abstract and individualist for many women, but because it names male domination so clearly. The feminist problem with women's traditional roles is not that women in fact performed them, but that they ensured women's subservience to men. The problem is not that women are nurturant and caring (if they are), but that women are required to nurture men without reciprocity. It is the prospect of women withdrawing from servicing men that is so terrifying, to men because they will lose women's recognition of their 'human' status at women's expense, and to women because they will lose the only access to intimacy and 'human' status allowed them under male supremacist conditions. But Offen failed to recognise that it is feminism's very opposition to male supremacy, an opposition which she so lightly took for granted, which is the source of the fear.

As I mentioned at the end of the last chapter, too often feminist texts equivocate on the question of male domination, even, oddly enough, in some cases where male domination is explicitly named. For example, Sandra Harding, in her paper 'Why Has the Sex/Gender System Become Visible Only Now?' (Harding, 1983), quite clearly recognises the existence of male domination, since she defines 'sex/gender' as 'a system of male dominance made possible by men's control of women's productive and reproductive labor' (p.311). 'Male domination' is synonymous with 'sex/gender system' throughout the paper. She tells us that it is probably unwise 'to assume that anything like the sex/gender system we know is a *universal* trait of human social life', and so confines the scope of her generalisation to 'the vast majority of cultures to which we will ever have historical access' (p.323n10—her emphasis). Hence any (hypothetical) cultures which were not male dominant would, it would seem, lack a 'sex/gender system'. But if male domination is the common and invariable characteristic of 'sex/gender systems', why is there any need to substitute 'sex/gender system' for 'male domination'? Given how prevalent the evasion of male domination is within texts self-identified as 'feminist', the substitution is not innocent. It too often functions as a euphemistic denial of male domination, and hence of the relations of power challenged by feminism. Why it should appear in a text which otherwise identifies the power relations clearly, is not explained.



Another text, which is less clear about locating feminist politics in the challenge to male domination, and which mentions it only to subordinate it to something else, is Nancy Fraser's and Linda Nicholson's paper, 'Social Criticism Without Philosophy' (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990). In their criticism of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Fraser and Nicholson point out the limitations of Lyotard's starting point, Philosophy. 'Suppose', they say, that 'one began, not with the condition of Philosophy, but with the nature of the social object one wished to criticise. Suppose, further, that one defined that object as the subordination of women to and by men' (p.26). But instead of leaving the criticism there, with Lyotard's failure to recognise the subordination of women by men (a not unsurprising failure, of course, on the part of any malestream theorist), they go on to identify the chief problem with Lyotard's thesis as a 'rejection' of 'many of the genres ... necessary for social criticism'. On Fraser's and Nicholson's account, the problem with Lyotard's thesis is that it is not multifarious enough to deal with 'a phenomenon as pervasive and multifaceted as male dominance'. And the problem with male dominance is that it is 'pervasive and multifaceted'. As of course it is. But male dominance could be homogeneous, monolithic, or confined to restricted areas of social life, and still be a problem. The problem with male dominance is male dominance. Finding it a problem needs no extra justification.

While most self-identified feminist texts which fail to acknowledge male domination as the prime antagonist feminism is struggling against, do so implicitly and by omission, there are some texts which explicitly argue against it. For example, there is Judith Butler's argument against what she characterises as 'the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination'. She goes on to say:

The notion of a universal patriarchy has been widely criticised in recent years for its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists. Where those various contexts have been consulted within such theories, it has been to find "examples" or "illustrations" of a universal principle that is assumed from the start. That form of feminist theorizing has come under criticism for its efforts to colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures to support highly Western notions of oppression, [and]

because they tend as well to construct a “Third World” or even an “Orient” in which gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism. The urgency of feminism to establish a universal status for patriarchy in order to strengthen the appearance of feminism’s own claims to be representative has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorial or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women’s common subjugated experience (Butler, 1990: 3-4).

This single paragraph comprises the whole of Butler’s critique of ‘patriarchy’/‘masculine domination’ within this text. The scantness of the argument indicates both Butler’s belief in the self-evident nature of the critique, and her scorn for the ‘form of feminist theorising’ she is supposedly criticising. As is so frequently the case with this kind of argument, no evidence for or examples of ‘fictive universality’ are provided, so that the charge is impossible to evaluate in this particular instance. We are not told where ‘the notion of a universal patriarchy’ appears, nor where it has been criticised. We cannot therefore decide for ourselves whether or not there are any forms of feminist theorising which ‘colonize and appropriate non-Western cultures’ and construct them as ‘barbarous’, nor which forms they might be.

Her argument is an instance of the ‘false universalism’ charge (see chapter three, pp.109-117), and it functions in the same way all such charges against feminist theory function, i.e. to deny male domination. She characterises ‘patriarchy’ as a ‘highly Western notion’, and insists that such a notion is inappropriate when applied to ‘the workings of gender oppression’ and ‘women’s subjugated experience’ in cultures other than ‘Western’ ones. In doing so, she denies that the concept of ‘patriarchy’ is relevant to cultures other than ‘the West’. She does, however, acknowledge that ‘gender oppression’ and ‘women’s subjugation’ exist in cultures other than ‘the West’. But if women’s subjugation is not the result of male domination, why are women subordinate? It would appear that ‘universalism’ is only false when what is being ‘universalised’ is male domination. There is no problem, it would seem, with seeing women’s oppression as ‘universal’ in the sense that it exists in cultures other than ‘the West’. What is forbidden by the accusation of ‘false universalism’ is the naming of the enemy.

To locate the cause of women's subordination in male domination is not to 'universalise' a peculiarly 'Western' notion and apply it to 'other cultures'. To identify the domination of women by men (and of some men by other men) is not to assert that there is only one singular form of male domination. Even in 'the West', it takes a multiplicity of different forms. Wherever men's interests prevail at women's expense, and the interests of some men override the interests of other men, male domination exists, whatever form it takes. While it is sometimes violent and blatantly dehumanising, it is also as multifarious and all pervasive as everyday life. While it takes different forms in different cultures and under different historical conditions, as long as 'human' existence continues to be defined in terms of the male, and the 'human' existence of some men is bought at the expense of other men, it remains male domination, in all its 'endless variety and monotonous similarity'.<sup>1</sup>

This reluctance among many who identify as feminists to name and identify male domination requires explanation. One frequently reiterated reason is a reluctance to characterise women as 'victims'. Focusing on male domination, so the argument goes, makes men out to be more powerful than they are, and can only make women feel trapped and helpless. To dwell at length on male power, to see it as all-pervasive, to find it everywhere encroaching on us, invading our lives, penetrating the deepest recesses of our psyches, entrenched in our most intimate acts, is to portray women as nothing but passive and helpless victims of men, or so it is argued. This kind of argument is rife in 'academic feminist' circles, and yet it is inherently contradictory because it makes the same mistake it supposedly finds elsewhere. It interprets references to male domination in terms of something monolithic and inevitable, an interpretation which misrepresents the fine feminist work already done in this area. It wants to maintain *both* the notion that women are oppressed, *and* the idea that women, too, can be powerful, both in the sense of being in some way in control of their own lives, and in the sense of oppressive of other women. But feminism's identification of male domination does not portray women as nothing but victims. Feminism's project of women creating for ourselves non-exclusionary and non-oppressive ways of being human is sufficient evidence that feminism does not define women as victims. And while it is important to identify ways in which women are oppressive towards other women, those ways must be accurately

---

1. The phrase is taken from Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 35. These authors, however, apply it to 'women's oppression', not to 'patriarchy' or 'male domination'.

identified if they are to be effectively challenged. (For an extended discussion of this, see chapter five, 'Feminism and Racism').

The following example of the 'feminism makes women into victims' assertion is one of many. In her book, *Foucault and Feminism*, Lois McNay says that the 'tendency to regard women as powerless and innocent victims of patriarchal social structures ... [and] the analysis of women's oppression in terms of a schematic dominator/dominated paradigm ... hamper many types of feminist analysis' (McNay, 1992: 63, 66). 'This tendency', she says, fails 'to account for the potential of women's creativity and agency within social constraints'. It is also oppressive to some women because it does not recognise 'that gender is not the only determining influence on women's lives', and because it 'takes white women's experiences as the norm and generalizes them'. Typically, she gives no examples of feminist work which supposedly exhibits this trait, because, as she puts it, 'the problematic assumptions which underlie the notion of women as innocent victims of male power are well documented' (pp.63-4). Yet she herself asserts that there are 'undoubtedly ... structures of domination, in particular constructions of gender, which ensure the overall subordinate position of women in society' (pp.66-7), and that women obtain 'kinds of "reward" ... from placing themselves in positions which are commonly regarded as subordinate' (p.81). McNay does not perceive a contradiction between rejecting 'patriarchal social structures' with their attendant 'powerless and innocent victims', on the one hand, and accepting 'structures of gender domination' and women's 'overall subordination' on the other. For if there are no victims of domination and subordination (and no perpetrators or beneficiaries), there is no political problem. To insist that women are male domination's victims is not to assert that, therefore, women are 'innocent and powerless'. Such terminology is nothing but a verbal trick substituting for argument and evidence. Male domination is referred to in pejorative terminology when the writer wants to set up an imaginary antagonist from which she wishes to dissociate herself, while at the same time using some kind of 'neutral' terminology when references to male domination are unavoidable. Since there are no substantive distinctions drawn, the difference is merely one of nomenclature.

To acknowledge that women are victims of male domination is not to define women *only* as victims. This kind of objection fails to take into account the sense of power,

triumph and relief which comes with seeing the world clearly. It fails to take into account the pressing need we have to see just how bad things really are, and the sense of liberation which comes with knowledge. It ignores the political necessity of knowing what we are up against if we are to do anything about it. Those fearful of confining women to perpetual victimhood seem to have forgotten (or never to have known) the relief of hearing one's oppression named *as* oppression, rather than merely as a personal, idiosyncratic failing. 'The personal is political' means just that. It is a liberation all in itself to have the enemy clearly identified as such. To realise that the fault lies, not in one's flawed self, but in a reality to which one can say 'no', is a vital step in the process of extricating oneself from oppressive conditions. It is true that we probably all have a sticking point, a point at which we can take no more, a point at which enough is enough and the misery outweighs the relief. But the misery is not alleviated by refusing to see male domination when it is manifestly present, by calling it something less horrendous (like 'gender'), or by portraying women as powerful when we are not. Recognising the constraints to which one is subjected is intrinsic to acknowledging one's own moral agency under oppression (to use Sarah Hoagland's phrase—Hoagland, 1988). Moral agency requires an ability to decide not only the scope but also the limits of one's own responsibility, the extent to which one is *not* responsible as well as the extent to which one is, when one *cannot* act as well as when one can.

Neither is naming male domination to portray women as *nothing but* victims. Women can also be collaborators, can embrace male supremacist meanings and values as their own and defend them vigorously. The system offers limited, but not thereby unimportant, benefits and advantages. It entices and seduces while it oppresses. Women can also be courageous and clear-sighted resisters. There is a sense in which feminism's challenge to male domination is not 'about' women at all. It refers to a social system which certainly operates to women's detriment, but with which anyone can be complicit and which anyone can resist. But it is important to be clear that women are its chief victims. To refrain from naming victimisation is a failure to name oppression. By the same logic, we ought not to name any of the other great oppressions in history either. Should we also refrain from speaking about the Holocaust or colonialism? These great evils produced countless millions of innocent and powerless victims. Why can these victims be named as such, but not the women who are victims of male supremacy? Is it because they *are* women? Under the grand scheme of things that is male supremacy,

women are unimportant except in so far as they serve male interests. How are we to know the extent of the harm done to women if we are forbidden to name the harm? To the extent that ‘academic feminism’ suppresses any reference to women as victims, it is in collusion with domination.

The central concern of feminist politics has been variously identified as:

- patriarchy (capitalist or otherwise),
- sexism;
- women;
- women’s oppression;
- women’s mothering;
- women’s equality with men;
- women’s life activity, experience, identity, etc.;
- female biology, in particular, women’s child-bearing capacity;
- the sexual division of labour;
- ‘gender’ or the ‘sex-gender system’;
- sex (or ‘gender’) differences;
- differences among women;
- race, class and ‘gender’;
- dichotomies, dualisms or binary oppositions;
- multiplicity;
- social construction;
- self-definition, i.e. anything said or done by anyone who identifies as a feminist;

doing what you want to do and not doing what you don’t want to do (as long as you’re a woman, that is).

The last category—doing what you want without hindrance or challenge—is intended as a reference to any claim that something is feminist simply by reason of the fact that some women want it. One example of such a claim is the insistence that lesbian sadomasochism is ‘feminist’. But because sadomasochism validates relations of domination and subordination by interpreting them as nothing but pleasure, it is by definition antithetical to feminism. The claim only makes sense on the assumption that ‘feminism’ is being defined as an absolute ‘right’ for women to do whatever they want

to do simply because they want to do it. But such claims are inadequate for a feminist politics because relations of domination can operate through the most intimate levels of desire. Whether or not desires are complicit with domination can only be decided by asking the question. Although feminism entails women's liberation, and although liberation partly involves being free to act on what one feels, feminism is also a political analysis which identifies, challenges and resists how we are situated within relations of power. We do this not only with reference to our feelings and desires, but also by taking an explicit moral stance against domination, even, or perhaps especially, in relation to our own implication in relations of power. To embrace with pleasure and delight our own desire to dominate or be dominated, is not to challenge and eventually overcome it, but to remain fixedly embedded within the values of the male supremacist status quo.

Most of the above issues are interrelated, and all of them have some bearing on feminist politics. But none of them clearly identifies the primary social problem exposed by feminism. None of them names male domination as *the* social problem addressed by feminism. Some of the issues listed above come closer to such an identification than others. 'Patriarchy' and 'sexism', for example, usually mean male domination of females, whereas the term 'gender' often seems to have been deliberately coined to avoid naming the enemy. But 'patriarchy' literally means 'the rule of the father', the domination, not only of women by men, but of sons by fathers, younger men by older men, powerless men by powerful men. And men do not acquire their dominant status because they are fathers, but because they are men. And although 'sexism' is sometimes used in an analogy to 'racism', i.e. by identifying 'sex' as the basis of oppression in comparison with 'race' as the basis of oppression, it can be (and is) used by men to complain about their exclusion from affirmative action policies and women-only spaces.

### **'Women'**

Feminism is necessarily concerned with women. It is the *women's* movement, and it is *women's* liberation which is at stake. It is women who are harmed, women who are oppressed and subordinated, women whose consciousness changed to see oppression for what it was, and to see, too, that it wasn't inescapable or natural and that it could be challenged. Feminism originated with women—with women's experience, women's discontent, women's outrage at the confidence tricks perpetrated to keep us subservient, women's sense of betrayal at being excluded from all kinds of rights, benefits and

privileges. But it is not sufficient to define feminism only in terms of women. In the first place, a concern with women is not always a feminist enterprise. Gynæcology, for example, is concerned only with women, as is any misogynist discourse. The simple fact of being focused on women does not in and of itself make something feminist. What distinguishes feminism from other concerns with women is its explicit acknowledgment of and opposition to the social system which is male domination. Feminism's concern with women arises in the first place out of a concern with the harm done to women under the social conditions of male supremacy, with the aim of providing women with the means to take control of our lives into our own hands, insofar as that is possible and while recognising the constraints and limitations placed on women by men's rule over the world. It is only acknowledging the social system of male supremacy as the main enemy that gives any meaning to feminism's concern with women.

In the second place, confining the meaning of feminism solely to 'women' has unfortunate political consequences. Focusing political attention exclusively on women means that the only relations of power which can be seen are those which operate among women. 'Women's oppression' then becomes something that women do to other women. It is true that women are divided from each other in a myriad of ways, through their intimate relationships with individual men, through their domestic isolation with sole responsibility for children, through their identification with and membership of hierarchically arranged social collectivities such as race/culture/ethnicity and class. But to define feminism only in terms of these 'differences' shatters and fragments the feminist project into a multiplicity of competing interest groups among women who have nothing in common because some are more (and some less) privileged than others. Feminism is reduced to nothing but a series of different and essentially antagonistic categories of women. That is not to say that differences of privilege and access to human rights and dignity among women are not feminist issues. They are. The problem is locating them *only* in differences among women, rather than locating them in the first place within the meanings and values of male supremacy. (For a more detailed discussion of this, see chapter five). This is a political dead end. Without the acknowledgment of male supremacy, all that women have in common is that they are women as 'women' are currently constituted. There is no way out because there is no way of naming the social problem, and hence no way of identifying what must be



resisted and overcome. All that women have in common are those traditional roles which tie them into their subordination to men, that is, nothing very much in common at all because the interests of men must take priority in women's lives. Unless it is possible to name the problem common to all women, and hence women's common interest in opposing the source of oppression, it is these hierarchical and oppressive differences between women which define feminism.

The solution to the problems of confining feminism to women is not to widen the focus to include men. That is to fall into the politically paralysing trap of the ideology of individualism. To pose the problem only in terms of 'women' and 'men' is to pose the problem in terms of the attributes of individuals. This makes feminism vulnerable to attack on the grounds that some individuals do not possess the characteristics in question. Assertions to the effect that not all men rape, or that women can be dominating too, operate to obliterate feminist politics by reducing it to nothing but a criticism of the preferences and behaviour of individuals. But if feminism is not in the first place 'about women' in this individualist sense, there is no need to include men. Feminism's identification of and opposition to the ideological construct of the male as the 'human' norm already includes 'men' as the bearers and beneficiaries of the social relations of male supremacy. Demonstrating that some men refuse complicity with domination, or that some women acquiesce, is not an objection to feminism construed as the opposition to male domination, as long as male domination continues to exist despite the best will and intentions on the part of individuals. (For a further discussion of this in relation to heterosexuality, see: Thompson, 1994; Thompson, 1995).

There is already some awareness within 'academic feminism' that there are problems with defining feminism solely in terms of 'women'. However, none of these arguments recognises male domination as the central problematic of feminist politics. In 'What Is Feminism?' (Delmar, 1986), Rosalind Delmar identified a number of problems with defining feminism as a concern with 'women's issues'. She said that such a concern was not specific to 'feminists', that it threatened to marginalise women and maintain their exclusion from 'the general field of human endeavour', and that it implied a unity and homogeneity among women which did not exist. Although she kept returning to a definition of feminism as a concern with 'women's issues', she did not commit herself (or feminism) to any one definition, since she disagreed with the idea that there can be

any “true” and authentic feminism’ (p.9). She provided what she regarded as a minimalist definition of ‘a feminist’ as ‘at the very least ... someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order’ (p.8). She admitted that she found this definition unsatisfactory, not, however, because it failed to mention male domination, but because things were ‘more complicated’ than this definition allowed. The limitations entailed by defining feminism in terms of ‘women’ were in her view intrinsic to feminism, and not a result of her own failure to perceive that feminism’s concern with women arises in the first place as a consequence of male domination.

Delmar’s text reads as though written from the position of a detached observer of the historical and conceptual vagaries of feminism. She did not identify as a feminist—both women and feminists are ‘they’—and the paper abounds in the agent-deleting passive voice. She did not discuss male domination at all as the defining factor in feminist politics. She mentioned it, briefly and dismissively, only twice. The first mention occurred in the context of what she viewed negatively as an (agent-deleted) ‘strong desire to pin feminism down’ by means of a ‘preoccupation with central concerns like sexual division and male domination’. This desire failed because, she said, ‘this impulse has invariably encountered obstacles’. These obstacles included disagreements about the reasons for women’s situation and about what should be done about it, and ‘bitter, at times virulent disputes’ (p.9). She did not discuss the nature of these disputes, nor identify those who were engaging in them. The second mention of male domination occurred in the context of a discussion of ‘sexual politics’. She regarded this as a new concept which was devised by contemporary feminism and which was unknown among nineteenth-century feminists. She recognised that the concept of sexual politics involved ‘the idea of women as a social group dominated by men as a social group (male domination/female oppression)’. But she did not follow up this insight. She simply dropped it, concluding with the assertion that the feminist idea of sexual politics was primarily focused on ‘the pursuit of questions about the female body and its sexual needs’ (pp.26-7). She did not consider the possibility that feminism’s concern with ‘the female body’ might be intrinsically different from malestream representations of the female body like pornography and advertising, nor that that feminist concern might be

inspired in the first place by an impulse to challenge male proprietorship of female bodies. It is not therefore surprising that Delmar found feminism's concern with 'women' unsatisfactory, since she failed to acknowledge the reason why feminism might be so concerned, i.e. feminism's identification of women's exclusion from 'human' status and its challenge to the ideology of the male as the 'human' norm.

Naomi Schor's definition of feminism, despite its inclusion within feminism of antagonistic and mutually exclusive positions, does implicitly characterise feminism as a concern with 'women':

I would propose a definition of feminism that makes of it a sum of contradictions, the nodal point where dissatisfactions with contemporary society and the place it assigns women, claims for equality, claims for singular or plural differences, assertions of an essential and transhistorical female nature, denunciations of a subaltern condition due to specifically historical and contingent factors clash and intertwine. In all feminism in the broadest sense of the term there would be equal parts of conservative and contestatory forces, of maternalism and anti-maternalism, of familialism and antifamilialism, of separatism and assimilationism. The apparently irreconcilable debate that currently opposes essentialists and constructionists is a false debate in that neither of the warring forces has an exclusive hold on the truth. Feminism is the debate itself (Schor, 1992: 46).

As well as its concern with women—'the place [society] assigns women', 'female nature', 'maternalism', 'familialism', etc.—this definition also displays a concern to challenge women's subordination—'denunciations of a subaltern condition'. Hence it would presumably exclude from the ambit of feminism discourses which did not identify and oppose women's subordination. But it does not locate the reasons for women's subordination with male supremacy, and it is so inclusive as to be useless for feminist politics. The tolerant acceptance of mutually contradictory positions which claim to challenge women's subordination, closes down debate and precludes from the outset any possibility of clarifying, much less resolving, the contradictions. For example, the characterisation of the 'essentialism' debate as a matter of 'warring forces'

misrepresents it. There are not two symmetrical camps, one claiming an essentialist position and the other a constructionist one. No one deliberately embraces 'essentialism' as their own position. There is only one position here, and that involves the accusation that certain feminist writings, usually designated radical or 'cultural' feminism, are 'essentialist'. Those so accused are rarely named (but see: Eisenstein, 1984; Segal, 1984. For a critique of the accusation, see: Thompson, 1991: especially chapters 7 and 10). But even when they are, they neither espouse 'essentialism' nor speak in their own defence, and hence cannot be seen to hold a position in the debate at all. Schor's all-embracing characterisation of feminism reduces it to nothing more than a series of personal opinions. 'Feminism' becomes anything said by anyone who identifies as a feminist.

But women have varying degrees of awareness of and opposition to the realities of male domination. To define feminism only in terms of what women say, does not provide any criteria for distinguishing feminist statements from anti-feminist or misogynist pronouncements by women. To cite another example: to define feminism, as Carol Bacchi does (citing Linda Gordon), as 'a "sharing in an impulse to increase the power and autonomy of women in their families, communities and/or society"' (Bacchi, 1990: xix), allows no way of identifying as anti-feminist right-wing discourses on women, as long as they emanate from the mouths of women. Right-wing women sometimes co-opt the feminist terminology for use in their anti-feminist crusade. For example, Babette Francis is a founder of the anti-feminist group 'Women Who Want To Be Women', a member of a number of 'pro-life' (i.e. anti-abortion) groups, and a committee member of the right-wing 'Council for a Free Australia'. She considers herself, however, 'a feminist in the true sense of the word', that is, 'a believer in equal rights for women'. She sees herself as acting entirely in women's interests in opposing such 'beliefs and methods' of 'women's liberationists' as 'abortion on demand, government-funded 24-hours-a-day crèches, and propaganda for education based on the assumption that sex differences are entirely socially induced rather than innate'. She believes that Christianity has been instrumental in 'establishing the philosophical basis for the equality of women' and in 'enhanc[ing] women's status', and that 'the Catholic tradition in particular' has benefited women by upholding 'the principle that women should not have to subject their bodies to contraception, abortion and sterilization to achieve equality with men' (Rowland, ed., 1984: 130-1). It is true that Francis speaks in

terms of ‘rights’ rather than in terms of increasing women’s power and autonomy. But she is certainly concerned with women’s place ‘in their families, communities and/or society’. Unless the limitations on women’s power, autonomy and rights are located with male domination, there is too little to distinguish Francis’ view of ‘feminism’ from a genuinely feminist one.

In fact, however, Bacchi does not confine herself to this definition of feminism, which she acknowledges is ‘used loosely’ in her text. Central to her own feminism is a commitment to ‘a social model which *includes* women in the human standard’ (p.266—her emphasis). It is this commitment which provides the crux of her argument against the ‘sameness/difference’ model of relations between the sexes. In that sense, her account is not ‘about women’ at all, but about those conditions which cause us to ‘lose sight of the fact that what is at issue are necessary social arrangements for humane living’ (p.xv). In another sense, however, she *is* centrally concerned with women, but in a way which clearly distinguishes her account from right-wing discourses on women. By acknowledging the feminist project as working for the inclusion of women in the human standard, she is also acknowledging women’s *exclusion* from that standard as the problem. In doing so, she is also acknowledging male domination as the problem, although she does not couch it in this terminology. Nonetheless, the recognition is there and is evident throughout her text.

The chief form which debates about the category of ‘women’ have taken, centres around the idea that the category is ‘essentialist’. My argument is that feminism is *not* in fact defined solely in terms of women, because such an interpretation fails to make sense of the feminist project. The ‘anti-essentialist’ argument is that feminism *is* in fact defined in terms of women, but that it ought not to be because of problems with the category ‘women’. One of the earliest statements of that position appeared in 1978 in a paper called ‘The “Subject” of Feminism’ (Adams and Minson, 1978). The quotation marks around the word ‘subject’ signalled a deliberate ambiguity. It meant both ‘women’ as the ‘subject-matter’ of feminism, and ‘women’ as the ‘subjects’ addressed by feminism. In a move which has subsequently become familiar under the rubric of postmodernism (although its stated allegiance at the time was to socialist feminism), the authors argued that, although feminist politics required ‘a specificity which will resist its absorption by other politics’, that specificity could not be theoretically designated ‘in

terms of the oppression of a pre-given category women' (p.43). Such an interpretation 'necessitates a concept of a human essence which exists independently of and prior to the category of the social ... woman ... as a transparent name for an eternal object' (p.44). It is not the case, they said, that 'the human subject [is] at the origin of meaning, value, etc.'. It is necessary 'to displace the subject from its position as origin, a source of language, expressivity and will, and in so doing to dismantle the unity of the subject'. There is no need for 'entities such as "people", "human relations" and so on', they asserted. Such entities 'have no explanatory function'. Neither is it necessary to posit 'a realm of values or ... unconditional "moral" attributes such as moral responsibility or free will' (p.52). Instead, they argued, the only allowable theoretical place for anything that might be called a subject is its role as an 'enunciative modality'. 'Subjects' are nothing other than the subjects of statements occurring in historically particular discourses and information networks which constitute 'the sites, statuses and positions of discursive agents' (pp.50-3). As a consequence, they said,

there is no general problem of responsibility, the self-presence of the subject to its actions. The problem of responsibility is dispersed into the particular sites, positions, statuses and agents of definite practices. ... responsibilities ... should be considered as specific *conferred statuses* ... To be held responsible, in this view, is no more or less than to be recognised as such in one or more definite discourses (p.53—emphasis in the original)

But this formulation gives rise to more problems than it solves (if it solves any at all). In fact it has horrifying implications. It excludes any possibility of addressing one of the most pressing problems of the twentieth century, the evil that is done by those who are 'agents of definite practices' of destruction and degradation. It condones the actions of those occupying 'conferred statuses' in dehumanising discourses, who justify what they do by pleading that they are 'only doing their duty', that they are 'just following orders'. It rules out any possibility of bringing to account those who ensure the efficient running of bureaucracies of death, of which the primary, although not the only, example in this century is the Nazi state. It allows no place for any kind of refusal to be implicated in 'definite discourses' of domination, for draft resistance, for example, or environmental activism, or feminism. Such refusals are not 'conferred statuses'. They are engaged in

by people who place in jeopardy their lives, liberty, comfort and safety. These people are not ‘human essences outside the social’. They are human beings who exercise their free will by accepting moral responsibility for resisting complicity with evil. If acknowledging the existence of such people has no explanatory power, there is no room for any kind of politics at all, feminism included. Such a move abolishes feminist politics, not, as has been argued, because it questions the category ‘women’, but because it abolishes any possibility of ethical refusal of relations of domination.

Judith Butler also addressed the question of ‘the subject of feminism’ (Butler, 1990). She argued against what she saw as the feminist assumption ‘that there is some existing identity, understood through the category women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued’ (p.1). She said that, because ‘subjects’ are inescapably formed ‘within a field of power’, no appeals can be made on their behalf as a way out of relations of power. There is no subject ‘outside’ or ‘before the law’ which can provide a basis for challenging the law. ‘The identity of the feminist subject’ she said, ‘ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation’ (p.6). In other words, feminism cannot appeal to the category of ‘women’ as the basis for its refusal of male supremacist relations of domination, if ‘women’ are already constituted by those very relations. But arguments like this depend on assuming that ‘the foundation of feminist politics’ *is* the category ‘women’. If in contrast, it is argued that the ‘subject matter’ of feminism is male domination, the term ‘women’ vanishes as feminism’s ‘foundation’. Feminism still needs to be able to refer to women if the harm done to women by the dehumanising procedures of male supremacy is to be addressed. But the word does not refer to any asocial and monolithic ‘essence’, although the frequency with which it is asserted that it does (in discourses which are not, of course, the speaker’s own) indicates that the accusers at least believe the word is inescapably essentialist. The word ‘women’ has perfectly serviceable uses. Sometimes the purposes for which the word is used are male supremacist in meaning and value (although the prevalence of ‘ladies’ and ‘girls’ suggests some discomfort with the word ‘women’). Sometimes the purposes are feminist. But it serves no feminist purpose to abandon the word simply because some of its uses are male supremacist.

Arguments like Butler's are politically stultifying. If the terms of the debate are so arranged that relations of domination constitute the whole of 'the social', because there is no way out of 'the social' (as everyone knows), there is also no way out of relations of domination, and hence no possibility of resistance and refusal. But putting it in these terms is to commit the same solecism the accusers of 'essentialism' supposedly find elsewhere. It is to reify 'the social' into a monolithic totality 'outside' the individuals who live and act within it. The fact remains that it *is* possible to refuse certain meanings, values and actions for certain purposes. People do it all the time. Whether something is an embracing of relations of domination, or whether it is a refusal, can only be decided by allowing that both possibilities exist. And such possibilities can only be seen to exist if male domination is not the whole of 'the social'. The word 'women' is undoubtedly a social category. (What else could it be?) But that does not mean that it cannot be used for the feminist purpose of refusing complicity with male domination. Such refusals are not 'outside the social' in any absolute sense (if that makes any sense at all). They are a constant process of engagement with the social order which is male supremacy. If ever male supremacy ceases to exist, what will have gone is not 'the social' per se, but its nature as male supremacist. But short of such a utopian outcome, those occasions which are already refusals of complicity with male domination, and they must exist otherwise opposing male supremacy would not be thinkable, are not thereby 'outside the social'. To assume without question that they must be, is to fall into the very trap of 'essentialism' which is supposedly being avoided. It is also to argue for political passivity. If we cannot refuse domination because that would require being 'outside the social', there is nothing to be done and political activism is futile. Butler appears to be perfectly satisfied with this conclusion. I am not.

Neither is it necessary. The 'subject' of feminism is not 'women', either in the sense of theoretical subject matter, or in the sense of that 'identity' in whose name feminist politics proceeds. The subject matter of feminism is male supremacy. The theory and practice of feminism proceed in the interests of women because women are the chief victims of male supremacist relations of power, because women are more likely to be in a position to perceive the problems (although those perceptions are not automatic or inevitable), and because current relations of power benefit men at women's expense. While feminism is concerned with 'women's issues', e.g. motherhood, marriage, equal pay, domestic labour, nurturing, to confine feminism's focus of attention only to what is



conventionally recognised as ‘women’s issues’, is to confine women to those ‘traditional roles’ which maintain women’s subordination to men. The task of feminism is not to improve the situation of women within conventional and subordinated statuses, nor to abolish them absolutely, but to recognise the importance, worth and human dignity of women, and to create (or maintain) possibilities for genuinely human choices for women however and wherever we are placed. More importantly, feminism is concerned with the whole of the human condition, and not just with that restricted sphere conventionally allocated to women (although still controlled by and for the benefit of men). Feminism is as much concerned with war as it is with nurturing, as much with planetary pollution as with housework, with capitalist accumulation as well as equal pay, with a revolution in meanings and values as well as childbirth, with reason as well as emotion, with the mind as well as the body. Nothing is outside feminist concern as long as male supremacy continues to exist.

Neither is feminism only, or primarily, about ‘women’s experience’. Feminism must remain grounded in experience, in some sense at least, if it is not to deteriorate into a set of academic exercises. But feminist theory cannot remain simply at the level of experience in the sense of incommensurable individual life histories, because experience is already theory-laden, context-dependent and collective. There is no ‘experience’ outside already constituted relations of power which provide experience with its meaning, purpose and value. There is no ‘pure’ experience which guarantees the truth of feminist theory. Neither experience nor any particular social location is a guarantee of feminist commitment. Since feminism is a politics and a morality, it requires more than a litany of appeals to ‘experience’. It requires a change in consciousness and a deliberate political choice so that relations of domination and subordination, and our own positioning within those relations, can be perceived and challenged. It is feminist theory, and the ethical and political insights which inform it, which reinterprets the meaning and value of experience by challenging its male supremacist connotations.

To define feminism only in terms of ‘women’ is actively to discourage feminist politics. It does not distinguish feminism from other discourses which also address themselves to the question of ‘women’, including misogynist and anti-feminist discourses. It focuses on hierarchies of privilege between and among women, and interprets social

oppressions only in terms of antagonisms between women. And it means that feminism can be too easily hijacked. Because it does not allow us to identify something as anti-feminist as long as it is said by women in the name of feminism, it can be put into service to defend anti-feminist positions simply because they are held by women. If feminism is only concerned with ‘women’, then how do we decide between conflicting views of ‘what women want’ as long as those conflicts emanate from the mouths of women? While feminism is certainly concerned with women’s interests, and while each of us has to make her own decisions about where her priorities lie, unless feminism is defined first and foremost in terms of opposition to male domination, it becomes at best nothing more than a set of pallid opinions, at worst, outright conflict between women with no hope of resolution.

It seems to me, thinking back, that we used to know this once. The appeal of early feminist consciousness-raising to ‘women’s experience’ was not a reassuring ‘sharing’ of each woman’s ‘experience’, but a transforming of the meaning of those experiences, from a set of personal failings and deficiencies into a consequence of women’s positioning within phallographic reality. In this sense feminism was never an ‘identity politics’. To define ‘feminism’ as an ‘identity’ as ‘a feminist’ is to remain caught up in the ideology of individualism. Since everyone is undoubtedly entitled to define her own ‘identity’, it stops debate before it even starts, and prevents any possibility of judging on feminist criteria anything said by anyone who identifies as ‘a feminist’. This kind of relativism is ideological because it operates in male supremacist interests. By interpreting conflicting claims made in the name of ‘feminism’ as conflicts between ‘feminists’, it silences the feminist challenge. If ‘feminism’ is an ‘identity’, disagreement becomes personal offence because it is an attack on one’s sense of self. In contrast, if feminism is clearly seen to be non-exclusionary, conflicts can hopefully be argued through without offending anyone because no one’s identity is at stake. The question is not what women are or have been, but what women might become once we threw off the dead hand of phallographic history and started seeing ourselves with our own eyes and living our lives in our own interests.

### ***‘Patriarchy’***

‘Patriarchy’ is the term most commonly used to designate the social problem identified by feminism (or it used to be—it would appear that it has been superseded by the term

‘gender’). But in its usual meaning of ‘rule of the father’, the term ‘patriarchy’ is a misnomer applied to the form of domination challenged by feminism. The paternal domination portrayed in western history, myth and literature is the rule of the father over the son. Whether manifested through the domination of younger male by older, of poor, disenfranchised, enslaved or dispossessed male by the wealthy, of colonised by the colonialist, of employee by employer, of proletarian by capitalist, of conscripted youth by aging warmongers, patriarchy in the west involves the imposition of, or struggles against, the ascendancy of some men over other men. ‘Patriarchy’ in this sense is an affair between men, and is relevant to women only derivatively through our implication in power hierarchies among men.

But whatever the status of some males in relation to other males, the problem identified by feminism is the subjection of women to men. Or rather, because women have always resisted subjugation and asserted our own worth despite the male monopolisation of the ‘human’ norm, as well as acquiesced, accommodated ourselves, manoeuvred for some space and freedom of movement, beat the oppressor at his own game, used his obsessions and weaknesses against him, etc., it is the male supremacist dream and reality of female subjection which is of concern to feminism, not struggles for ascendancy among men. To the extent that women aid the ‘sons’ in their battles with the ‘fathers’, no matter how worthy the cause, no matter how justified the sons’ complaints, women are once again working in men’s interests. These may indeed be women’s interests as well, but that cannot be decided unless it is possible to see women’s interests in the first place.

Freud managed to state the problem clearly, if briefly and inadvertently, in his parable, *Totem and Taboo*. His tale is a ‘just-so story’ illustrating the defeat of classic patriarchalism and its replacement by what Carole Pateman calls ‘fraternal patriarchy’ (Pateman, 1988; Pateman, 1989). Freud’s story is usually interpreted as a mythical account of the historical change from justifying political power in terms of the rule of the father, to justifying that power in terms of a social contract between equals. The sons/brothers band together to form an association strong enough to overcome and kill the father, and subsequently continue the agreement out of guilt and remorse, and out of a need to ensure that no one of them ever again comes to monopolise power in the way the father did. What such interpretations ignore is the kind of power which is at issue in

the struggle between father and sons. What the sons challenge is the father's exclusive right to sexual access to females. What the sons want, what the father-right deprives them of, and what they will commit murder to acquire, is sexual dominion over women. As Pateman points out:

Freud's story of the parricide is important because he makes explicit what the classic tales of theoretical murder leave obscure: the motive for the brothers' collective act is not merely to claim their natural liberty and right of self-government, but *to gain access to women ...* Freud's primal father ... keeps all the women of the horde for himself. The parricide eliminates the father's political right, and also his *exclusive* sexual right ... by setting up rules that give all men equal access to women ... they exercise the "original" political right of dominion over women that was once the prerogative of the father (Pateman, 1989: 42-3—her emphasis).

What Freud's tale reveals is that men's political freedom depends on women's sexual subordination. It suggests that male political power is derived from the sexual control of women. The father ruled because of his monopolisation of sexual access to females; the sons acquired the right to rule themselves when they acquired control over sexual access to women. The interpretation of Freud's tale solely as an account of the replacement of 'the patriarchal horde' by 'the fraternal clan' focuses attention exclusively on male interests. But as soon as women's interests are brought to the fore, it becomes a tale of varying forms of male supremacy. Whether the rule is autocratic or democratic, whether the rulers are fathers or sons (or brothers or husbands) the status of women in Freud's tale, and throughout the historical changes to which that tale alludes (Pateman, 1988), remains a subordinate one (Freud, 1913: 146, 144).

Hence, by identifying the enemy as 'patriarchy', feminism has misnamed it, although it has not always misrecognised it. To the extent that the problem of power-as-domination addressed by feminism is recognised as male domination, it is identified accurately, whatever it is called. Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics*, for example, named the problem 'patriarchy', but defined it primarily in terms of male supremacy: 'If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be

twofold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger' (Millet, 1970: 25). Ti-Grace Atkinson, in *Amazon Odyssey*, did not use the term 'patriarchy', but she did identify the problem addressed by feminism as the domination of women by men. Her preferred designation was 'the sex-class system':

The ... radical feminist analysis of the persecution of women ... begins with the ... *raison d'être* that women are a class, that this class is political in nature, and that this political class is oppressed ... If women are a political class and women are being oppressed, it must be that some other political class is oppressing the class of women. Since the very definition of women entails that only one other class could possibly be relevant to it, only one other class could possibly be oppressing women: the class of men ... Women exist as the corollaries of men, and exist as human beings only insofar as they are those corollaries (Atkinson, 1974: 41).

Socialist feminism's use of the term 'patriarchy' was always somewhat equivocal. While socialist feminists were on the whole disinclined to use the term on the grounds that it was 'ahistorical' and 'universalistic', some were reluctantly prepared to accept it as a designator of the political problem addressed by feminism, although it tended to mean neither male supremacy nor the rule of the father. Although socialist feminism purported to resolve the question of which had political priority, capitalism or patriarchy, by asserting that capitalism was the latest historical form of patriarchy, and hence that capitalism was one form of patriarchy (Eisenstein, ed., 1979), in fact within the socialist feminist context, 'patriarchy' was usually simply a form of capitalism. It was a capitalism expanded to include issues of concern to women—domestic labour, reproduction both social and biological, the family, the constitution of femininity, sex segmentation of the work force—but a capitalism nonetheless. Under this schema, 'patriarchy' was defined solely with reference to 'the oppression (or subordination) of women', with the source of that oppression either left unstated or reduced to just another aspect of capitalism. Hence, in this usage, 'patriarchy' had no referent as a form of domination.

Veronica Beechey, in her 1979 paper, 'On Patriarchy', considered whether or not the term 'patriarchy' should be abandoned, given the unsatisfactory way in which she felt it

had been theorised. She argued, however, that it served a purpose for feminism by pointing to ‘real political and theoretical problems’, and hence that it should be retained, at least until ‘we find some other more satisfactory way of conceptualizing male domination and female subordination, and, for Marxist feminism, of relating this to the organization of the mode of production as a whole’ (Beechey, 1979: 68). She did not say why conceptualising male domination as male domination was unsatisfactory.

Moreover, her criticisms of the ‘unsatisfactory’ nature of previous conceptualisations of ‘patriarchy’ leave much to be desired. Her single example of a radical feminist text was Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*.<sup>2</sup> Her criticism of that text was that it provided us with ‘a *description* of patriarchal relationships ... [but] is unable to provide a satisfactory *explanation* of their foundations’ (p.69—her emphasis). True enough, and I am sure Millett would be among the first to agree. But Beechey herself gave us no pointers towards what might constitute an explanation as opposed to a description. Nor, in her concluding remarks, did she appear to regard explanatory power as a prerequisite for a more satisfactory account of patriarchy. Rather, her concern was that ‘a satisfactory theory of patriarchy should be historically specific and should explore the forms of patriarchy which exist within particular modes of production ... [and] in particular social institutions’ (p.80). But she did not tell us how this would raise the theoretical enterprise from the level of mere description to that of explanation.

Neither did she tell us what a ‘mode of production’ might be, a not insignificant omission given the inconclusiveness of the debates within Marxism about that very concept (Coward, 1978). However, it would appear to relate to the question of historical specificity. Extrapolating from that single text by Millett to radical feminism as a whole, Beechey asserted that ‘radical feminism ... leaves unexplained specific forms of male domination and female subordination’ (p.69). But what she meant by this is unclear. Leaving aside the question of ‘explanation’ which Beechey herself never resolved, did she mean that radical feminism is not historically and culturally specific when it designates male domination and female subordination as the problem? If this is what she meant, then she is wrong. Given that feminist theory and practice is grounded in

---

2. Before she proceeded to discuss socialist feminist writings, Beechey expressed some disquiet at the possibility that she might be being ‘unfair to particular writers’ by confining her discussion to an ‘incomplete survey’, instead of providing ‘a comprehensive review of the Marxist feminist literature’ (p.72). Interestingly, she appeared to feel no such disquiet at the incompleteness (to say the least) of her review of radical feminist literature.

experience, it would seem obvious that it always takes culturally specific forms, i.e. the forms and variations which the feminist knows from her own experience. There may be problems with generalising from one specific historical and cultural context to other historical periods and cultures. But those problems occur, not because the original account was not specific enough, but because it was inaccurately generalised to contexts where it did not apply (in which case its non-application needs to be argued for, not simply asserted as self-evident—see chapter five, ‘Feminism and Racism’). On the other hand, if she meant that radical feminism is at fault because it ‘leaves unexplained’ every specific form of male domination and female subordination, then she was demanding the impossible.

This appeal to historical (and cultural) specificity was of vital epistemological importance to socialist feminism, both as a way of retaining the explanatory force of the Marxist critique of capitalism, and as a weapon in their struggle to amend what they regarded as the faults and naiveties of radical feminism. Michèle Barrett, in *Women’s Oppression Today*, also objected to ‘early radical feminist uses of the term’ patriarchy, on the grounds that such uses ‘invoke an apparently universal and trans-historical category of male dominance, leaving us with little hope of change’ (Barrett, 1984: 12). As a version of the ‘false universalism’ charge this objection is incoherent, but even leaving aside the ‘universal’ and ‘trans-historical’, it is not clear what the charge amounts to. Why would ‘invoking male dominance’ leave us with ‘little hope of change’? On the contrary, it is only by identifying the problem as male dominance that there is any hope of change at all.

Unlike Beechy, Barrett did not feel that the term ‘patriarchy’ was retrievable for present feminist purposes. She proposed to use it to refer only to societies ‘where male domination is expressed through the power of the father’. Such societies, she said, are ‘not capitalist ones’ (p.250-1). However, this left her without a term to refer to those current relations of ruling challenged by feminism. Her preferred term for the problem addressed by feminism was ‘women’s oppression’, and she did sometimes use the term ‘male domination’. But she did not connect the two by attributing women’s oppression to male domination, as of course she could not, because such an endeavour would be, in her own terms, ‘universal’ and ‘trans-historical’. As a consequence she could only account for ‘women’s oppression’ in terms of ‘contemporary capitalism’. But while it is

certainly the case that women are oppressed by capitalism, there are dimensions to that oppression—male sexual violence, to name just one—which even the most thorough investigation of capitalism would never uncover, and hence open the way to change. Barrett tried to resist arguing that women’s oppression was a consequence of capitalism. She criticised attempts to account for women’s oppression ‘in terms of the supposed needs of capitalism itself’ (p.248), or as ‘a functional pre-requisite of capitalism’ (p.249). But her own insistence on confining the account of ‘women’s oppression’ to ‘a material basis in the relations of production and reproduction of capitalism today’ (p.249) left her with no alternative.

But even when socialist feminism did use the term ‘patriarchy’ to mean male domination, it was placed in a very strange social location. As Veronica Beechey put it:

Unlike radical feminist writers like Kate Millett, who have focused solely[!] upon the system of male domination and female subordination, Marxist feminists have attempted to analyse the relationship between the subordination of women and the organization of various modes of production ... not simply “patriarchy” but the *relationship between* patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production (Beechey, 1979: 66, 67—her emphasis).

If there is an as yet undiscovered ‘relationship’ between ‘patriarchy’ and ‘the capitalist mode of production’, then the two must be separate from each other. If they still need to be brought together, then they must still be apart. But if they are two distinct spheres or phenomena, the question is not how to relate them, but how are they separate? Where do they exist if they do not occur together? More to the point, given that there is general agreement about the existence of capitalism, where does ‘patriarchy’ exist if it is separate from the social relations of capitalism? The answer, of course, is that they are not separate in the first place. But to see it in that way requires that feminist standpoint socialist feminism was at such pains to argue away.

I would suggest that the term ‘patriarchy’ has a limited usefulness for feminism, given its tendency to slide back into its original meaning of ‘the rule of the father’, and its socialist feminist history as a term emptied of meaning. At the very least, feminists need to be alert to traps laid for the unwary by ill-considered uses of the term. At the same



time, it does have an honourable feminist history, and with a little feminist caution it can still provide good service.

### **‘Sexism’**

The problem with the term ‘sexism’ is that it does not contain domination as its immediate referent, and hence does not immediately identify the sex which dominates. It fits too easily into the individualist terminology of liberalism, of ‘rights’, ‘discrimination’, ‘attitudes’, and ‘prejudices’. To the extent that ‘sexism’ means no more than distinctions based on sex, it assumes an original equality between sexed individuals, an equality which is transgressed by any action favouring one sex over another, including actions taken by women in defence of their own interests. As a consequence it can be used against actions taken to redress the wrongs done to women, as well as against attempts by women to establish (literal or metaphorical) space outside male intervention and control.

Although the term was widely used in the 1970s, it did not receive much theoretical discussion. There was some discussion in Australia, which originated with the Hobart Women’s Action Group (HWAG) (*Refractory Girl* no.5, 1974; *Refractory Girl* no.6, 1974; Summers, 1975: 22). That analysis revealed the basic flaw in the idea, but instead of resolving it, the debate reproduced the confusion. ‘Sexism’ continued to be defined in the bland, neutral terminology of liberal pluralism, despite the discussants’ partial awareness that such a definition depoliticised the term and rendered it useless for feminist politics.

In their paper, ‘Sexism and the Women’s Liberation Movement’, which was first presented at the Women’s Liberation Theory conference at Mount Beauty in Victoria in January 1973, and which was printed in the ‘Lesbian Issue’ of *Refractory Girl* in 1974, the HWAG defined ‘sexism’ as a structural principle of society which set up distinctions between people based on sex: ‘Sexism means organizing people according to sex and sexual behaviour, and attributing various behaviour, personality and status traits to people on the basis of sex’ (*Refractory Girl* 5: 30). The authors took some pains to argue that ‘sexism’ was not identical with male domination. It was merely a way of structuring society. A society in which women ruled—‘matriarchy’—or one in which

the sexes had equal power and influence although in different spheres, would also be ‘sexist’, they argued, because it would still be structured along sex lines.

A sexist society is not necessarily a patriarchal society—it could equally well be a matriarchy or a society in which the sexes have equal power and influence providing that their spheres of action are different and enforced as different ... Patriarchy is not a precondition of sexism ... Without sexism, patriarchy is deprived of its organizing principle and of its ideology of consent. Sexism then is sufficient basis for patriarchy but does not necessarily lead to it (*Refractory Girl* 5: 30).

On another occasion, the HWAG did acknowledge a close connection between ‘sexism’ and ‘patriarchy’. They pointed out that, although it might be theoretically possible to have forms of sexism which were ‘power-neutral’ in that they were divisions of roles and personality without subordination, or even to have a ‘matriarchal’ form of sexism where women ruled men, in actual fact, they emphasised, ‘*the only sexism that we know is sexism in its patriarchal manifestation*’. They criticised apolitical uses of the term ‘sexism’ which were purely theoretical in the sense that those uses did not locate ‘sexism’ within current patriarchal society. At the same time, however, they themselves defined it solely in theoretical terms, by denying that it meant male domination:

To talk solely about “sexism” rather than “patriarchal sexism” mystifies sexism as it exists in our society. It may infer that other sorts of sexism (power-neutral, matriarchal) are more-than-theoretically possible. This is not to say that sexism means the “institutionalised subordination of women to men”, but to say that *that* manifestation of sexism is the only form that it is relevant to discuss in this society. It is a purely theoretical construct to talk at present of sexism except in its patriarchal form (*Refractory Girl* 6: 2-3).

Despite the writers’ own strictures against discussing any form of ‘sexism’ other than the male dominant form, that was exactly what they themselves were doing by insisting that their own definition include other forms of ‘sexism’ along with the male dominant one. They did not give any reasons why the purely theoretical concept of ‘sexism’

should be retained even though it referred to nothing in 'our society' as it was at present, and hence was of no use for a feminist politics located in the present. Neither did they see any problem with the notion of forms of 'sexism' which do not exist 'in this society'. If those forms do not exist in the here and now, where then do they exist? Why retain the idea if it refers to something which does not exist? Neither did they appear to be aware that, to insist on keeping a theoretical, power-neutral, apolitical concept of 'sexism', was to undermine the feminist insight into the subordination of women by men. In their relative weighting of 'patriarchy'/male domination, on the one hand, and 'sexism', on the other, the HWAG gave priority to 'sexism'. While 'patriarchy is not a precondition of sexism', they said, obviously sexism is a precondition of patriarchy, since 'without sexism, patriarchy is deprived of its organising principle'. On this account, 'sexism' is the more basic phenomenon, while 'patriarchy' is a secondary phenomenon, on the same level as the other hypothetical, and non-existent, forms of 'sexism'.

But the confusions are inherent in the term itself. Because it does not explicitly identify the relations of power involved and name which sex is dominant and which subordinate, it can too easily be used as a pejorative label tied to any action which 'discriminates' on the ground of sex, even those intended to redress problems arising from women's subordination. One example of this occurred in the editorial to *Refractory Girl* no.5, the 'Lesbian Issue', in 1974. The editors were discussing their reasons for producing an issue of the journal which was devoted to the specific topic of lesbianism. One of the reasons they gave was the 'popularity' of the idea that 'lesbianism is the most radical position possible for a feminist to adopt' (p.2). Their comment on this idea was that it 'seems inherently sexist'. Because it excluded 'men and, perhaps, heterosexual women', they said, it was 'a form of sexual apartheid'. In the view of the editors of *Refractory Girl*, lesbian feminism was 'sexist' because it might exclude heterosexual women, and did exclude men. What it was they were excluded from, was not mentioned. Certainly, men are excluded from lesbianism, and usually from feminism (although not only by lesbian feminists). But the distinction between 'heterosexual' and 'lesbian' women was not as hard and fast as this charge of 'sexism' implied. Not only were women discovering within themselves a hitherto unrecognised lesbianism in a strictly sexual sense, lesbianism itself was expanding beyond the genital sexual to include all forms of loving identification between women. In that feminist sense, lesbianism did not

‘discriminate’ against ‘heterosexual’ women—it was available to all women whether or not they availed themselves of it.

The editors of the ‘Lesbian Issue’ of *Refractory Girl* were able to accuse lesbian feminism of ‘sexism’ because of their reliance on the HWAG’s power-neutral definition. This reliance enabled them to ignore the actual relations of power ‘in our society’, and hence to ignore the counter-hegemonic and liberatory implications of lesbian feminism. In doing so, they colluded with the phallographic suppression of the lesbian possibility, even as they purported to challenge that suppression by producing a journal focused on ‘lesbianism’.

In acknowledging the problems entailed by the concept of ‘sexism’, however, I am not arguing for its complete rejection. It still has its uses, as long as the depoliticising tendency is recognised and allowed for. It identifies ‘sex’ as the ground of oppression, as the term ‘racism’ identifies the oppression of ‘race’. While neither term identifies *which* sex or race is dominant, both can still serve as handy short-hand descriptions of discriminatory behaviour.

### ***Idealism***

One way of describing the problem with much academic feminist writing is to characterise it as ‘idealist’ in the sense in which the term ‘ideology’ was used by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* to refer to the work of the ‘Young Hegelian’ German Idealist philosophers. As in the case of the term ‘ideology’ (p.32n11), I am using the term ‘idealism/idealist’ in only one of its many senses. I take Raymond Williams’ point that the term ‘needs the closest scrutiny whenever it is used’ because of its ‘complexities of meaning’ (Williams, 1983: 153). But those undoubted complexities are not sufficient reason to abandon a term which can still do good service because it supplies a shorthand reference to a problem to which academic work in particular is peculiarly susceptible. I am not using the term ‘idealism’ in the traditional, neutral philosophical sense which refers to those philosophical theories which argue for the epistemological priority of mind over matter, of which the most important examples are the writings of Kant, Hegel and Bishop Berkeley. Neither am I using it in the positive sense of an idealistic commitment to principles of the good, the true or the beautiful.

Nor am I using it in contrast to ‘materialism’, although it is this contrast, a split between a realm of ideas and a realm of the material as some kind of universal problem, which has bedevilled Marxism from the beginning. The original problem addressed by Marx and Engels, that of German Idealism, was a particular problem. It is one which is an ever-present danger for philosophy and academic work in general (what Marxism called ‘mental labour’). But it was a problem which was too limited in scope to serve as a basis for the grand generalisations about ‘history’ which followed on from its first elucidation in *The German Ideology*. While it can happen that ideas become divorced from reality, that is itself a form of ideology, in the sense that the reality from which the ideas are divorced is the reality of relations of ruling and the divorce serves to disguise that. The problem of idealism, in the sense in which I am using the term, is not in the first place a problem of a split between ideas and reality, but of the kind of reality those ideas studiously ignore, that is, the reality of domination. Hence, my use of the term takes on its meaning in the context of a critique of ideology. To the extent that ideas do not reinforce relations of ruling, they cannot be called ‘idealist’ in this sense, no matter how esoteric, abstract or removed from experience they may be.

Transferring concepts from their original context to another context altogether, in this case from Marxist historical materialism to feminism, needs to be done with caution. Historical materialism has, of course, its own male supremacist biases in its insistence on the primacy of wage labour, and in its relegation to ‘nature’ of the biological reproduction in which women are centrally involved, thus excluding it from history, society and critique. Nonetheless there does seem to be a similarity between the problem addressed by Marx and Engels in the middle of the nineteenth century, and an increasing tendency in much academic feminist writing to avoid challenging male domination. Marx and Engels characterised the problem of a purportedly ‘revolutionary’ critique which failed to consider the real life activity of human beings and their actual situation within capitalist relations of power, as a battle in ‘the realm of pure thought’. In doing so, they were not suggesting that the philosophers they were criticising stop thinking and start doing. Rather, Marx and Engels were arguing that, to the extent that ideas were not explicitly located in the actual historical conditions within which they originated, those ideas were nothing but the ideas of the ruling class, reinforcing ruling class interests while masquerading as ‘universal’ and in the interests of all. Hence, ‘idealism’ does not mean working with ideas rather than fomenting

revolution on the factory floor or at the barricades. It means working with ideas which are detached from, and hence fail to acknowledge, social relations of domination. Since the relations of domination opposed by feminism are those of male supremacy, feminist accounts which fail to acknowledge this are idealist in this sense.

Idealism is one form ideology takes. Although *The German Ideology* did not make the distinction between idealism and ideology, it is useful for feminist purposes because it underlines the point that ideology is not just a matter of ideas, that it is also an aspect of domination which reaches into every sphere of human existence, including what is most intimate and commonplace. Idealism is that form of ideology to which academe is especially prone. It refers to the tendency for academic work to divorce ideas from the world of the mundane. That tendency is not inevitable, but because playing with ideas is endlessly fascinating in itself the disconnection can only be resisted through a conscious and deliberate commitment to a moral and political framework which maintains the link between ideas and what those ideas are for. Concepts like ‘gender’ and ‘dichotomies’ fail to maintain that link.

### **‘Gender’**

I have argued elsewhere that the term ‘gender’ functions as a depoliticising strategy by separating ‘sex differences’ out from the domain of the social and locating them somewhere else, usually in ‘biology’. This ploy allows the social construction of ‘sex differences’ to remain unexamined, and avoids dealing with the ways in which those ‘differences’ are complicit with male supremacy (Thompson, 1991: 168-76. See also: Gatens, 1983). ‘Gender’ is a euphemism, softening the harsh, uncompromising ring of ‘male domination’. It provides academic feminism with the appearance of a subject-matter while at the same time enabling the real problems to be avoided. It is idealist to the extent that it serves to disguise the reality of male domination by veiling the relations of power within which women are situated under conditions of male supremacy.

But even within its own terms, ‘gender’ undermines its own intended purpose. It was set up in opposition to ‘sex’, to stress the point that the differences between the sexes are socially constructed, not natural. But the ‘sex/gender’ distinction does not challenge the ‘society/nature’, ‘culture/biology’ opposition—it remains wholly within it. If ‘the

social' is wholly subsumed within the referent of the word 'gender', then sex is other than social. But sex continues to exist. People know what it is, they act on certain beliefs about it, they arrange their lives in accordance with certain meanings and values it already has. If its meanings are not social, all that is left is the residual category of 'the natural', and 'sex' remains as 'natural' as it ever was. As a consequence the 'sex/gender' distinction does not disrupt and unsettle the 'society/nature' opposition, it reinforces it because it is the same kind of distinction.

The distinction has been incoherent from the beginning. Since feminism is a politics it is already concerned with the level of the social, the moral and political. There is no need for the word 'gender' since the feminist concern with sex is already moral and political, and hence a social, not a 'biological', concern. 'Gender' confuses the issue by implying that feminism has uncovered a new phenomenon not already covered by the ordinary English word 'sex'. If 'gender' is not 'sex', what is it? The substitution of 'gender' for 'sex' places the debate at two removes from the actual relations of power challenged by feminism. It prevents the discussion of sex differences by extracting them from the realm of the social and allocating them to 'biology'; and by preventing discussion of sex 'differences', it prevents discussion of that crucial site for the investigation of male supremacist relations of power—the maintenance of sex 'differences' as they are currently constituted, and of compulsory heterosexuality as the mechanism for managing women's consent to their subordination to men. But the use of the term 'gender', as the designation of feminism's chief concern, has proliferated mightily and has become hegemonic within academic feminism (and the media, and wherever the word 'sex' would do instead). But the question of what it might mean is never addressed. In fact, despite (or because of?) its supposed 'multiplicity' of meanings, the term is meaningless both because of the incoherence of its origins, and because it is a euphemistic substitute for naming the real problem, male domination.

Jane Flax says that 'The single most important advance in and result of feminist theories and practices is that the existence of gender has been problematized' (Flax, 1990: 21). Although she does not say what 'gender' is, it is clear that it is not male domination. She sees 'male dominance' as merely one form of 'gender relations', and as a hindrance to the adequate investigation of those relations. In a section headed 'Male Dominance' (pp.22-4), she says that the nature of 'gender relations' has been 'obscured' by the

existence of male dominance. In societies where men dominate, she says (implying that there are societies where men do not dominate), men are not seen as a part of 'gender relations', and so they are not defined as a 'gender'. This creates an asymmetry in any account of 'gender relations', according to Flax. Whereas what women 'are' can be endlessly investigated, what men are is rarely the subject of investigation. But this account is idealist in the sense described above. It extracts 'gender relations' from the social conditions of male supremacy within which the relations between the sexes are currently structured, and posits a 'really real' of 'gender relations' outside the only terms within which they are knowable. If 'gender relations' are not those we are acquainted with at present, what are they and how can we know them? It may be that what Flax is trying to say is that relations between the sexes ought not to be structured in terms of male dominance, and that feminism needs to allow for that possibility. But unless male domination can be identified, it cannot be challenged and opposed. Far from 'obscuring' the nature of the relations between the sexes, identifying male domination clarifies what feminism is struggling against. It is *only* feminism's focus on the problematic of male domination which allows for any possibility of refusing to be implicated.

On another occasion Flax appears to be defining 'gender' in terms of any social location at all. She tells us that there are 'at least three dimensions' to 'gender'. The first dimension is that 'gender' is 'a social relationship' and 'a form of power ... [which] affects our theories and practices of justice'. But the only social categories she mentions in this context of justice are 'race and economic status'. Women are not mentioned. Throughout her discussion of the other two dimensions of 'gender'—as 'a category of thought', and as 'a central constituting element in each person's sense of self and ... of what it means to be a person'—there is no mention of the two sexes, women and men. It is not until the very end of the discussion, when she criticises the idea of 'sex roles', that we are given any hint that 'gender' might be connected to the existence of two sexes (pp.25-6). She makes no mention of the fact that feminism's concern with justice involves first and foremost justice for women, including women located within the dominating hierarchies of race and class, but primarily women as women assigned the subordinate role in the dominating hierarchy of sex. On this account, 'gender' means 'race' and 'class' *before* it means 'sex'.



This defining of 'gender' in terms of any social location at all depends on detaching 'gender' from its original referent, 'sex'. But this seeming ability of 'gender' to be unhooked from 'sex' betrays the traces of its origins in the original 'sex/gender' distinction. If 'gender' must stand on its own, as *the social per se*, then 'sex' remains behind still immersed in biology as the only source of truth about sex. As Ann Oakley argued so long ago (Oakley, 1972), the cultural construction which is 'gender' is merely superficial, a matter of 'prejudice' (p.16), of 'distortion' and '*apparent* differences' (p. 103—emphasis added), 'simply ... the beliefs people hold' (p.189), something that is 'learned' (p.173) and hence can be unlearned. Biology, on the other hand, is 'fundamental' (p.46). Oakley's account is replete with appeals to biology. To be entirely accurate, it must be said that she appeals to biology only when biology looks as though it substantiates her argument that there are no important differences between the sexes. She needs to argue against the existence of sex differences because she confounds 'difference' with inequality and inferiority. She wants to demonstrate that women are not 'really' unequal and inferior to men because they are not different. But wherever it is possible to do so, it is biology which is used to demonstrate the truth of that lack of difference.

The proponents of 'gender' deal with this on-going subterranean connection between biology and truth by attempting to abandon any claims to truth. But the price of any such attempts is that same incoherence with which the 'sex/gender' distinction began. 'Gender is (a) representation',<sup>3</sup> says Teresa de Lauretis (De Lauretis, 1987: 3). 'The "real" and the "sexually factic" are phantasmatic constructions—illusions of substance', says Judith Butler (Butler, 1990: 146). But words like 'representation', 'phantasmatic', 'illusion' only have meaning in terms of their opposites. To say that something is a representation is at the same time to say that there is something else it is a representation of; to say that something is a phantasm entails that there be something else which is real; and to say that something is illusion logically requires something else which is true. Otherwise, what is being implied—that *everything* is representation, phantasmatic or illusion? In that case it would make as much sense to say that everything is real, although it would not make any *more* sense, since the concept of the real also implies its opposite. The words only gain their meaning from the distinctions

---

3. The parenthetical 'a' is not meant to imply the first of a series, to be followed by 'b', 'c', 'd', etc. It signals that the sentence is actually two sentences compressed into one—'Gender is representation' and 'Gender is *a* representation'.

they make. If no distinctions are being made, why use these words rather than their opposites? But, of course, a distinction *is* being made. It is the same distinction which has bedevilled the detachment of 'sex' from 'gender' from the beginning, the separation of the 'biological' from the 'social', and the characterising of the 'social' as in some way unreal. But if there is an unreal, there is also a real. Since it is biology which is society's other in this discourse of 'gender', it is biology which is real in the face of the unreality which is society. That this is so, is clearly, although inadvertently, stated by de Lauretis, when she says that 'gender is not sex, [which is] a state of nature' (De Lauretis, 1987: 5). So if 'gender' is a representation, then what 'gender' is not (i.e. sex, a state of nature) is also not a representation, but the original reality which 'gender' is a representation of.

Although de Lauretis appeared to be unaware of these implications, Judith Butler explicitly attempts to deal with them. She argues that

gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also [sic] the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts ... This production of sex *as* the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender* (Butler, 1990: 7—her emphases).

In arguing that 'sex' is itself a social construct, and hence not natural or biological at all insofar as it is of concern to feminism, Butler is perfectly correct. But if that is the case, if sex is already social, what part is played by the term 'gender'? What does using 'gender' add, that is not already contained in 'sex' viewed from a feminist standpoint? According to Butler, 'gender' is an 'apparatus of cultural construction' which purveys 'sex' as 'natural'. But that can be said without recourse to 'gender', namely, 'sex is a social construction which presents itself as natural'. To say it like that is far more direct and challenging to conventional wisdom, than interpolating 'gender' between sex and its social construction. It is after all *sex* which is the social construct, and not something other than sex. Using a different word, 'gender', for the social construct, implies that sex is something other than the social construct.

Butler herself is at least partly aware of this problem. She says:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (p.7).

But Butler does not take the next step in the argument and dispense with the word ‘gender’, to focus instead on sex and its discontents. Retaining ‘sex’ and rejecting ‘gender’ would not fit in with her purpose, which is to open up a theoretical space within what she sees as feminism, for ‘those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined ... [and whose] persistence and proliferation ... open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder’ (p.17). The examples she mentions in her text of such ‘gender disorder’ are lesbians, especially those who ‘destabilize’ and ‘displace’ the heterosexual norms of masculinity and femininity through ‘butch/femme’ role play (p.123), Foucault’s hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin, male homosexuality (pp.131-2), and drag and cross-dressing (both male, although she does not say so) (p.137). Although she does not specifically mention them, her account would also include lesbian sadomasochism, transsexualism, fetishism, pædophilia, and all those ‘erotic dissidents’ so staunchly defended by Gayle Rubin (Rubin, 1984). The term ‘gender’ is perfect for this purpose just because of its incoherence and idealism. Because it has no definite meaning, and because it is detached from the only referent that makes any sense, i.e. sex, it can take on any meaning at all. It is much more difficult to interpret ‘sex’ as ‘a multiple interpretation’, as ‘a free-floating artifice’, as ‘a shifting phenomenon’, as ‘a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what is it at any given juncture in time’, as ‘fictive’, ‘phantasmatic’ and ‘illusory’. ‘Sex’ remains too tied in with its ordinary meanings of male and female, and heterosexual desire and activity, and hence too close to those traditional sites of male supremacy.

Butler is not concerned to identify the ways in which sex is constructed under male supremacist conditions, with the aim of challenging, resisting, refusing and changing those conditions. On the contrary, she regards such an enterprise as impossible. ‘There is no radical repudiation of a culturally constructed sexuality’, she says. She agrees with

what she refers to as ‘the pro-sexuality movement within feminist theory and practice’ that ‘sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power’. The most we can expect to accomplish by way of ‘subversion’ is ‘how to acknowledge and “do” the construction one is invariably in’. The only political option available involves ‘possibilities of doing gender [which] repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized’ (pp.30-1).

But she herself does not believe in the ‘invariability’ of ‘gender’, since she is at some pains to argue that ‘gender’ is ‘choice’, and that it is possible to engage in ‘the exercise of gender freedom’ (Butler, 1987: 131, 132). There is a problem of ‘social constraint’, but this constraint is obviously not ‘invariable’. Indeed, to perceive it as such would be, in Butler’s account, to remain deluded by its ‘phantasmatic’ character. She resolves this dilemma between what ‘one is invariably in’ and ‘gender freedom’, by referring to ‘the very complexity of the discursive map that constructs gender’. This complexity constructs ‘gender’ as at one and the same time both multiple and univocal: ‘If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing’ (Butler, 1990: 32). ‘Multiplicity’ is better than the ‘univocal’, better in the sense that the political project is the struggle for ‘multiplicity’ and against the ‘univocal’, because ‘multiplicity’ allows more ‘choice’. But Butler never examines what is involved in this question of ‘choice’. The goodness and rightness of ‘choice’ is self-evident. It is good, only good and nothing but good, and the more the better because it allows more ‘freedom’. But she never asks what this ‘freedom’ is for. Her account closes off any possibility of identifying some choices as bad. This libertarian stance enables her to avoid addressing the ethical issues raised by feminism’s exposure of ‘sex’ as socially constructed under male supremacist conditions. Although she herself would presumably not want to take a morally neutral stance in relation to the worst forms of male sexual behaviour, on her account such evils as male sexual abuse of children, rape, sexual harassment, prostitution, pornography, are nothing more than ‘choices’. She does not, of course, say so. She merely avoids discussing these issues.

There are some feminist theorists who use the word 'gender', but who do not accept the 'sex/gender' distinction in the sense of a separation between 'biology' and 'society', and who have no qualms about identifying male domination. Miriam M. Johnson, in *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives*, uses 'gender' to refer to 'one's civil status as male or female', while reserving the word 'sex' to refer to 'genital erotic activity (sex in bed)' (Johnson, 1988: 202).<sup>4</sup> Johnson uses this distinction between 'sex' as sexual activity and 'gender' as social role, in order to avoid what she sees as the dominant tendency to define 'gender' in terms of 'sex'. She wants to avoid the assumption that the inequalities in the social situations of women and men are somehow caused by the male dominant/female submissive differences between male and female sexuality. She says: 'Using the word *sex* to describe to both sexual activity and the difference between males and females attests to the degree to which gender has been conflated with sex' (p.220). The problem with this conflation, as Johnson sees it, is that women have been defined in terms of femininity, passivity and submission, and men in terms of masculinity, dominance and aggression, because that is the way it happens in bed. 'Separating gender from sex', she says, 'helps to break up this assumption'. She argues that the influence is the other way around, that male and female sexuality are different because the social roles of women and men are different and unequal. It is not the case that sexual activity, defined in this way, is definitive of what she calls 'gender'. On the contrary, it is 'gender', defined as male dominance and female submission, which has been reflected in the differences between female and male sexuality.

But although she is correct in this, separating 'sex' from 'gender' merely compounds the problem. Once again, if 'gender' refers to the social, then 'sex' must refer to something else. But heterosexual sex is also social. It is *part* of the social definition of female and male, not something other than it. Moreover, the distinction remains an idealist solution, i.e. it is a distinction in thought, not in the actual social relations of male power. Merely saying something is not so will not make it go away. And there is the danger that making the verbal distinction will mask the feminist perception of the on-going social reality.

---

4. For the same kind of distinction, see also: MacKinnon, 1987; and MacKinnon, 1991: xiii. MacKinnon says that she tends to use the words 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably, since she does not agree with the distinction between 'biology' and 'society' entailed in the 'sex/gender' distinction. I prefer not to use the word 'gender' at all because of its apolitical connotations.

Teresa de Lauretis is also not reluctant to identify male supremacy. Her paper, 'The Violence of Rhetoric', for example, is intended to show that male violence against women is encoded in culture and language, in science, myth and theory. Take the following statements:

the subject of violence is always, by definition, masculine; "man" is by definition the subject of culture and of any social act ('The Violence of Rhetoric', de Lauretis, 1987: 43).

The discourse of the sciences of man constructs the object as female and the female as object. That, I suggest, is its rhetoric of violence, even when the discourse presents itself as humanistic, benevolent, or well-intentioned (p.45).

But her commitment to 'gender' sometimes seduces her into missing the point. For example, she can only flirt coyly with naming male domination in her version of what has become the standard academic feminist critique of Foucault. What 'mars' his theory (and its politics), she says, is that it 'will deny gender'. She goes on to say:

But to deny gender, first of all, is to deny the social relations of gender that constitute and validate the sexual oppression of women; and second, to deny gender is to remain "in ideology", an ideology which (not coincidentally if, of course, not intentionally) is manifestly self-serving to the male-gendered subject (p.15).

But what Foucault's work denied was not 'gender' (whatever that might be). It was the male supremacist nature, not only of the discourses and practices which formed the subject matter of his writings, but also of his own work, his habitual portrayal of the male as the 'human' universal.<sup>5</sup> To refer to what is excluded from Foucault's texts as 'gender', is itself to 'remain in ideology' by obliterating the main problem with those texts from a feminist standpoint.

Another occasion where de Lauretis misses the point occurs in her discussion of a paper called 'The New Scholarship on Family Violence' by Wini Breines and Linda

---

5. Except on one occasion where he acknowledged that classical Greek discourses on sexual ethics were addressed to men only. He did not, however, incorporate this insight into his analysis, and he continued to refer to men only as though they comprised the whole of the human race (Foucault, 1985: 22).

Gordon. De Lauretis comments favourably on the fact that Breines and Gordon name 'family violence', and thus situate the battering of women within a social context, in contrast, for example, to the police, medical or judicial viewpoints, which see it as a problem of individual 'battered women'. She regards Breines' and Gordon's use of the term 'family violence' as an improvement on terms like 'spouse abuse' or 'marital violence'. These terms, according to de Lauretis, imply that batterers could be either wives or husbands, and that the writer is being objective and scientifically and morally neutral (pp.33-4). But the term 'family violence' is no improvement. It is not, after all, families who bash women, but men. It is not until de Lauretis is four paragraphs into her argument that she mentions men, and then only in relation to child sexual abuse (and in parenthesis). Male domination, and the violence which the dominator feels justified in visiting upon the dominated, may indeed be deeply encoded within family relations. But the actual male offenders against women would have been more clearly identified if de Lauretis had been able to name male domination unequivocally as the problem, rather than that politically unlocatable concept, 'gender'.

'Gender' ought to be completely expunged from the feminist vocabulary, unless it is confined to its original grammatical and linguistic context. *Words* have gender, *people* have sex in both senses of the word, in the sense that there are two sexes, and in the sense of sexual desire and activity. That they are usually confused, as Miriam M. Johnson pointed out, is a consequence of the heterosexual hegemony—sexuality happens because there are two sexes, i.e. sex is always heterosexual. Substituting 'gender' for sex compounds the confusion because it evades the necessity for disentangling it. More importantly, because in most of its usages 'gender' is meaningless, it can take on any meaning at all, including anti-feminist ones. By being detached from its ordinary language referent 'sex', it floats freely in a discursive space far removed from the actual social relations of male supremacy. The frequency with which this happens gives rise to the suspicion that that is what has been intended all along.

### ***'Dichotomies'***

In *Feminism and Philosophy* (Gatens, 1991), Moira Gatens sets herself a task which appears at first sight to identify male domination clearly and unequivocally. She defines her task, in part, as that of providing 'a feminist consideration of the history of some ...

philosophical conceptions of women and their nature', conceptions which, she says, 'are formed and reformed anew, in accordance with the dominant conception of male subjectivity and its needs' (pp.7, 8). On many occasions throughout the book, she neatly exposes the male supremacist ideology within philosophy and liberal social and political thought, in terms of the ways in which masculinity parades itself as 'the human *par excellence*'. For example, she says that 'the apparently sexually neutral human subject turns out to be implicitly a male subject whose "neutrality" is conceptually dependent on the "shadow" conception of the female subject' (p.5). She points out that the 'terms—rationality, individuality, freedom, progress—which are foundational to liberal theory, are not neutral, human categories but rather presume a subjectivity that is inherently masculine' (p.44). She criticises Beauvoir for her 'agreement with male privilege when it asserts that to be "really human" is to be a male' (p.56), and for her covert acceptance of 'the male body and masculinity ... [as] the norm' (p.57). And she points out the irony of John Stewart Mill's and Harriet Taylor's defence of the rights of women, in that 'they fail to see that "the individual", because of the very assumptions built into the notion of individuality, is *male*. In their attempt to emancipate women they produce a model of human excellence that is, inherently, masculine' (p.46—her emphasis).

But on other occasions when the problem is named, Gatens refers to it as 'bias' or 'prejudice'. She refers to 'sexual biases apparent in socio-political theories' (p.6), 'sexual bias in philosophy' (p.24), 'the inbuilt masculine prejudice of liberal theory' (p.44), existentialism's 'biases against women' (p.49), 'deep bias in knowledge-construction' (p.63), etc. She says that she is not concerned with 'the influence of mere (conscious or unconscious) *personal* prejudice'. Instead, she is interested 'to explore the extent to which there is a cultural prejudice against women' (p.2). Hence, she does not attribute the 'bias' and 'prejudice' to the personal failings of individual male philosophers, and neither does this constitute her main argument. Nonetheless, the use of such terminology facilitates an evasion of naming the problem in the most general terms as male supremacy. This evasion is not accidental, since the problem Gatens is alluding to with her frequent use of the term 'bias' is not at base the culture of male supremacy. Rather, it is a consequence of 'dichotomies' within philosophy and social and political thought more generally:



In the introduction, it was suggested that the mind/body, reason/passion and nature/culture dichotomies interact with the male/female dichotomy in extremely complex ways, often prejudicial to women. What has been shown in the ensuing chapters is the way that these dichotomies function in the work of particular philosophers and the consequences of this functioning for their views on sexual difference. It has become apparent in the course of this analysis that in contemporary thought it is the private/public distinction which organizes these dualisms and gives them their distinctively sexually specific character (p.122).

The problem addressed by feminism, in Gatens' account, is one of 'dichotomies' organised around 'the public/private distinction'. To the extent that male domination constitutes a problem—for feminism, for 'contemporary thought', for 'Western culture', for philosophy or philosophers—it is merely a secondary formation generated by dichotomous thinking. By identifying 'dichotomies', rather than the social system of male domination, as the central political problem addressed by feminism, Gatens' argument is idealist in the sense described above. Despite her frequent insights into the ways in which the 'human' norm is purveyed as only male, by substituting 'dichotomies' for the explicit acknowledgment of male supremacist relations of ruling, she reduces men's rule to a mere effect of something more basic. In this account, the feminist political task is not to mount a direct challenge to male domination. Rather, it becomes a matter of working towards 'the "break[ing] down" of the coherence of Western culture' in order that it may be 'reassembl[ed] in a more viable and polyvalent form' (p.121—first interpolation in the original). In Gatens' terms, the problem to be addressed is the dualistic 'coherence of Western cultures', and the solution is to 'break down' this coherence in the interests of 'polyvalence'. Whatever this might mean, it involves no reference to the actual relations of power within which women are subjected, nor to the possibility of a new world for women free of male definition and control.

The idealist nature of her thesis is made explicit in her introduction where she separates 'theory and philosophy' out from 'the socio-political level', and gives the former epistemological priority over the latter:

The argument of this book is that it is a primary weakness of much feminist theory that it engages with philosophy or theory only at the socio-political level ... This study will not assume that ... metaphysics, theories of human nature and epistemology ... are sex-neutral. On the contrary, it will be argued that they often provide the theoretical underpinning for the biases which become visible at the socio-political level (p.2).

But feminism's 'socio-political' emphasis is not a 'weakness'. It is precisely this emphasis which enables feminism to expose philosophy, as it has been conventionally practised, as not sex-neutral, but rather as operating to the detriment of women. Rather than interpreting the 'socio-political' structures of male supremacy as 'underpinned' by philosophical biases, the feminist argument is the other way around. Feminism sees mainstream thought as yet one more manifestation of the social relations of male domination. Men dominate philosophy, as they dominate both the private *and* the public spheres and everything else, not without contestation, but hegemonically nonetheless. Philosophy is not something other than the socio-political level. It is itself imbued with relations of power, of inclusion and exclusion, and serves the interests of some at the expense of the interests of others. I do not want to give a detailed account here of the ways in which philosophy serves the interests of men at the expense of the interests of women. Gatens herself gives many examples throughout the book (see also: Lloyd, 1984; Le Dœuff, 1991). Suffice it to say for the moment that, to locate the problem in 'dichotomies' or 'dualisms' which are more basic than some contentless 'socio-political level', is one more evasion of the real issue.<sup>6</sup>

A further example of this identification of feminism's chief antagonist as 'dichotomous thinking' can be found in the volume, *Feminism As Critique*. At the end of the Introduction, the editors ask:

---

6. It should be noted that the charge of 'idealism' is not appropriate in the case of Moira Gatens' earlier work, e.g. Gatens, 1983; Gatens, 1986. Although she does not explicitly name male domination as feminism's central political problem, her arguments in these two texts can easily be read as being informed by a clear recognition of that political priority. Ironically, the second of these two papers, 'Feminism, Philosophy and Riddles Without Answers', was reworked into chapter five of her book, as 'The Feminist Critique of Philosophy'. It was in that reworking that the concept of 'dichotomies' made its appearance. Although Gatens may see that concept as promising an answer to the riddle, I tend to see it as yet another variation of the riddle of why feminists find it so difficult to remain focused on the main enemy.

where do we go beyond the politics of gender? To a radical transcendence of the logic of binary oppositions altogether or to a utopian realization of forms of otherness, immanent in present psychosexual arrangements, but currently frozen within the confines of rigid genderized thinking? (Benhabib and Cornell, eds., 1987: 15).

The problem here is the ‘opposition’ itself and its ‘rigidity’, not the fact that that ‘opposition’ (between the sexes) constructs the male as the norm, as the only ‘human’ subject, at the expense of any interests females might have in our own human status outside male definition and control. Although such criticisms of ‘dichotomies’ (or ‘binary oppositions’, or ‘dualisms’) recognise a hierarchical relation between the two terms, whereby one term is always valued over the other, they do not unequivocally locate that hierarchical relation with the meanings and values of male supremacy. But it is not the fact that the differences between the sexes are ‘rigid’ or even ‘opposed’ that is the main problem for feminism, but the fact that the ‘differences’ encode and enforce male supremacy (MacKinnon, 1990). The feminist task, then, is not to shatter and fragment the grand dichotomy of male and female into a multiplicity of fluid and shifting ‘genders’, ‘sexualities’ or ‘identities’, but to continue to oppose male domination, however and wherever it manifests itself, in the interests of a female human status which is not defined at the expense of anyone at all. (For another self-styled feminist text which defines the central problematic of feminism as ‘dualisms’, see: Porter, 1991).

### ***‘Difference’***

As Hester Eisenstein pointed out in her introduction to the 1985 anthology, *The Future of Difference*, the feminist concept of ‘difference’ has two aspects to it: differences between the sexes, and differences between and among women. Both aspects have been consistent preoccupations of ‘second wave’ feminism. That does not mean, however, that ‘the theme of “difference” has been integral to modern feminist thought’, as Eisenstein goes on to assert (Eisenstein, 1985: xv. See also: Eisenstein, 1984: passim). On the contrary, far from being ‘integral’ to feminism, the concept of ‘difference’ has too often functioned as a diversionary tactic serving to deflect energy and attention away from feminism’s real problems and projects: identifying and challenging male domination, creating a human status for women outside male control, and building

connections between women who have been divided from and set against each other. Whether the focus is on differences between the sexes, or on differences between and among women, male domination tends to be accorded a subsidiary status. In the case of differences between the sexes, male domination (when it is acknowledged) is presented as a secondary formation, usually euphemistically designated 'sexual' or 'gender inequality' or 'women's inequality', generated by sex differences, or rather, from a feminist standpoint, hopefully *not* caused by those differences. Given that feminist debates about sex differences have been bedevilled by a confounding of difference with inequality,<sup>7</sup> an initial feminist response was to argue those differences away (Oakley, 1972). A more recent response is to grant a limited and strategic value to women's differences from men, because failure to acknowledge female specificity, biological or social, sometimes works against women's interests (Rhode, ed., 1990). In the case of differences between and among women, investigation of male domination is displaced in favour of race and/or class and drops out of the analysis altogether. Invidious distinctions between women are attributed to feminism, or, more usually, to the attitudes and behaviour of (usually unidentified) 'white middle-class feminists', and the origins of those distinctions in hierarchies established among men is ignored. In the most general sense, 'difference' functions as a euphemism to avoid naming the main enemy, male domination.

### **Differences Between the Sexes**

The problem with focusing feminist attention on differences between the sexes has already been adequately criticised in the literature (MacKinnon, 1987; MacKinnon, 1990; Lloyd, 1988; Jaggar, 1990). As Catharine Mackinnon in particular has pointed out, whether women are asserted to be 'the same as', or 'different from', men, the male remains the norm against which women are measured. Keeping the debate at the level of 'sex differences' serves the purpose of avoiding the question of the systematic subordination of women to men. Once this is recognised, the question of whether women are 'the same as' or 'different from' men becomes irrelevant. Women can be 'the same as' men, and still be subordinated. 'Exceptional' women can be isolated from other women to supply a token female representation in hierarchical positions normally reserved for men, while those positions continue to function in the interests of men and

---

7. For an early and exemplary instance of this confounding, see: Oakley, 1972; for a later account, which acknowledges the confounding but does not resolve it, see: Jaggar, 1990.

against the interests of women. And although women's 'difference from' men is usually justification for women's subordination, it can also be a source of women-only power and identification.

I have identified three contexts within which the question of differences between the sexes has been discussed within 'second wave' feminism, the first two of which I mention only briefly here. The first of these debates originated in psychology, with token excursions into sociology, anthropology, primatology, ethology, endocrinology and the medical model in general. There is a fairly extensive literature on the subject, but it has limited use for feminist theorising because it tends to be empiricist and positivist. It assumes unquestioningly that sex differences are objective matters of fact discoverable through the purportedly value-free methods of psychological testing, some of which only involve animals and not human beings at all (e.g. Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). In its commitment to 'objectivity', it fails to address the values which are an inherent part of relations between the sexes, a failure which drains its investigations of all meaning. Refusing to address value questions directly within the inherently moral arena of human interactions does not abolish moral judgements. It merely ensures that those moral judgements which do structure and inform the research will be those of the status quo, of the world-taken-for-granted which feminism is challenging. Painstaking and detailed though much of this work was, it was ultimately pointless because it failed to ask recognisably human questions about sex differences.

The second context in which discussion of sex 'differences' is supposedly to be found is what has been called 'French feminist theory'. But this designation covers such a large and disparate group of authors that it is impossible to discuss them under a single heading. Since any attempt to do so must fail, given the intricacies and sheer volume of these works, I mention them only in passing.

### **Feminist Object Relations Theory**

The third context is feminist object relations theory (Chodorow, 1978; Chodorow, 1989; Dinnerstein, 1976; Benjamin, 1989; Keller, 1985; Gilligan, 1982). Although there are a number of problems with the theory so far, it is more fruitful for feminist theorising than the positivistic approach which treats sex 'differences' as empirical data. The kinds of 'sex differences' feminist object relations theory exposes—the relational, caring,

nurturing female, and the detached, contemptuous, masculine individual—are the kinds of differences which might be expected given current conditions of male domination. Its emphasis on the importance of women’s mothering is a necessary counter-weight to the male supremacist obliteration of the fact that women mother. And its emphasis on infancy and early childhood makes it one of the few social theories which does not assume that we enter social relationships as fully formed adults.

It is already a partial acknowledgment of male domination, in that it is an account of social inequalities that are sexed (even if it does call them ‘gender’, and by so doing equivocate on the question of male domination). Although its critique of masculinity does not go deeply enough, it does have one. Nancy Chodorow tells us that men’s ‘nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed’, that men ‘have tended to repress their affective relational needs’ (Chodorow, 1978: 7, 199). Men are incapable of relating to women, she says, because of men’s intense ambivalence towards women: ‘men defend themselves against the threat posed by love ... demanding of women what men are at the same time afraid of receiving’ (pp.196, 199). She describes men’s feelings towards women in terms of contempt, disparagement and devaluation on the one hand, and resentment, fear, dread and terror on the other. She also says that men are incapable of relating to other men, because their ‘training for masculinity and repression of affective relational needs, and their primary nonemotional and impersonal relationships in the public world make deep primary relationships with other men hard to come by’ (p.196), and because they tend ‘to develop ties based more on categorical and abstract role expectations’ (p.199). And they are incapable of relating to children because ‘the relational basis for mothering is ... inhibited in men, who experience themselves as more separate and distinct from others’ (p.207).

Not only did Chodorow not draw out the implications of her own descriptions of masculinity, she held that current arrangements of mothering by women were responsible for reproducing it. But she did not tell us how mothering by women reproduced masculinity, apart from vague references to the need for boys to separate from their mothers. Neither did she tell us why misogyny and contempt for women are so integral a part of the masculine psyche. On the one occasion where she attempted to do so, she omitted the crux of the matter. She said, quoting Freud, that ‘A boy’s struggle to free himself from his mother and become masculine generates “the contempt felt by

men for a sex which is the lesser”<sup>8</sup> (Chodorow, 1978: 182). But it is not the boy’s struggle which generates the contempt, but rather the contempt which provides the motivating force for the struggle. Or rather, because children of both sexes grow out of the helplessness and dependency of infancy, it is contempt which provides the extra impetus for the male under male supremacist conditions. Chodorow got it the wrong way round because she left out the key step in the process, the ‘threat of castration’. It is this threat which Freud said ‘leads to two reactions, which ... permanently determine the boy’s relations to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her’ (Freud, 1925: 336). Freud said nothing about how the boy manages to avoid identification with the mother, but that is probably because he regarded the reason as self-evident. As he himself put it, children identify with both parents up until the time when they recognise ‘the difference between the sexes’: ‘for before a child has arrived at definite knowledge of the difference between the sexes, the lack of a penis, it does not distinguish in value between its father and its mother’ (Freud, 1923: 370n1). On Freud’s account, the devaluation of women is a direct consequence of the female lack of the penis. Freud was wrong in the way he characterised the meaning and value of the penis. ‘Penis-envy’ and the devaluing of those who lack penises are ‘secondary formations’ (to use his own terminology), the result of the male supremacist culture’s glorification of the phallus—penis-possession as the symbol of ‘human’ status—which Freud himself never questioned. Nonetheless, his account does supply us with the reason for misogyny and contempt for women. Within those male supremacist terms so clearly exposed by Freud, women are contemptible because we lack penises. Masculinity is reproduced through the over-valuation of penis-possession. It depends on contempt for and hatred of the female, because to acknowledge the humanity of women would be to render the penis meaningless as the symbol of ‘human’ status. Male castration anxiety is a dread of the loss of meaning of penis-possession, a loss which the very existence of women constantly threatens. The masculine psyche develops at the expense of a human status for women, and must guard itself against the ‘horror’ of human beings who lack the necessary symbol. Contempt for women gives permission for the endemic male violence against women to any man who cares to avail himself of it, and ensures that women will have little or no redress.

---

8. Interestingly, this quote appears in Freud’s text in the context of a discussion the consequences for *girls* of ‘envy for the penis’. Freud said; ‘After a woman has become aware of the wound to her narcissism, she develops, like a scar, a sense of inferiority. ... she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect’ (Freud, 1925: 337).

The extent to which men are incapable of human relationships is exactly the extent to which the penis-as-phallus comes between the male self and others, and blocks the possibility of recognising others as fully human individuals lacking nothing. Masculinity renders men incapable of the mutual recognition necessary for reaching out to others when penis-possession stands as a barrier between the male self and others. Men are unable to relate to women when men are complicit with the phallocratic requirement that women be treated as 'non-human'. They are unable to relate to each other if their 'humanity' is already impaired by that same phallocratic requirement. By acquiring their 'human' status by denying it to women, men render themselves unfit for any genuine human interaction. In treating women as things, they fetishise themselves and each other into objects whose worth is measured by positions on hierarchies of extraneous criteria, of which the two most obvious are race and class. By the same token, women are more able to involve themselves in human relationships because they are more capable of recognising the humanity of others. It is not because women are inherently more nurturant, caring or loving than men, but because women do not have any masculinity to defend at others' expense. Women, not having penises, have less at stake in defending the meanings and values of penis-possession,<sup>9</sup> and hence lack the chief barrier to relating to others as unique and irreplaceable ends in themselves. By deliberately abandoning the original Freudian insight into the hypervaluation of penis-possession, feminist object relations theory has rejected the key insight into the meaning of masculinity.

Feminist object relations theory gives an inadequate account of sex 'differences' because it fails to ask the right questions in the first place. It is agreed that there is a 'difference' between mother and male infant. It is in fact the crux of the argument. In Nancy Chodorow's account, males are incapable of mothering because they are so 'different' from mother, and mothering is reproduced in females because they are 'the same' as mother. In Jessica Benjamin's account, women lack subjectivity because they are mothered by women who lack subjectivity and girls are 'the same' as their mothers, while men are subjects in their own right because as boys they are 'different' from their mothers and can identify with their fathers (Benjamin, 1989). But the theory never asks

---

9. That is not to say that women have nothing at all at stake in those meanings and values. To the extent that women, too, can see no alternative to the male as the 'human' norm, and no alternative for themselves but a secondary status as men's auxiliaries, women too have a stake in maintaining penis-possession as the symbol of 'human' value.



how the distinction is noted. What counts as male and female? What *is* the ‘difference’ which establishes and maintains the acculturation process which makes infants into sexed individuals? In their understandable haste to disassociate themselves from ‘penis envy’, feminist object relations theorists move too far away from Freud, and abandon his important insights (misnamed though they were) into the meaning of penis-possession. To assert, as Benjamin does, that ‘it is not anatomy ... that explains women’s “lack”’ (p.86), is to extract ‘anatomy’ from the social order within which it acquires meaning and value. The lack of female subjectivity which Benjamin calls ‘a “fault line” in female development’ (p.78) does not originate with women although it manifests itself in women’s lives, but with a male supremacist culture which refuses to allow women a fully human status because they do not possess the prized anatomical organ. To locate the ‘fault line’ with women is to fail to see that the penis is already glorified as the sign of sexual difference, as the marker of a valued presence and a contemptible absence, as that which sets the process in train and which structures the cultural context into which each individual is born. Unless the phallus is situated at the heart of sexual domination, its role as the justification for male domination cannot be exposed.

Feminist object relations theory is also flawed by its tendency to reverse the logic of the social ‘causation’ involved. By locating the ‘causes’ of male domination in the activities and developmental processes of individuals in familial environments, rather than interpreting those familial environments as structured and made meaningful by the social system which is male domination, the theory gets it the wrong way round. This is a tendency which is an ever present danger for any theory like object relations and its precursor, psychoanalysis, which starts from a concern with individuals. Feminist object relations theory avoids the more extreme versions of individualism and psychologism because of its focus on what Jessica Benjamin calls ‘intersubjectivity’ (and see: Chodorow, 1985, for a critique of masculine individualism in the work of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown). But the realm of the intersubjective is itself situated within wider and more enduring systemic relations of power of which the most crucial for feminist purposes is that of male domination. The intersubjective does not provide some kind of foundation for social relations in general. Rather, from a feminist (and sociological) standpoint, the intersubjective is a realm of congealed social meanings which operate automatically unless they are deliberately resisted from a position of

refusal. There is a sense in which those familial arrangements identified by feminist object relations theory can be interpreted as the source and origin of male domination. Because social arrangements must be produced anew in each new individual, they do have an origin in each individual life. But unless those arrangements are clearly identified as generated by the requirements of present historical conditions of male supremacy, they tend to assume an unwarranted explanatory importance, as the ‘cause’,<sup>10</sup> rather than as a consequence, of the social arrangements of male supremacy. One aspect of current social arrangements—usually mothering by women—is made responsible for the whole of the ‘society’ which is male supremacy. While mothering by women is a necessary prerequisite for the maintenance of the social relationships of male supremacy, that is not because it causes those social relationships, but because mothering by women is what is required if men are to continue to feel justified in demanding of women selfless devotion to male interests, needs, projects and desires, and if women are to continue to acquiesce in those demands.

In *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin’s task, as she sees it, is to elucidate the failure of mutual recognition between the sexes within ‘our culture’ under conditions of ‘gender’ domination. Her purpose is to show how and why the balance between assertion of the self and recognition of the other breaks down into relationships of domination and subordination. Like Chodorow’s, her account, too, attempts to explain society (‘our culture’) in terms of one of its parts. Her focus on familial relationships reads as an argument to the effect that ‘domination’ originates within families, and is then taken out into the wider society, where it persists because individuals are already structured that way. As she herself says, she aims to ‘show how the structure of domination can be traced from the relationship between mother and infant into adult eroticism, from the earliest awareness of the difference between mother and father to

---

10. Or a cause. Nancy Chodorow has acknowledged that she was mistaken in her earlier writings in implying that ‘women’s mothering was *the* cause or prime mover of male dominance’ (Chodorow, 1989: 6—her emphasis). She now feels that ‘women’s inequality may be multiply caused and situated’. But this is still seeing the problem the wrong way round. The problem lies in seeing women’s mothering as having any causal role at all in generating the social system which is male supremacy, rather than seeing it as a consequence and a requirement.

There is, of course, another problem with characterising social phenomena in terms of ‘causes’, and that is the implication of determinism. To talk about ‘causes’ in social life is to imply that people have no choice, that they are nothing but bearers of social relations and/or the inert outcomes of what happened to them in infancy and early childhood. But to the extent that human beings are moral creatures, we do have choices, as long as we have knowledge of alternatives. The maintenance of relations of domination requires the suppression of alternatives, a suppression that manifests as repression and the unconscious at the level of the individual psyche.

the global images of male and female in the culture' (Benjamin, 1989: 8). On another occasion she says that she 'will offer some observations on how the split that constitutes gender polarity is replicated in intellectual and social life, and how it eliminates the possibilities of mutual recognition in society as a whole' (p.184). On Benjamin's account, the 'family' is not only the 'basic unit' of society, it structures the whole of it. Her failure to characterise as male supremacist the 'culture' within which dominant and submissive individuals are constituted, means that that 'culture' is reduced to an epiphenomenon of the family. Society is nothing but the family writ large.

This is a direct consequence of her refusal to locate the phallus at the centre of the meanings and values of male supremacy. She tells us that it is 'the father—not the phallus—[which] is the locus of power' (p.96). She argues that the father holds power (within the family) because he is 'the representative of the outside world', 'the exciting, stimulating, separate other ... [who] mediate[s] the wider world' (pp.100-4). The father represents access to the wonderful, exciting world outside the mother-infant relationship, for both sexes. Whereas he accepts his son's identification with him, and encourages the boy's striving for independence and activity, he rejects his daughter's and withdraws from her. As a consequence, daughters are pushed back to their mothers, where they have no possibility of developing a sense of self because the only avenue to individuation is blocked. Benjamin does not ask how it is that fathers (and mothers and others) distinguish between sons and daughters. Yet this is surely the crucial question. In infancy there is only one discernible difference between females and males—sex. And the distinguishing mark of sex is the presence or absence of the penis, a sign which has been recognised and whose significance has been operative since birth. The father recognises his son as a penis-bearer with the potential for autonomous subjecthood like himself, and refuses to recognise his daughter because she lacks that symbol of identity, in the sense both of likeness to him and of selfhood. But it is not the father's fatherhood with which the boy identifies, and the girl tries to, but his maleness. Because of this insistence on the centrality of the father rather than the phallus in the establishment of psychic patterns of domination, the only adult males who appear in Benjamin's account are fathers (and sometimes husbands, who are, however, also called 'fathers' because of the significance for the children of their dominant position in relation to the mother). Fathers, in terms of Benjamin's analysis, are not men. Or rather, by avoiding the

question of phallic supremacy, her analysis provides us with no account of fathers as men.

Nonetheless, Benjamin's account of what is already involved in mother-infant relationships, despite male supremacy, is a welcome antidote to certain currently popular theories which portray the mother-infant couple as an undifferentiated, 'symbiotic' unity, whose continuation unhampered by phallic intervention is linked to psychosis (if that is the import of the arguments of Julia Kristeva), and into which the phallus must intervene in order to wrench the child into the symbolic order (if that is the import of the Lacanian account). As Benjamin puts it in her critical comment on this aspect of the work of the child analyst, Margaret Mahler:

The problem with this formulation [of an initial unity] is the idea of a separation from oneness; it contains the implicit assumption that we grow *out of* relationships rather than becoming more active and sovereign *within* them, that we start in a state of dual oneness and wind up in a state of singular oneness ... the issue is not only how we separate from oneness, but also how we connect to and recognise others; the issue is not how we become free of the other, but how we actively engage and make ourselves known in relationship to the other (p.18—her emphasis).

Benjamin argues that the infant is active in relation to the mother from birth. The baby can respond to soothing and holding or resist, cooperate or turn away, focus on the mother's face, react to the mother's voice, and (although Benjamin does not mention this) smile, during the first few weeks of life. The possibility of mutual recognition, of 'emotional attunement, mutual influence, affective mutuality, sharing states of mind' (p.16), between mother and infant is there from the beginning. The mother-infant relationship is one already capable of mutual recognition. Benjamin argues against portraying the infant 'as a passive, withdrawn, even "autistic" creature', as she says 'most psychoanalytic discussions of infancy' do. On the contrary, she says, 'infants [are] active participants who help shape the responses of their environment, and "create" their own objects ... the infant's capacity to relate to the world is incipiently present at birth and develops all along' (pp.16, 17). Moreover, as Benjamin points out, it is already the case that 'real mothers in our culture, for better or worse, devote most of

their energy to fostering independence ... it is usually they who set a limit to the erotic bond with the child, and thus to the child's aspiration for omnipotent control and dread of engulfment' (p.152).

The implication of Benjamin's argument concerning 'the first bond' (between mother and child) is that it is *only* the relationship between mother and child which holds the potential for generating mutual recognition, and that the father's intervention irrevocably destroys the possibility of mutuality between the sexes, at least under present conditions and to the extent that adult individuals do not resist the dominant trend. The father's intrusion ruptures, not a solipsistic 'oneness', not an undifferentiated unity, but a mutuality, a flexible balance of separation and connection responsive to the needs and desires of both mother and infant, a reciprocity of give and take which is already present. Mothers and infants, it would seem, do very well all by themselves. As Benjamin herself says:

The longing for a holding environment and open space reminds us that there is a mother who is not fled but sought. She is the holding mother who can support excitement and outside exploration, who can contain the child's anger and frustration, and survive the storms of assertion and separation ... The mother who can absorb and appreciate, and still set limits to the child's excitement and aggression, is the other subject who is sought in the recognition struggle (p.121).

if ... we believe that infants take pleasure in interpersonal connection and are motivated by curiosity and responsiveness to the outside world, we need not agree to the idea that human beings must be pulled by their fathers away from maternal bliss into a reality they resent (p.174).

What Benjamin's account suggests (although she herself does not draw out the implication) is that women cannot be left alone to get on with it if male supremacy is to be maintained. Women are not to be trusted to be whole-hearted in the male cause. They must not be left to raise children without intervention, especially male children. Once the child starts reaching out to the world, the disruptive intrusion of the father becomes necessary. Not however, as a father, either literally or symbolically, nor merely as 'the

first outsider ... represent[ing] the principle of freedom as denial of dependency' (p.221), as Benjamin puts it, but as the nearest significant adult male. Single mothers of sons are gravely cautioned about the dire consequences for their sons' masculinity of the absence of 'male role models'. The small male must be provided with a model of what he can aspire to, one who is personally present and who actively intervenes to show the boy the kind of place waiting for him once he has repudiated the world of the feminine. He has his own little symbol of all that he is heir to, but it *is* little and mother is still powerful, loving, nurturant and needed. The small female must start her lessons in heterosexuality. She must learn that full 'human' status is not her birthright, and that her only access to it is second-rate and via subordination to those who bear its anatomical symbol. Ideally, she should learn to love it. But given the prevalence of father-daughter incest, and its social condonation by way of silence and denial, love is obviously not a necessary prerequisite for the female's training in heterosexual desire. Indeed, if the female is to be trained in sexual subservience, then sexual violence from an early age would seem to be entirely functional for that training process.

In light of this analysis, the solution to whatever problems might be connected with women's mothering is not shared 'parenting', as feminist object relations theory recommends, at least not in the foreseeable future. Given that the theory itself points out the unlikelihood of fathers 'mothering' to the same extent that women do, it is not clear how it might be brought about. If current arrangements of mothering render males more or less incapable of human relationships, and if that incapability is not just an unwillingness, but is an intrinsic aspect of the masculine sense of self, deeply embedded in unconscious processes of fear and desire, hatred and contempt, then male 'mothering' will not become a social norm simply through conscious decision and rational choice on the part of men. The very meaning of masculinity itself must change. It must be divested of its contempt for and dread of the female (and of the reverence and adoration which serve as a superficial gloss masking the actual relations of power), of its competitiveness, aggression, violence and addiction to hierarchy, and of its eroticised obsession with penis-possession, in favour of a genuine humanity which excludes no one from human rights and dignities. Until and unless that happens, it is dangerous to suggest that men take on the care of infants and small children. Even if they were to do so in any numbers, a large 'if' given the great hurdle of male reluctance, at the very least they would simply dominate 'mothering' at the expense of women, just as they

dominate everything else. But there is an even greater danger involved as long as the penis continues to function as the symbol of the only 'human' status allowed, and that is male sexual abuse of children. It is foolhardy to recommend that men have greater access to children, unless the glorification of penis-possession has first been acknowledged and overcome.<sup>11</sup> What must also be overcome is the demand for self-abnegation placed on women by the kind of mothering required under conditions of male supremacy. Instead of focusing yet again on men, what is needed is support for the women who already mother, especially those women who are mothering without men, since this is already a challenge to male control of mothering. If those mothering arrangements are to be changed in the interests of everyone, social resources, both material (e.g. adequate income and child-care) and intangible (e.g. respect), need to be provided in abundance for the women who already mother.

As should be obvious by now, it is not feminist object relations theory itself as it currently stands that I find fruitful for feminist theory, but the role it serves as an accessible way into certain issues of vital importance to feminism.<sup>12</sup> Although it refuses to acknowledge the phallus, explicitly in Benjamin's case, the gap that refusal leaves is clearly marked by its failure to account for male supremacist relations of ruling. It does set up a logic of causes, and then proceed to get the determinants the wrong way round by arguing that the structure of the family determines 'our culture', rather than regarding a particular family formation as a requirement of more systemic relations of power. But it also brings the fact that it is women who mother out into the open, and challenges the denial and suppression to which that surely unremarkable fact is subjected under male supremacist conditions. And it insists that sex 'differences' are neither deliberately imposed nor consciously adopted, but result from processes originally beyond the control and awareness of the immature psyche of the helpless and

---

11. There are, of course, men who do not define their humanity solely in terms of penis-possession, who are not obsessively driven to use their penises with complete disregard for the rights and feelings of others, and who are deeply horrified by child sexual abuse and rape. But they remain individual exceptions to the general rule of male dominance which still prevails, as long as there is no general recognition of the problem of overvaluation of penis-possession.

12. The Lacanian paradigm, which is sometimes regarded as an oppositional alternative to object relations theory, and which could be an alternative way into these issues, is decidedly not accessible. Although it explicitly addresses the phallic symbolic, it is even less critical of phallic domination than Freud was. Because Freud was almost totally unaware of the implications of what he was saying for the human status of women, his account leaves room for feminist intervention. Once his naturalistic naivety is exposed, his work appears as an ideological apologia for phallic supremacy, and a vivid depiction of what feminism is struggling against. Lacan's account, on the other hand, is not naive at all. It demonstrates an awareness of the feminist challenge, and closes off the last remaining loopholes. The work required for intervening in this hermetically sealed discourse is beyond the scope of this present work.

dependent little individual we all are to begin with. As Nancy Chodorow puts it: ‘The capacities and orientations I describe must be built into personality; they are not behavioral acquisitions’ (Chodorow, 1979: 39); and as Jessica Benjamin said: ‘submission [is] the *desire* of the dominated as well as their helpless fate’ (Benjamin, 1989: 52—her emphasis).<sup>13</sup> It is an attempt to explain why current social relations are so intransigent, and has implications for explaining the strength of the resistance to the feminist challenge to those relations. It is important for a feminist politics to be able to give an account of the ways in which relationships of domination and subordination are embraced by individuals out of what is experientially felt to be intrinsic desire, rather than portraying those relationships as imposed. Feminist object relations theory is not yet that account, but it gives suggestive hints for how to go about providing one.

In this chapter I have discussed a number of ways in which feminism has come to be defined implicitly. I have argued that these definitions pay insufficient attention to the male supremacist relations of ruling which constitute the prime antagonist opposed by feminism. As a consequence, these ways of seeing feminism are more or less inadequate as programs for feminist political change. The term ‘patriarchy’ is arguably the least inadequate, since it is usually used in a feminist context to mean male supremacy. But its conventional meaning of ‘rule of the father’ has led some feminist theorists to locate male ruling with fathers rather than with men (See: Benjamin, 1989, discussed above, pp.141-2. See also: Mitchell, 1974a, Mitchell, 1974b). This has adverse consequences for feminist politics. By focusing feminist attention on the importance of men’s fathering, it ignores the present dangers for women and children of the male supremacist structuring of intimate relations, and diverts attention away from the need to validate women’s mothering and re-arrange the social conditions within which women mother. And by according familial relations a causal role in determining social relations in general, it confines feminist attention to the family. The term ‘sexism’ can also be used as a short-hand reference to male supremacy. But its neutrality on the

---

13. Once again, the postulation of unconscious processes and desires for subordination originating in infancy gives rise to questions about determinism. But the shape of desire is not fixed for all time in childhood. It is possible to change one’s desire, although not easily, and not at all if there is no access to alternative readings of the way the world is. Psychoanalysis itself holds out the promise that desire can be reconstructed (although that promise is weakened by psychoanalysis’ individualism and continuing complicity with male supremacy).



question of which sex is dominant means that it can be too easily co-opted to serve men's interests at the expense of women. Couching the feminist critique in terms of such phenomena as 'dichotomies', 'binary oppositions' and 'dualisms' does acknowledge the hierarchical valuing of one term over the other, and usually allows that the 'male/female' distinction is the basic principle underlying all the others. But it is difficult to see what follows from that in practical political terms. Should feminism refrain from 'dichotomies' altogether? In that case, it is a recommendation that feminism refrain from alluding to those meanings and values to which it is utterly opposed, that is, those which serve the interests of male supremacy. Or is it a recommendation to refrain only from those 'dichotomies' listed? But if feminism cannot allude to the distinction between male and female, once again it cannot address the social order of male supremacy which creates the antagonisms between women and men in the first place. As for the term 'gender', in most of its usages it serves anti-feminist purposes by appearing to supply feminism with a subject-matter, while actually obliterating the central concern of feminist politics. All it can recommend by way of 'feminist' practice is a limitless plurality of personal 'choices', unrestrained by any ethical considerations whatsoever (or none that are ever mentioned). With its covert appeal to something other than the social as 'the truth' of human existence, 'gender' transforms 'society' into nothing but unfair and (implicitly) unnatural constraint, and interprets 'the social' as a superficial and dispensable gloss on the essential reality of the desiring individual.

Defining feminism in terms of 'women' would seem to be the most plausible way of characterising it, since feminism is clearly concerned with the struggle of women by women and for women. It becomes inadequate as politics, however, when the focus is only on women, and feminism as the struggle against male domination is omitted, denied or ignored. Without the centralising focus of opposition to male supremacy, feminism is reduced to antagonisms between and among women. In the next chapter, I look at some of the ways in which those antagonisms have been played out in the context of that crucial category of 'race'.

## Chapter Five: Feminism and Racism

### *Differences Among Women*

The question of ‘differences’ between and among women revolves chiefly around the contentious issues of race and class. What is being said in these debates is that some women are in a dominant position in relation to other women, that some women oppress other women because they are more privileged than other women—white women in comparison with black or third-world women or women of other ethnic minorities, middle-class women in comparison with working-class women or women of poverty. To the extent that this focus on differences between women allows no room for locating the invidious and hierarchical differences within a culture of male domination, it fragments the feminist project into a myriad of oppressive distinctions among women with no common meeting ground. To the extent that it appeals only to a hierarchy of oppressions among women, it reinforces that hierarchy. It displaces the source of domination from the male power system to women themselves, and by ignoring the nature, manifestations, scope and influence of male domination, it misrepresents the feminist project. And because these invidious and hierarchical distinctions undoubtedly exist among feminists, those accused react with guilt, self-recrimination or shamed silence. (For an interesting discussion of these reactions of guilt and shame, see: Fisher, 1984). This problem of ‘differences’ among women has reached such a pitch that it occupies a large part of the feminist terrain, paralysing debate, and too often diverting feminist energy away from the main enemy.

That does not mean that race (or class), as forms of practical politics, can be wholly subsumed within feminist politics. On the contrary, feminism cannot afford to give priority to the politics of race or class at the expense of the struggle against male supremacy. The categories of ‘race’ and ‘class’ also contain men, and men can exercise their prerogatives at women’s expense. Any category which includes men tends to be dominated by the interests of men. Because men are more secure in their human status, they tend to have a clearer apprehension of their exclusion from human rights than women do. Men tend to know what they are entitled to and what they are being deprived of. The invidiousness of racism or class exploitation are more readily perceivable than the oppression of women, because they involve the dehumanisation of men. Moreover, the allocation of people in terms of racial categories tends to reproduce

the ideology of the male as the 'human' norm, so that the categories are automatically male unless women are specifically mentioned. Because women are still struggling for a human status, we frequently cannot even express what we want, much less get access to the necessary resources, especially if women's needs come into conflict with what men perceive as their justified claims against other men. Too often, women become nothing but the terrain over which battles for supremacy among men are waged, unless the feminist insight into the male supremacist defining of the 'human' as only male is kept constantly in mind.

That is not to say that *feminists* cannot give political priority to race and/or class. There are times when politically committed women must challenge the oppressions of class and/or race directly because the urgency of the situation demands it. Andrea Dworkin argued this in terms of 'states of primary emergency'. What she meant by this was that, in certain contexts, certain identities brought with them more pressing, immediate and dangerous problems than others. She gave the examples of the Jew in Nazi Germany, and the Native American during the colonisation of the US. 'That first identity', she said, 'the one which brings with it as part of its definition death, is the identity of primary emergency' (Dworkin, 1974: 23). But even short of death, the economic deprivation which capitalism visits upon a large proportion of the world's population, and the dehumanising effects of racism, require their own specific politics. But unless feminism is a constant presence in those politics, women will continue to be excluded from agendas devised by men in the interests of maintaining their 'human' status at women's expense. As long as feminism is conceived as a commitment to the human dignity of all, it is already a commitment to opposing race and class oppression. But feminist involvement in these politics focuses the effects on women of the hierarchies of class and race, both the ways in which those hierarchies specifically disadvantage women, and the ways in which women reproduce those hierarchies among ourselves. Once male domination is identified as the main problem addressed by a feminist politics, it can be acknowledged that women experience male domination differently, depending on where they are situated in relation to race, class, or any other social location.

I am not going to discuss class in this present work, despite the lack of resolution of many of the questions involved in discussions of women and class—the difficulty of

allocating women to class positions (not to mention the difficulty of allocating men); the derivative nature of ‘class’ for women and its dependence on their relationships to men;<sup>14</sup> confusions about what ‘class’ means, whether it can be accounted for in terms of status, prestige, privilege and access to resources, or whether it is confined to the Marxist concept of ownership and non-ownership of the means of production (in which case it is irrelevant to women); and most importantly, the absence of any acknowledgement of the existence of a ruling class. Although there are some discussions in the feminist literature which deal explicitly with class (e.g. Phillips, 1987; *Lesbian Ethics*, 1991), within the category of ‘differences between and among women’ it is the question of race which has received the most attention. ‘Class’ has tended to play a subsidiary role, mentioned only briefly and tangentially in discussions primarily concerned with ‘race’. Moreover, the main problem with the feminist ‘race’ debate—the ignoring or denial of male domination and the concomitant focus on hierarchies among women—is also to be found in discussions of ‘class’. Hence, much of what is said about ‘race’ is also relevant to ‘class’.

### ***Feminism and Racism***

The ‘race’ debate within feminism shares in the same general problem already discussed in relation to ‘academic feminism’, that is, the deletion of the question of male domination. While it is clear that there are many women, variously identified as women of colour, black women, third world women, indigenous women, or women from ethnic minorities,<sup>15</sup> who feel excluded from a great deal of what is called ‘feminism’, what is less clear is the nature of and reasons for that sense of exclusion, and what is to be done about it. This problem of exclusion tends to be blamed on what is

---

14. As Virginia Woolf so elegantly put it, struggling with the same issue in the British context: ‘Our ideology is still so inveterately anthropocentric that it has been necessary to coin this clumsy term—educated man’s daughter—to describe the class whose fathers have been educated at public schools and universities. Obviously, if the term “bourgeois” fits her brother, it is grossly incorrect to use it of one who differs so profoundly in the two prime characteristics of the bourgeoisie—capital and environment’ (Woolf, 1952[1938]: 265n2).

15. There are problems with all of these terms. They imply a homogeneity among those so categorised, which is not only not the case, but can lead to its own form of domination and exclusion. This is evidenced by the way in which the debate has been dominated by the concerns of US black women, concerns which are certainly pressing and important, but which are different in crucial ways from the interests of, say, Australian Aboriginal women. Once women’s interests are characterised in terms of different cultural realities, the inclusion of some will inevitably occur at the expense of others. It is impossible to include all cultures because no one can ever be in a position to know. The terms also imply a non-existent homogeneity among those who fall outside the categories, those designated ‘white’. Nonetheless, addressing questions of racism requires the continued use of these terms or variants of them, given the absence of any adequate alternative.

perceived to be the 'white, middle-class', or 'Western', nature of feminism, and to be explained in terms of feminism as a 'white women's movement' which focuses on the concerns of women who are already relatively privileged, at the expense of women who are subjected to social exclusions and indignities because of their race. But there are a number of problems with this account. There is little discussion of what counts as 'white and middle-class' and what does not. Such assertions are too often presented as self-evident truth requiring no argument or evidence. In raising this question of evidence, I am not intending to cast doubt on the occurrence of racism among feminists, much less its existence more generally. I have no doubt about its existence, having seen too many instances of it. But if that is the case, why raise the question of evidence? The answer is: if feminism's political project involves working towards a human status for all women at no one's expense, then embracing feminism *ought* to mean refusing racism. If it does not, then it is vitally important that the racism which does occur be identified so that it can be eradicated. There is no further insight to be gained from simply reiterating that racism exists. There can be no doubt about that. What we need to know is the form or forms it is taking among women whose political awareness should preclude it. We also need to know because hurling insults is easy, and guilt reactions automatic. The issues need to be argued through if they are to lead to something more positive than simply occasions for self-aggrandisement or breast-beating. However, on the few occasions the case is argued, it fails to stand up under close investigation, chiefly because there is a lack of clarity about what 'white and middle-class' means. The construct of 'race, class and gender' also fails to theorise the issues adequately, because, once again, it is unclear what these categories involve, and because their focus on categories of the oppressed means that they remain unconnected loci of oppression with no common ground. Most importantly, the 'race' debate largely ignores the problematic of male domination. Instead it interprets feminism as concerned only with categories of oppression or hierarchies of domination among women. But it is only the focusing of feminist attention on the social construct of male monopolisation of the 'human', I would argue, which promises to address that sense so many women have of feeling excluded from much of what is labelled 'feminism'. It is only that political focus which can make sense of feminism for women everywhere subjected in a multitude of different ways to the dehumanisation inherent in the social order of male supremacy.

If the debate has been, at the very least, unhelpful for feminist politics, it has also been inadequate as an anti-racist politics. One reason for this derives from that very avoidance of questions about male domination which makes it so problematic for feminist politics. In other words, it is inadequate as an anti-racist politics to the same extent as, and for the same reason that, it is inadequate as a feminist politics, i.e. its deletion of the question of male domination.<sup>16</sup> There is too little discussion of the male dominated nature of the human categories on whose behalf the anti-racist struggle is waged, categories which contain only men unless women are explicitly mentioned. The exclusion of black women or women of colour is blamed on a 'white women's movement' or a 'white middle-class feminism', when the original exclusion is a male supremacist one, i.e. the exclusion of women from every 'human' category because they are not men. In contrast, starting from the standpoint of opposition to the male domination allows the problem of women's exclusion from all 'human' categories to be addressed directly, in a way that focusing exclusively on 'race' does not. Certainly texts authored in the name of 'feminism' can be complicit with this exclusion of women from categories defined in terms of 'race', but it does not originate there. Rather, it originates with the male supremacist ideology that only men count as 'human'. Starting with that same ideological construct in mind also promises to throw light on the male supremacist aspects of racism and imperialism, connections between racism and masculinity which are hinted at in some of the malestream anti-racist and post-colonialist literature, but which remain at the level of suggestive insights for lack of a feminist analysis. Ignoring the ideological constitution of the male as the 'human' norm means failing to identify the ways in which racism and imperialism have mirrored the domination of women by men, and the male supremacist nature of the anti-racist and post-colonialist struggle itself.

The feminist 'race' debate has also failed to identify some of the systematic forms which racism has taken within feminist ranks. For there *is* racism among feminists (as there is in any group of people if it is not consciously resisted, because it is systemic). A feminist commitment does not mean that women cannot behave in racist ways; nor does it mean that anything and everything said in the name of feminism is automatically excluded from criticism on the grounds of racism. Racism is not always violent, blatant

---

16. For some exceptions to this, see: Wallace, 1990; Lorde, 1978; Lorde, 1979a.

and overt. It can be subtle, devious and sometimes ambiguous, and hence difficult to identify and describe. But unless it can be identified, it cannot be dealt with.

One form that racism takes among the ranks of feminists is a disinclination on the part of women identified as 'white', to challenge, disagree with or criticise anything said or done by women identified as black, indigenous, third world women, or women of colour. Sometimes the disinclination is motivated by fear or confusion, fear of being labelled 'racist', or confusion about what is actually happening, about what is the right thing to do and how to avoid doing the wrong thing. Sometimes the refusal is deliberate and well-intentioned, a reluctance to disagree with women of colour about the racism they are in the best position to know about because they experience it, or a desire to treat gently those who are multiply oppressed. But whatever the motives, these reactions involve applying different, and lesser, standards to those identified in terms of their racial characteristics. The on-going possibility of internal criticism, of self-criticism and criticism of each other, is vitally important if feminism is to continue as a viable politics. Criticisms must be substantiated and argued for, and must leave the way open for disagreement and debate, if they are not to degenerate into sloganeering and name-calling. But silence, whether well-intentioned or guilt-stricken, leads nowhere.

Another form racism takes within feminist circles is a kind of tokenistic inclusion solely on the grounds of race. This is motivated by the best of intentions. It is an attempt to rectify the structural inequality of exclusion. It is positive discrimination in favour of those who are automatically discriminated against unless deliberate action is taken to include them. But because it involves sorting women into racial categories, it threatens to relapse into the very racism it is designed to combat. Women have to be divided into 'them' and 'us' if decisions are to be made, with the consequence that 'they' are once again 'other' than 'us'. To the extent that it is only race which matters, at the expense of any other criteria of judgement, it reinforces racial divisions among women, and reaffirms 'white' in the dominant position of being able to afford magnanimity. I do not think there is any general solution to this dilemma. The problem could be partly redressed, however, if those who have the power to make decisions about inclusion and exclusion, e.g. organisers of conferences, editors of anthologies, publishers, kept feminism in the forefront of the decision-making process, and refrained from making

race the sole criterion of judgement. But that involves being clear about what feminism is in the first place.

Although raising these issues goes against the grain of most of what has been said in the name of an anti-racist feminism, there is no benefit to be gained, either for feminism or for the anti-racist struggle, in refusing to address the problems because they are too hard, too confusing, or too threatening. Ignoring the problems will not make them go away. It leads to political paralysis because, as it stands at the moment, the debate provides no ground from which to start righting the wrongs which are supposedly at issue. But a feminist anti-racist politics must involve more than the simple acceptance and meek reiteration of anything and everything said by or on behalf of women of colour without challenge, argument or debate. Otherwise it does a grave injustice both to feminism's own insights and political priorities, and to those of the anti-racist struggle.

### ***Misrepresenting Feminism: Denying Male Domination***

The accusation—for it is an accusation, and a harsh one—that feminism (or aspects of it) is 'racist' or 'white and middle-class' and 'Western' has been frequently reiterated in feminist writings. But that reiteration too often depends on deleting feminist insights. One example of this occurs in a paper by Hazel V. Carby, called 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' (Carby, 1982). Carby uses the racist oppression of black men as an argument against feminism. She argues that the concept of 'patriarchy' (i.e. male domination) should be abandoned by feminism because black men are subordinated to white men. This point is reiterated a number of times throughout the paper: 'Racism ensures that black men do not have the same relations to patriarchal/capitalist hierarchies as white men' (p.213); 'How ... can it be argued that black male dominance exists in the same forms as white male dominance?' (p.215); 'It bears repetition that black men have not held the same patriarchal positions of power that the white males have established' (p.217); 'if we take patriarchy and apply it to various colonial situations ... it is unable to explain why black males have not enjoyed the benefits of white patriarchy' (p.218). But none of these statements is an argument against feminism, because feminism has never asserted that black men enjoy the same benefits, privileges and power as white men. That some men have rights, benefits and privileges which other men are denied is a consequence of the male supremacist régime



of power and ‘knowledge’ challenged by feminism, and not a construct of feminism itself. Carby’s objections rest on her assumption that the feminist concept of ‘patriarchy’ means that all men are equal, and that, since all men are not equal, the term should be dropped from the feminist repertoire because it makes false, and racist, assumptions about black men. But feminism has never argued that all men are equal. It has in fact asserted the exact opposite. Hence these objections do not constitute a critique of feminism.

One example of an outright denial of male domination occurs in a paper by Chandra Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’. ‘There is’, says Mohanty, ‘no universal patriarchal framework ...—unless one posits an international male conspiracy or a monolithic, ahistorical power hierarchy’ (Mohanty, 1988: 335). She goes on to acknowledge the existence of ‘a particular world balance of power’, which she characterises (quoting Anouar Abdel-Malek) as including: “‘the military-industrial complex and the hegemonic cultural centers of the West ... monopoly and finance capital ... the scientific and technological revolution and the second industrial revolution itself’” (ibid.). That this ‘world balance of power’ may itself be an international ‘patriarchal framework’, consisting of the concentration of the world’s wealth in the hands of a few men, in the interests of their own power and prestige and at the expense of the majority of people, is not a connection Mohanty makes.

Her denial of male domination is central to her task of exposing the ways in which some examples of ‘Western feminist writing on women in the third world’ are, as she sees it, complicit with this ‘world balance of power’. These writings, she argues, demonstrate their complicity with the ‘colonization’ of women in the third world through ‘the production of the “Third World Woman” as a singular monolithic subject’, a discursive construct which results in the ‘suppression ... of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question’. There is certainly something like this involved in one of the forms of racism I identified above, that is, the defining of women only in terms of race along a ‘white’/‘non-white’ axis. But Mohanty does not recognise this as an attempt to include those normally excluded, however misguided or self-defeating such attempts might be. Instead, what she dismissively criticises as ‘appropriating’ and ‘colonizing’ are writings which explicitly identify male domination. Her criticism involves a number of

strategies. One of these is the use of dismissive and exaggerated terminology, like ‘universal’, ‘conspiracy’, ‘monolithic’ and ‘ahistorical’, to finesse questions about male domination. Such contemptuous language functions to stop any discussion before it starts. It demonstrates the supposed absurdity of using the concept of male domination as an analytical and political strategy, and it does so without actually providing any argument or evidence against it. The naming of male domination is characterised as a ‘process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world’, and as an exercise of power over third world women on the part of ‘much recent Western feminist discourse’ (p.335). But she writes as though third world women were not in fact oppressed by male violence, colonialism, economic development, etc., as though they were not powerless in the face of ‘particular socio-economic systems’, as though the only problem is that ‘Western feminist discourse’ says they are: ‘in these texts ... women are defined consistently as the *victims* of male control’ (pp.338-9—her emphasis). She clearly means this as a criticism of these texts, the implication being that third world women are not victims of male control, they are merely portrayed as such by ‘Western feminism’.

Another strategy she uses is to draw distinctions which are terminological rather than substantive, since they are distinctions between something described in neutral language and something described pejoratively. For example, in her criticism of Fran Hosken’s work on genital mutilation, she acknowledges that ‘it is true that the potential of male violence against women circumscribes and elucidates their social position to a certain extent’. But, she goes on to say, ‘defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into “objects-who-defend-themselves”, men into “subjects-who-perpetrate-violence”, and (every) society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people’ (p.339). Of course, there *is* a substantive difference between these two assertions, apart, that is, from the emotive language within which the second is couched. The difference is that, in the second assertion, men are named as the perpetrators of violence against women, whereas in the first they are not. ‘Male violence against women’ is only ‘potential’; it not only ‘circumscribes’, it also ‘elucidates’ (whatever that might mean in this context); and it does not even ‘circumscribe’ women, but only their ‘social position’, and only that ‘to a certain extent’. If the responsibility of men for their violence against women is to be named, it must at the same time be rendered non-existent by being exaggerated to the point of absurdity. Hence, Mohanty’s denial of

male domination also involves denying men's responsibility in the maintenance of women's subordination.

Another terminological distinction Mohanty makes is to insist that writings on third world women must confine themselves to 'description', although what she means by this is not clear. At one point she contrasts it with 'explanation' (p.348), and at another point with 'universalistic, ahistorical categories' (p.349). At the same time, she says that she is not arguing against 'generalization', but against those generalisations which are not 'careful, historically specific' and 'complex' (ibid.). The difference appears to be whether or not men are identified as the beneficiaries or perpetrators of women's subordination. The single 'Western feminist' text which she views favourably does not mention men, or at least not in the quoted excerpt. The women lace-makers discussed in this text are exploited by a 'hegemonic ... world market', a 'production system', a 'culturally specific mode of patriarchal organization', a 'housewife ideology', etc., but not by men it would seem. In contrast, in a criticism of a book on women in Africa, Mohanty says that she does not object to 'the use of universal groupings for descriptive purposes', such as the phrase 'all the women of Africa'. The problem, she says, is that 'descriptive gender differences are transformed into the division between men and women'. She clarifies the nature of this 'division' in the next sentence: 'Women are constituted as a group via dependency relationships vis-a-vis men, who are implicitly held responsible for these relationships' (p.340). What is being contrasted with 'description' here is 'holding men responsible'. (And once again it appears that such 'divisions' are solely a construct of 'Western feminist discourses' and that none exist in actuality). The distinction Mohanty herself supposedly draws between those generalisations of which she approves, and those of which she disapproves, is one between generalisations confined to a single cultural context, e.g. the lace-makers of Narsapur, India, and generalisations across cultures, e.g. 'all the women of Africa', or 'third world women'. But it is only some cross-cultural generalisations she disagrees with, that is, those involving men and male domination. Although she couches the generalisations she disagrees with in terms of women—'all the women of Africa', etc.—in fact, she does not disagree with this generalisation until it is 'transformed into the division between men and women'. She is also quite happy with cross-cultural generalisations which are sufficiently abstract, 'a hegemonic, exploitative world market', for example. It is indeed unhelpful to couch the problem solely in the

individualistic terminology of 'men and women', rather than in terms of social systems of male domination. But to recommend silence on the question of male agency in defending their benefits and privileges at women's expense, often violently, is to recommend political quiescence.

What Mohanty is attacking in the texts she discusses, what she is interpreting as a form of Western domination, is any attempt to bring feminist insights to bear on the situations of third world women. In doing so, however, she abolishes the possibility of acknowledging, and hence struggling against, any form of domination at all. It is not possible to give an account of domination, however it is characterised, *without* identifying both its victims and its beneficiaries. To disqualify talk of victims is also to disqualify talking about oppression. But there is also a sense in which to talk about domination is not at all to talk about victims. Rather, it allows people the opportunity to make decisions they would not otherwise have been able to make, because seeing domination and the forms it takes provides them with alternatives they would not otherwise have had. To prohibit discussion of domination is to place a ban on this provision of alternative ways of seeing the world and one's place in it. As well, to disqualify explanation and analysis is to disqualify theory and politics, because both theory and politics are ways of understanding systematic regularities. Forms of domination cannot be challenged unless those regularities are made explicit by a theory and a politics which reaches beyond mere 'description'. To demand that feminist accounts restrict themselves to 'description' is to demand that they abandon theory and politics. It is a demand that they leave the status quo intact, and refrain from challenging those regularities which already structure conditions as oppressive. It is a demand which ensures a retreat from political engagement. If male domination cannot even be acknowledged, wherever it is to be found, however varied its subtle or brutal manifestations may be, it cannot be challenged and opposed, and feminism ceases to exist.

### *Misinterpreting Feminism*

At the beginning of this 'second wave' of feminism in Australia, in the early 1970s, there were many Aboriginal women who expressed antagonism towards feminism<sup>17</sup> (e.g. Saunders, 1975; Venceremos Brigade, 1975; Sykes, 1975; O'Shane, 1976; Grimshaw, 1981; Fesl, 1984).<sup>18</sup> But this antagonism was based on a number of misinterpretations of feminism, misinterpretations based on a well-founded suspicion on the part of Aboriginal women of anything seen to emanate from white Australia. For example, in the early 1970s, Bobbi Sykes was telling 'white Women's Liberationists' that Aboriginal women did 'not wish to join' the women's movement (Sykes, 1975: 318-9).<sup>19</sup> The Aboriginal women at the Women and Politics conference in Canberra in 1975 did not see themselves as feminists, but located their political priorities with the struggles of Aboriginal people. They regarded the oppression of Aboriginal people by white society as the most urgent problem, and the Aboriginal struggle as far more important than what they perceived to be the comparatively trivial concerns of women they saw as more privileged than themselves. They also saw themselves as less in need of feminism than white women, because Aboriginal culture allowed women more equality than white culture did, because Aboriginal women were already in the forefront of the movement for Aboriginal self-determination, and because Aboriginal women had always had supportive networks among themselves (Aboriginal and Islander Women, 1975a; Aboriginal and Islander Women, 1975b; Grimshaw, 1981; Fesl, 1984).

---

17. There were also Aboriginal women who were feminists, who had had harsh personal experience of male violence and who were committed to feminism as the struggle against it. (Janne Ellen (Reid), personal communication, March 1995). Their presence has been expunged from the record.

18. This debate also appears to have been deleted. On two occasions recently, it has been asserted that Aboriginal women's complaints against 'the white women's movement' are 'recent'. In the Introduction to the 1991 volume, *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, Sneja Gunew asserted that 'the specific needs of Aboriginal women have only recently surfaced' in Australia, and that 'the racism of white women', and the 'irrelevance' of the Australian women's movement to Aboriginal women, have only now been placed 'on the feminist agenda in Australia as ... in Britain and America' (Gunew, ed., 1991: 3). And in their Introduction to *Australian Women*, Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns say: 'Aboriginal women have in recent years articulated their rejection of white feminists' analysis of subordination' (Grieve and Burns, 1994: 5. For a bibliography on this early debate, see: Bell, 1991a). In both cases, the reference was to a paper by Jackie Huggins (Huggins, 1991; Huggins, 1994). Huggins herself does not claim in either paper that her discussions of 'the needs of Aboriginal women' are among the first in Australia, and she does reference earlier similar claims by Aboriginal women. But Huggins' propensity for speaking on behalf of Aboriginal women in general is worrying, since there is by no means unanimity among Aboriginal women about the relevance of feminism to their lives, about the existence or otherwise of a 'white women's movement', or about relations with 'white women' (For one Aboriginal woman's disagreement with Huggins, see: Nelson, 1991; Bell 1991a; Bell, 1991b).

19. This article is a reiteration of a position she had stated at a Women's Conference at least as early as 1973. (My informant on this does not want to be identified).

This decision on the part of Aboriginal women is not surprising. The needs of Aboriginal people are so pressing that the commitment of Aboriginal women to struggling for the self-determination of Aboriginal people as a whole is only to be expected. But the seeming antagonisms between Aboriginal politics and feminist politics were due to a number of misinterpretations. Feminism was often trivialised by Aboriginal women activists, as ‘mak[ing] men do the washing up’ (Grimshaw, 1981: 88), as ‘chatter ... about sexual oppression and the competitive orgasm’ (Sykes, 1975: 318), as a struggle for ‘a more equal distribution of power between the white sexes’ (Sykes, 1984: 66), as the opposition to ‘male chauvinism’ and as ‘an extremely anti-male ideology’ (Venceremos Brigade, 1975). Another common misinterpretation concerned the perception of feminism in terms of a ‘white women’s movement’ consisting of organised groups of women calling themselves feminists, groups which one could join or refuse to join. Since Aboriginal women refused to join these groups, they interpreted this as a refusal to join feminism. But feminism is not confined to particular groups, any more than it is confined to particular individuals. Feminism is wider than the sum total of identifiable feminist organisations. It is a political and moral engagement with male domination in the interests of women, however and wherever that is manifested. It is available to anyone who makes that commitment. The refusal of Aboriginal women activists to join groups organised by white women did not mean that feminism was irrelevant to Aboriginal women (although that was the way some of them saw it). Given that feminism is a struggle on the part of women for their own rights, self-respect and human dignity, the struggles of Aboriginal women on their own behalf is itself a feminist struggle.

Another common misinterpretation of feminism was that it set up irresolvable antagonisms between women and men. Hilary Saunders said: ‘we can only hope to achieve [self-determination] as one people not a race of men, nor a race of women but of Black People United’ (Saunders, 1975). Vi Stanton said: ‘I can’t get interested in women’s liberation. To me, as an Aboriginal, it’s not relevant, for the simple reason that our whole people have to be liberated. I don’t consider that we split forces here, between women and men’ (quoted in Grimshaw, 1981: 87). Eve Fesl commented: ‘One aspect that sets our women’s groups apart from most non-Aboriginal women’s groups is that we work along with, and stand as partners beside, our men—we do not as a whole oppose men *per se*. (It seems to some of us that in Euro-Australian women’s groups

there is often an element of man-hatred)' (Fesl, 1984: 114. See also: Huggins, 1994). This argument was recently reiterated by a group of Aboriginal women. 'We continually find', they said, 'we are being jockeyed into the position of fighting and separating from our men and we will not. We are women and men together who have suffered grave injustices by the white invaders. We have all suffered' (Huggins et al., 1991: 506). This objection has also been raised by other women engaged in anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles, who have rejected feminism on the grounds that they need to work alongside their men in struggling to liberate all their people.

But it is not feminism which is responsible for antagonisms between the sexes. Rather, those antagonisms are the result the social conditions of male supremacy which operate at women's expense, and of the male violence against and contempt for women which feminism is struggling *against*. That this is so even within Aboriginal communities, has become increasingly apparent (Bligh, 1983; Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force, 1988; Langton, 1989; Bell and Nelson, 1989; Bell, 1991a; Bell, 1991b; Atkinson, 1990a; Atkinson, 1990b; Atkinson, 1990c; Sculthorpe, 1990; Mosey, 1994). To the extent that there are antagonisms between Aboriginal women and men, those antagonisms are not a consequence of feminism, but of the behaviour of men. Aboriginal men do not refrain from violence towards women and children just because they are Aboriginal. While it is true that Aboriginal people as a whole have been subjected to genocidal policies, and it is also true that Aboriginal women and men work together in their struggle against a common oppression, yet Aboriginal women, like women everywhere, suffer at the hands of men, and not only men of the dominant classes. Within Aboriginal communities, as elsewhere, the interests of women and men can come into conflict. For example, Aboriginal women have been denied legal representation by the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) in cases of domestic violence where their partners are also Aboriginal. Because of its policy of not acting in any case against an Aboriginal person, the ALS will not represent Aboriginal women who charge Aboriginal men with violence. It does, however, act on behalf of the men (Hole, 1994).

Struggling against male domination is antagonistic to men only to the extent that men are committed to male domination. The feminist practice of excluding men from women-only groups, events and activities was sometimes perceived by Aboriginal

women as 'man-hating' (e.g. Fesl, 1984: 110). But it is no more than a strategic decision to provide for women some space, always temporary and sometimes contested, which men cannot dominate because they are not present. Provision of women-only occasions, spaces and support networks was part of many traditional Aboriginal societies, and continues among Aboriginal people today (Hamilton, 1981; Bell, 1983; Bell, 1987).

The political struggles of Aboriginal women struggling for their own identity and dignity as women in solidarity with each other, bring Aboriginal women into conflict with Aboriginal men only if Aboriginal men are committed to the meanings and values of male domination, only if Aboriginal men, too, are violent towards women, and collude with male contempt for the female. In opposing the racism of white Australia, Aboriginal women are also opposing male supremacy, because the colonisation of Australia, and what was done to Aboriginal people by the European settlers, was male supremacist as well as white supremacist. Aboriginal women were not raped by white women. Neither were the massacres of Aboriginal people perpetrated by women. That does not mean that European women were innocent of racism. They may have been complicit with the actions of the male colonisers. Many white women exploited the labour of Aboriginal women and girls as unpaid domestic servants (Tucker, 1977; Ward, 1987), although it is as well to remember that the chief beneficiaries of the domestic labour of Aboriginal women were white men, and that the households were managed for the ease and comfort of the husbands, sons, fathers and brothers of the white mistresses. European women may have blamed Aboriginal women for the sexual misbehaviour of white men; they may have condoned, excused or justified the massacres. But whether they protested or not, women have never had the social power necessary to colonise and subdue people. The European women involved in the colonisation of Australia were mostly wives, prostitutes and servants, i.e. under male control. (There were a few exceptions, e.g. Mary Reiby, who was transported as a convict, but who eventually became a wealthy businesswoman).

The male supremacist nature of the colonisation of Australia appears not to have been recognised by some of the participants in the debate. For example, Bobbi Sykes' all-too-brief history of 'black women in Australia' (Sykes, 1975), is a history of the rape of Aboriginal women by white men. But rape is a feminist issue, perhaps, it could even be argued, *the* feminist issue, expressing as it does male belief in the irresistibility and



power of the penis, in the male right to violate female bodily integrity, and in the existence of women solely as receptacles for the penis. All women have an interest in abolishing rape. And yet, this issue of rape, which is so clearly of concern to all women, was used by Sykes to argue for the irrelevance of feminism to Aboriginal women. She was able to do this, firstly, by ignoring the inherently male supremacist nature of rape, and defining it instead as an aspect of racism, and secondly, by characterising feminism as white women's groups which Aboriginal women refused to join. But the feminist commitment of Aboriginal women is not dependent on their membership of groups organised by white women, whether or not Aboriginal women choose to characterise their political commitment as feminist (and some do, at least for some purposes).

Another example of the male supremacist nature of the European colonisation of Australia concerns the differential effect of colonisation on the lives of Aboriginal women and men. Both sexes suffered under European colonisation. But Aboriginal women, like the women of all invaded or colonised peoples, were subjected to the extra burden of sexual exploitation and violence (Grimshaw, 1981: 90). Moreover, to the extent that the European colonisers dealt with Aboriginal people as human beings, they dealt only with Aboriginal men, defining only men as breadwinners, paid workers, informants, cultural experts and 'owners' of the land. This European commitment to the ideology of the male as the 'human' norm undermined the economic arrangements of traditional Aboriginal societies whereby the survival of everyone depended on the food-providing activities of Aboriginal women. It also obliterated women's cultural knowledge, spiritual expertise and relationship to the land. To the extent that the domination of European culture was successful (and it has not always been), Aboriginal women lost a great deal of the independence they had within traditional societies (Hamilton, 1975; Hamilton, 1981).

And yet, looked at in another way, the disruptive effect of colonisation on Aboriginal culture has been more demoralising for men than for women. The Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force report partly located the causes of the high level of domestic violence in Aboriginal and Islander communities in the 'breakdown of traditional culture'. The report pointed out that 'Aboriginal men's roles have been seriously undermined' as a result of European settlement. The 'attempts by various authorities to manage the so-called "Aboriginal problem"', and 'the murder and maltreatment of

Aboriginal persons', the report commented, has meant that Aboriginal men's 'opportunities for mastery and positive achievement in the new culture have not been effectively realised'. The report went on to say that 'Aboriginal women do not appear to have suffered such dramatic changes in their roles', and attributed this to 'their on-going role as child bearers and rearers. They have had to cope for the sake of their children'. The report quoted from a submission to the task force, arguing that 'the traditional role of men in Aboriginal society has been eroded with the result ... [that] in a lot of cases the men [use] violence on the women folk to re-assert their authority' (Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force, 1988: 258-9). Patricia Grimshaw also suggested that men of a colonised culture experience greater shock and disruption than women do, because the men have more to lose. She said that, because men are the religious and political leaders, male identity is more closely tied up with their culture than is female identity, and hence men suffer greater dislocation when their culture is threatened. Women at least have some continuity in their responsibilities for children and in their female support networks (Grimshaw, 1981: 90).

But there are problems with this kind of account. There are indications from the work of female anthropologists that this supposed cultural 'leadership' of men is a construct of the male supremacist nature of colonisation. Given the important part played by women in the cultural life of the people in traditional Aboriginal societies, it is not at all clear that men were the spiritual 'leaders' in traditional societies (leaving aside the question of what might count as a 'leader' in those societies). Both sexes had spiritual responsibilities. Sometimes these were joint responsibilities, but sometimes they were so separate and distinct that men were not permitted knowledge of women's rites, and vice versa. As men, whether as anthropologists, government officials or curious individuals, the colonisers would not be informed of 'women's business', and hence it would appear that the spiritual life of the people was largely 'men's business'. Although I would agree that there is a sense in which men are more demoralised by the destructive effects of colonisation than women, I would suggest that that is yet another consequence of the male supremacist values of the dominant culture, which promises colonised men a 'human' status and deprives them of it at one and the same time. They are 'human' because they are men, but they are also 'less than human' because they are not members of the dominant race. It is in this sense that Aboriginal men have more to lose than Aboriginal women, not in the sense that they are deprived of something they

once had, but in the sense of a savage double-bind which women escape because they are not given the promise of 'human' status in the first place. The coloniser is unlikely to grant to the women of what he sees as an 'inferior race' what he does not allow to the women of his own race.

However, arguments like these have worrying implications. They are detrimental for Aboriginal women who need protection from actual male violence, not explanations of its 'causes'. But there are also unacceptable implications for Aboriginal men, since such arguments both absolve men of responsibility for their own behaviour, and imply that all Aboriginal men have a propensity for violence because they are subjected to racist oppression. As Susanne Kappeler has pointed out, these arguments 'overlook ... that the perpetrator has *decided* to violate, even if this decision was made in circumstances of limited choice' (her emphasis); and they 'help to stigmatize all those living in poverty and oppression; because they are obvious victims of violence and oppression, they are held to be potential perpetrators themselves' (Kappeler, 1995: 3).

Sometimes the relevance of feminism has been acknowledged by Aboriginal women. For example, Hilary Saunders said: 'Women's Liberation has played a part in bringing about a certain form of awareness in Black women'. She went on to qualify that statement by saying that Aboriginal women could not afford to let that awareness go too far because of the injustices suffered by Aboriginal people as a whole. But she did point out that Aboriginal women needed to struggle against attempts by Aboriginal men to 'protect' them, thereby placing Aboriginal women in a subservient role and denying them the right to speak and to take up positions of leadership (Saunders, 1975). But often Aboriginal women activists spoke as though there were no common meeting ground between Aboriginal women and white women, as though the only men who ever caused women any trouble were white men, as though Aboriginal men were only comrades, kin and fellow sufferers in oppression, and never raped, bashed or molested women and children. The motive behind the silence about Aboriginal male violence against women and children (and each other and themselves) is understandable. No one committed to the interests of Aboriginal people wants to provide ammunition for racists. But while the silence may protect Aboriginal men from some of the consequences of their behaviour, it has been lethal for Aboriginal women (Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force, 1988). As Diane Bell put it:

by framing violence as a racial problem (i.e., it is Whites oppressing Blacks), women are rendered mute ... It is helpful to ask the question feminists asked when scrutinising the violence hidden in the home: In whose interests is silence maintained? Under what conditions may women be able to put their safety and that of their children above the needs of the men who beat and rape them? ... the need to work from within the race construct has constrained findings that might empower women (Bell, 1991a: 389).

It has been argued with some justification that manifestations of male dominance, including the level of male violence, within present day Aboriginal communities is a consequence of European colonisation, that traditional Aboriginal societies allowed women far more autonomy, independence and influence, and that that female autonomy has been eroded by the cultural imperialism of white Australia. There is a great deal of evidence to support that argument (Hamilton, 1975; Hamilton, 1981; Grimshaw, 1981; Bell, 1983; Bell, 1987). But traditional Aboriginal society no longer exists uninfluenced by European imperialism. Many Aboriginal people are generations away from traditional society. Even among the desert people who have retained their languages, spiritual life and connections to the land despite the depredations of European settlement, government, policies and practices, those very depredations have irrevocably changed Aboriginal society. The worst evils of male dominance may indeed have been imposed on Aboriginal people by European imperialism. But that makes feminism, and its championing of the cause of women, more relevant to Aboriginal women, not less. As Aboriginal activist Marcia Langton pointed out recently:

without the concerted effort of feminists to raise the issue of domestic violence over the past two or more decades, Aboriginal women would face a grim future ... In my view, the determining character of the imbalance in gender relationships is the ability of men to use force, in the last analysis, to preserve male dominance in ideology, in structures and in relationships (Langton, 1989).

Hence, feminism is relevant to Aboriginal women, because Aboriginal women, like women everywhere, suffer under the régime which is male domination.

Other misinterpretations of feminism involve characterising feminism in terms of mutually antagonistic categories of women. (For other implications of defining feminism in terms of ‘women’, see chapter four, the section on ‘Women’). One author who characterises feminism in terms of ‘women’ is bell hooks. She defines feminism as ‘the struggle to end sexist oppression’ (hooks, 1984; hooks, 1990; hooks, 1991), but as hooks uses it, the term does not refer to the social system of male domination. Hooks’ account does not focus on the sex whose interests are maintained by ‘sexist oppression’, the sex which benefits from permission to oppress women. Rather, the ‘sex’ referred to by hooks’ concept of ‘sexist oppression’ is the female sex. Her concept refers to any oppression suffered by women:

By repudiating the popular notion that the focus of feminist movement should be social equality of the sexes and emphasizing eradicating the cultural basis of group oppression, our own analysis would require an exploration of all aspects of women’s political reality. This would mean that race and class oppression would be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism ... When feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women’s social and political reality, it centralizes the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movements (hooks, 1984: 25).

This focus on categories of the oppressed among women allows hooks to situate her account in terms of hierarchies of oppression among women, and to construe feminist politics largely as a struggle between the antagonistic interests of mutually exclusive categories of women, irrevocably divided along race lines. But while it is true that women are divided, and that some women are more, and some women less, privileged than others, it is questionable whether hooks’ schema allows the undoubted disparities between women to be identified, because she relies on a dubious account of feminism. She interprets as a variety of ‘feminism’, espoused by women she refers to as ‘white bourgeois women’, what she characterises as a movement for equality with men, as a lifestyle, and as an individualistic ‘anything goes’ demand to improve the lot of women who are already relatively advantaged. But this formulation is not feminism. Although these are positions which have been argued in the name of ‘feminism’, and as such they

are open to criticism, they are not, however, forms of feminism, but failures of feminist insight. If feminism is seen as the struggle for women to take control of their own lives at no one's expense, especially not at the expense of other women, it becomes obvious that equality between the sexes cannot be the primary aim of feminism as long as men themselves remain unequal. This aim is not in women's interests, since its achievement would result in establishing the same hierarchies of status and privilege among women as already exist among men, an insight which is partly expressed in the early feminist slogan: 'Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition'.

Hooks' arguments against such positions are not new, and to the extent that feminism has already identified the problems, her arguments are not relevant to a critique of feminism. That supposedly privileged form of 'feminism' which hooks so valiantly demolishes is a chimera. And yet her argument depends on it if she is to assert something more than the simple fact that women differ along racial, cultural and ethnic lines. It is not the fact of racial difference which is the problem, but of systematic meanings and values, attitudes and behaviours of racism which privilege some women at the expense of other women. This is what hooks is trying to identify with her construction of 'white, middle-class feminism'. But if what she describes is demonstrably not feminism, all that remains is the fact of race differences, and 'white' women become racist by mere fact of being 'white'. Since no one can do anything about being 'white', no one can do anything, and the result is political paralysis. If, on the other hand, hooks had identified examples of racist behaviour and attitudes on the part of feminists, or racist aspects of feminist discourse, then there would be a possibility of active political engagement with the issues. Since she did not do this, her case against feminism must remain unproven.

Hooks' own characterisation of feminism as 'the struggle against sexist oppression' does not improve matters because it involves an unacknowledged and unresolved contradiction. It abolishes the distinctions between sex, race and class which she herself wants to maintain. As any form of oppression suffered by women, sex, race and class are all defined in terms of one category of the oppressed, 'women'. At the same time, she wants to maintain that they are distinct forms of oppression because not all women are subjected to all three. She frequently refers to 'white bourgeois women' who not only do not suffer race and class oppression, but who oppress other women on those

very grounds. While 'white bourgeois women' are subjected to 'sexism', in the case of race and class oppression they are themselves the oppressors, according to hooks. She manages the contradiction between retaining the distinctions and abolishing them by ignoring the male supremacist aspects of race and class oppression. But not only does the concept of 'sexist oppression' as hooks defines it have unfortunate consequences for feminist politics because it locates hierarchies of oppression and domination only among women, its contradictory nature makes it inadequate for any other form of politics as well. It cannot be used to designate the form of oppression peculiar to women because it refers to different forms of oppression among women; and it cannot be used to designate those different forms, e.g. race, because it does not name them. Naming feminism's chief antagonist as 'sexist oppression' would be a move in the right direction, if the referent of this form of oppression were confined to sex, and if the sex which is dominant were clearly identified. But it merely confuses the issue to include race and class under the heading of 'sexism'.

Hooks' account of feminism not only does not advance the feminist enterprise, it actively discourages it. By confining her analysis of domination to race and class hierarchies among women, she argues that the primary, if not the only, problem faced by US black feminists and feminists belonging to minority cultures is the racism of 'white, middle-class' feminists, and that male domination is not a problem in US minority cultures. She does recognise some manifestations of male domination within what she refers to as 'lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white'. She refers to the relative privilege of the men of those groups in comparison with the women, and to 'exaggerated expressions of male chauvinism' on the part of black men. But she attributes those 'exaggerated expressions' to 'the male's sense of himself as powerless and ineffectual in relation to ruling male groups, rather than an expression of an overall privileged social status' (hooks, 1984: 18). While this is certainly true, she does not show any awareness of the possibility that this raises questions about black men's complicity with the meanings and values of (white male) masculinity. Neither does she ask why these men should take out their rage and frustration (if that is the import of the phrase 'exaggerated expressions') on women who are even more powerless than the men themselves, and who are certainly not responsible for the men's powerlessness. In hooks' account, the oppressor is neither men nor male domination, because in her view such an identification is simplistic and

individualistic. It might indeed be simplistic to assert no more than that ‘men are the enemy’, since women too can despise women, treat women with contempt, and uphold the male as the ‘human’ norm. But challenging ‘male supremacy and the ideology of sexism’ is no more ‘individualistic’ (hooks, 1984: 25), than challenging white supremacy or capitalism. This refusal to name male domination rules out the possibility of asking questions about the complicity of black men with the meanings and values of male supremacy, a complicity which works to the disadvantage of women, including black women. And it confines ‘feminism’ to struggles between women, struggles which are irresolvable to the extent that they are identified in terms of a personal characteristic, i.e. ‘white’, which is not moral and political because no one can do anything to change it. This does not mean that racism is irrelevant to the feminist struggle. On the contrary, pursuing the feminist aim of a human status for women at no one’s expense requires a constant readiness on the part of all feminists to refuse to be implicated in racist meanings and values. But that cannot happen unless it is possible to identify what counts as racism and what does not.

Chief among the consequences of defining feminism solely in terms of ‘women’ in the context of the ‘race’ debate, has been the dichotomous dividing of women into ‘white’ and ‘other’, with all the responsibilities, obligations, and more importantly the power, located on the ‘white’ side of the dichotomy. This is not surprising. Once the problematic of male domination has dropped out of the picture, and feminism has been defined solely in terms of women, racism becomes nothing but a form of domination among women; and to the extent that racism originates under historical conditions of white supremacy,<sup>20</sup> the women in the dominant position are those identified as ‘white’. The problem is that the analysis stops there.

One example of this occurs in the Introduction to *Common Differences* by Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis. The authors designate something they call ‘the White women’s movement’ which, they say, ‘has had its own explicit form of racism in the way it has given high priority to certain aspects of struggles and neglected others, and it has often been blind and ignorant about the conditions of [US] Black women’s lives’ (Joseph and Lewis, 1981: 4). They do not identify this ‘White women’s movement’ any further.

---

20. Racism does not always take the form of white supremacy, although it always involves domination and subordination. The racism of Japanese society, for example, is not directed against Koreans or the indigenous people, the Ainu, because they are not white, but because they are not Japanese. Even in the West there are forms of racism, e.g. anti-semitism, which are not white supremacist.



They do not tell us which struggles have been given priority in which feminist writings or practices, nor which aspects have been neglected. Instead, they go on to tell us that the movement was ‘bound’ to emphasise some things and ignore others, because it was started by women who experienced ‘specific White realities’. But this is by no means self-evident, largely because it is not clear what this means. If we look at the issues raised by feminism, rape and other forms of male violence, for example, or women’s access to a living wage, or control over our own reproductive capacities, or freedom from male imposition and constraint, it is not at all obvious that these are only ‘White realities’. Neither do we know whether feminism was ‘started’ by ‘white women’, or even if the idea of feminism being ‘started’ by anyone makes any sense, given the long and varied history of women’s resistance to male power, a history which has not always been written down, but which must have existed because male domination is nowhere absolute. But the authors do not address any of these questions. Once they have labelled feminism, even in part, as the ‘white women’s movement’, its ‘racism’ appears as a kind of logical necessity. On this account, the ‘white women’s movement’ was inevitably and inescapably racist because it was ‘white’. The authors do acknowledge that ‘women’s liberation did and does touch on questions which in different ways affect *all* women’s lives—and men’s lives too’ (emphasis in the original), i.e. that women’s liberation is not only ‘white’. But if it is not only ‘white’, then its supposed ‘racism’ cannot be the result of being concerned only with ‘white’ women. There must be other reasons why feminism, or the ‘white’ aspects of it, is ‘racist’. But the authors do not give us any other reasons, or at least, no other reason which makes any sense. They do give us one other reason, and that is that ‘the movement did not begin with women who had some all-encompassing political and historical knowledge’ (p.4). But in that case, they are blaming feminism, or that aspect of it they designate ‘the White women’s movement’, for not doing the impossible, for not having ‘some all-encompassing political and historical knowledge’. The original question, however, remains unanswered: if the women’s movement is racist in some ways and not in others, then it is important to be explicit about the differences if there is to be any progress made towards eliminating racism. And being explicit requires that assertions be substantiated so that they can be argued out and evaluated.

But it cannot be the case that racism is nothing but an aspect of being ‘white’. In the first place, racism is a moral issue. It involves attitudes and behaviours about which

people have choices. It is possible to refuse to be implicated in racism, and those who are complicit with racism can be held responsible. And in the second place, racism is a manifestation of the social system of white supremacy which purveys 'white' as the criteria of 'human' status. As such, its meanings and values insidiously influence the choices, decisions and world views, not only of those who qualify for the benefits and privileges of being white, but also of those it most oppresses. As a consequence, it cannot be assumed that the social system of white supremacy has no influence on those who are not white. It is certainly true that negative attitudes towards whites on the part of, say, Aboriginal people cannot be called 'racist', even when those attitudes explicitly refer to race. Because the system of domination is white supremacy, blacks cannot be 'racist' towards whites. In white supremacist terms, 'white' is always the reference point of highest value against which other racial groups are measured and found wanting, and it occupies that supreme position by virtue of being not a 'race' at all, but a signifier of the 'universal human'. But because white supremacy is a social system of meanings and values, complicity can be found even among those most oppressed by the system. Like any system of domination, it operates through the inculcation of self-hatred and self-depreciation among the oppressed, as well as through blatant imposition.

For example, in her study of the writings of a number of US Afro-American women, Mary Helen Washington discussed what she had found was 'a persistent and revealing theme in the lives and literature of Black women'. She called this theme 'the intimidation of color'. By this she meant the harsh judgements made, sometimes by black women about themselves, sometimes by both women and men about other black women, judgements which made invidious comparisons between black skin and Afro hair on the one hand, and white standards of beauty on the other. She quoted from the Introduction to a volume of short stories by Afro-American women, *Black-Eyed Susans*, in which the author wrote: 'In almost every novel or autobiography written by a black woman, there is at least one incident in which the dark-skinned girl wishes to be either white or light-skinned with "good" hair' (Washington, 1982: 210). Such attitudes cannot strictly speaking be called 'racist', since racism involves attitudes and behaviours on the part of members of the dominant group imposed on those judged 'inferior'. The point at issue here is that they are not separate from racism, they too are part of the social system of white supremacy which needs to be challenged by a feminism committed to women's interests, as indeed they have been, particularly in the

writings of US Afro-American women. In another paper, 'A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood', Michele Wallace narrates what happened when, at the age of thirteen, she went to school one day with her hair openly displayed in a Afro, instead of being hidden in braids disguised in a long flowing scarf. She said that black men on street corners 'began to whoop and holler' at her. When she asked someone why, she was told: "They think you're a whore, sugar" (Wallace, 1982: 5-6). This experience of Wallace's illustrates the intertwining of white supremacy with male supremacy. The black men, debarred from 'fully human' status themselves by the system of white supremacy, could still embrace the values of that system by judging black women according to white male supremacist criteria. That is the way systems of domination operate, by endlessly conveying the interests of the dominators as the interests of all.

A further problem with the 'white/other' dichotomy among women is the attribution of an unrealistic level of power to those women identified as 'white'. For example, Barbara Omolade held women she designated as 'white, middle- and upper-class' responsible for preventing US black women from speaking:

The question of ... why [US] black women have not joined the women's movement in large numbers and have been generally hostile to feminism ... has been raised ... by white feminists in order to develop better ways to recruit black women into their movement ... In discussing this issue, there is a need to put aside the narrow and limited confines of feminism as defined and dominated by mainly middle- and upper-class white women to reach a broader analysis that could include the experiences of all women under white male domination ... white feminists ... have objectively excluded [women of color] from equal participation in the women's movement ... the racism of white women will not allow them to give us the right to speak on our own behalf (Omolade, 1980: 247, 256).

But Omolade herself admitted that 'white feminists' had at least attempted 'to recruit' black women. Perhaps those attempts at 'recruitment' *were* attempts 'to reach a broader analysis' and include women of colour within feminism. In the absence of any account of what those methods of 'recruitment' were, we cannot know how or why they failed. But putting it in terms of 'recruitment' attributes an unrealistic level of power to those

‘middle- and upper-class white women’. It implies that these women have the power to monopolise feminism as their own private property, to invite other women in or refuse them admission. It characterises those who are not ‘white’ as passive-aggressive supplicants who can only demand concessions, and who have no power to create feminism themselves because feminism belongs to someone else and hence is something other than their own conviction. But that has never been the case. Perhaps what she was talking about was access to resources like academic credibility, respectability and employment, publishing, invitations to speak, etc. And it is true that not all feminists, not even all feminists who want to write, speak and publish, have access to these resources. But if this was her point, it was not entirely accurate. Even at the time she was writing (1980), US black women (the ‘we’ of her text) had been writing and publishing within feminism for at least ten years (e.g.: Ware, 1970; Beal, 1970[1969]; Norton, 1970; Black Women’s Liberation Group; 1970; Kennedy, 1970), and presumably they were doing so out of their own feminist insights.

Or to take another example: In a recent paper called ‘Sexism, Racism and Canadian Nationalism’, Roxana Ng said, ‘Working in the women’s movement ... women of colour ... feel silenced from time to time. Our unique experiences as women of colour are frequently overlooked in discussions about women’s oppression’ (Ng, 1993: 197). Ng does not identify any agents of this silencing and overlooking. She leaves it at the level of feeling and experience without saying what it might be that leads to women of colour to feel this way. Given the prevalence of the problem I have called ‘academic feminism’, women of colour are not alone in feelings of alienation and irrelevance in relation to much of what is published as ‘feminism’. The solution, however, does not lie in somehow making one’s feelings known (to whom?). Nor does it lie in vague references to unspecified experiences. The solution to the problem of a self-styled ‘feminism’ which is either incomprehensible or actively hostile to what many of us know as feminism, lies in feminists taking responsibility for feminism, for its significance for and relevance to our own lives, for what we will accept as feminism and what we will not, for contesting and debating its meaning, for continuing to struggle for access to resources. Feminism is never located somewhere else apart from the speaker’s own position. It is not something other than the speaker’s own political engagement. It is not the prerogative of any particular category of women with the power to invite or exclude other women. It is a political and moral struggle available to

anyone. If a woman of colour engages in that struggle, then that is where feminism is, wherever else it may be as well. As Alice Walker put it:

There was never a time when Our Mother [i.e. herself] thought, when someone spoke of “the women’s movement”, that this referred only to the women’s movement in America. When she thought of women moving, she automatically thought of women all over the world. She recognized that to contemplate the women’s movement in isolation from the rest of the world would be—given the racism, sexism, elitism, and ignorance of so many American feminists—extremely defeating to solidarity among women as well as depressing to the most optimistic spirit. Our Mother had travelled and had every reason to understand that women’s freedom was an idea whose time had come, and that it was an idea sweeping the world (Walker, 1982: 41).

### ***What Does It Mean To Call Feminism ‘White and Middle-Class’?***

At first sight, it seems that the meaning of the statement that feminism is ‘white and middle-class’ is obvious. It means that feminism (or aspects of it) is preoccupied with the interests of women who are white, middle-class and Western, that is, of women who are relatively privileged in relation to other women. It means that feminism excludes, or is irrelevant to, women who are not white, middle-class or Western, women who identify themselves as black women, women of colour, indigenous women, third world women, or (in the Australian context) Aboriginal women or women of non-English-speaking backgrounds. It also means, in some versions (e.g. Mohanty, 1988), that feminism is complicit with Western imperialism, and that white feminists in the West impose on other women the same kinds of frameworks as the male dominated Western imperialism imposes on the rest of the world. It says that feminism belongs to one particular category of women, to the exclusion of women who do not belong within that category. This implies that feminism consists of organised groups with criteria of membership, ways of distinguishing members from non-members, etc., and which includes some but not others. It also implies that feminism is some kind of scarce

resource or commodity which can be monopolised by particular groups of women at the expense of other women.<sup>21</sup>

It is also presumably a generalisation referring to instances like those described by Alice Walker in her paper, 'One Child of One's Own', in the anthology, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Hull, Scott and Smith, eds., 1982).<sup>22</sup> In this paper, Walker gave three examples of what might be referred to as white, middle-class bias on the part of feminists. The first example involved Patricia Meyer Spacks' book, *The Female Imagination*. Spacks herself acknowledged that her research was confined to writings by 'white, middle-class' women, because, she said, she was reluctant to theorise about experiences she hadn't had. But, as Walker pointed out, this was an inadequate excuse for excluding writings by US black women, since Spacks included the Brontës although she had no experience of nineteenth-century Yorkshire either. But the problem with Spacks' book went further than this. Not only did she fail to include writings by black women, she did so in the face of a golden opportunity to expand her own 'female imagination'. At the time she was writing the book, she was sharing an office with Alice Walker who was teaching a course on 'Black women writers', and who was prepared to share the fruits of her own research with Spacks. Walker's second example involved Judy Chicago's exhibition, *The Dinner Party*, which included only one plate referring to black women, the one devoted to Sojourner Truth. Walker's objection was not just to the tokenism of including only a single example. It was also directed to the kind of example it was. Although all the other plates depicted stylised vaginas, the Sojourner Truth plate did not. Instead, it depicted three faces, one weeping, one screaming and one smiling. Walker commented that, although there is something to be said for depicting women in terms of faces rather than vaginas, that was not what the exhibition was about, and the faces were nothing but tired old clichés about black women. Walker's third example

---

21. It also implies that feminism is confined to women to the exclusion of men. But the feminist strategy of separatism is not intended to exclude men from understanding feminism and learning from it, but rather to prevent men from dominating it. Moreover, given the extent to which male supremacist meanings and values have permeated much of the feminism authored by women, excluding men and confining feminism to women is obviously not sufficient to keep feminism focused on a critique of male supremacy. The much debated question of whether or not men can be feminists is the wrong question, as is the question of who among women is or is not a feminist. Both questions only make sense within an ideology of individualism which reduces feminism to a matter of personal identity.

22. This anthology, with the delightfully accurate title, is not one of the texts I am criticising in this chapter. Although it focuses exclusively on 'women', its manifest purpose of rectifying the exclusion of US Afro-American women from US history and society situates it firmly in the honourable feminist tradition of insisting that women are human too.

involved a brief interchange at an exhibition of women painters at the Brooklyn museum. In response to one woman's question about whether there were any black women painters represented, another woman replied: 'It's a *women's* exhibit!'

These are undoubtedly instances of racism, of the way in which white US society ignores the existence of such a large and important part of its population. They are the kinds of things that a feminist politics needs to be alert for, and to resist. But it is not helpful to refer to such examples as instances of feminism. Rather, they are *failures* of feminist insight, not exemplars of it. That is not, however, the way in which the 'white, middle-class' debate is couched. Instead, instances like those above are seen as a part of feminism itself, rather than as examples of the meanings and values feminism is struggling against. While Alice Walker herself does not interpret them in this way, there are many feminist writers who do.

On too many occasions where attempts are made to demonstrate the 'white, middle-class' or 'racist' nature of feminism, the demonstration fails because of lack of evidence, inadequate argument, or terminological confusion. For example, in the Introduction to the anthology, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson says: 'From the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, feminist theory exhibited a recurrent pattern: Its analyses tended to reflect the viewpoints of white, middle-class women of North America and Western Europe' (Nicholson, ed., 1990: 1). By this she means that, as she says later, 'aspects of modern Western culture were postulated as present in all or most of human history' and in cultures other than the West (p.6). The reason Nicholson gives for what she sees as the 'white, middle-class' emphasis of feminist theory is not the obvious one. She does not argue that feminist theory reflected the viewpoints of 'white, middle-class' women because it was written by 'white, middle-class' women in defence of their 'white, middle-class' interests. Rather, she goes on to discuss a version of the 'false universalism' charge. But with this move to 'false universalism', the ground of the accusation has shifted. The question of the 'white, middle-class' nature of feminism has dropped out of the account, and feminism is now being accused of inappropriately generalising from one culture (which Nicholson later calls 'modern Western') to other, different cultures. With this shift of focus, even feminists who do not qualify as 'white' and/or 'middle-class' within 'modern Western' culture could imperialise the situations of women of other cultures. (See: Washington, 1985, for an acknowledgement of the

inappropriateness of referring to US black women as ‘Third World women’). The problem being identified here is that of Western cultural imperialism, and the question being addressed would be more accurately couched in terms of the extent to which feminism is peculiar to ‘the West’. Nicholson does not address this question. The problem with social generalisations which emanate from the West, and in particular from the USA, is domination. It is not the case that just any ‘specific cultural and historical context’ is randomly and inappropriately applied to any other, but that hegemonic frameworks serving the vested interests of the powerful are imposed on those who have no right to be heard. It may be that this was what Nicholson was attempting to suggest with her categories of ‘white’ and ‘middle-class’. But she failed to spell out what these categories involve, and hence she failed, too, to substantiate her assertion about the elitist and racist nature of (some aspects of) feminism.

Nicholson does provide some examples of those feminist writings which she regards as implicated in ‘false universalising’. But her arguments against them do not survive close examination, not surprisingly, given the basic incoherence of the concept of ‘false universalism’. (See chapter three). One text she discusses is Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*. Firestone was among those who had, she said, a ‘too casual’ approach to history (Nicholson, 1990: 5). Arguments like Firestone’s, Nicholson said, are ‘essentialist’, because ‘they project onto all women and men qualities which develop under historically specific conditions’ (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990: 28). Firestone’s ‘appeal to biological differences between women and men’ did not allow for the way these differences vary across cultures and throughout history (Nicholson, 1990: 5), and hence ‘falsely universalised’ Western cultural values. But this is a decidedly peculiar argument, for two reasons. In the first place, the ‘biological difference’ which Firestone was addressing was childbirth. The fact that females give birth and males do not is not a ‘false universal’, but a true one. Childbirth is not a Western cultural value, but something common to the whole human species. In the second place, although Nicholson is quite right to point out the falsity of Firestone’s argument, she does so for the wrong reasons. It is true that, as Nicholson says, childbirth is not the cause of women’s oppression, as Firestone argued it was. But what is wrong with Firestone’s argument is not that she ‘falsely universalises’ childbirth as a biological difference between the sexes—it is, after all, universal. What is wrong about Firestone’s argument is wrong for *any* cultural context, including her own. She perceived pregnancy and



childbirth as inherently oppressive of women, and hence could only recommend that they be abolished by technological means. She did not see that their oppressiveness to women was a consequence of their happening under conditions of male domination, and that they could be a source of joy and excitement if women had control over the conditions under which they got pregnant and gave birth. Hence, the problem with Firestone's argument was not that she made inappropriate generalisations from her own culture to other cultures; the problem was that it was false for her own culture as well. Childbirth is not inherently oppressive, even in the West. And neither is women's lack of control over the conditions under which they get pregnant and give birth peculiar to the West. Nor does the issue of women's taking control over their own bodies and reproductive capacities have relevance only for 'white, middle-class' women.

Other examples Nicholson gives of 'essentialist' and 'historically casual' feminist attempts to locate the cause of women's oppression are:

the postulation by many influential feminist anthropologists in the 1970s of a cross-cultural domestic/public separation, ... later appeals in the late 1970s and early 1980s to women's labor, to women's sexuality, and to women's primary responsibility for childbearing [sic—Does she mean *childrearing*? How can women not have responsibility for *childbearing*?]. In all of these cases, aspects of modern Western culture were postulated as present in all or most of human history (Nicholson, 1990: 5-6).

It is true that 'cross-cultural' generalisations are suspect, not, however, because they are 'essentialist' or 'ahistorical', but because they are imperialistic. Anthropology is a framework originating in Western colonialism. The speaking position of the anthropologist reflects that origin, as do 'cross-cultural' comparisons, which are unidirectional, imposed *from* the West upon other (more or less) 'primitive' cultures without reciprocity.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to imagine, for example, the Trobriand Islanders studied by Bronislaw Malinowski, studying in their turn British social mores and customs. Or a group from the highlands of Papua New Guinea studying, say, the

---

23. To say as much is not to suggest that individual anthropologists are inevitably complicit with Western imperialism. There are many anthropologists who devote the whole of their working lives to providing for the people they live with and work among access to Western resources the people would not otherwise have had.

denizens of the highlands of Scotland. Or the Kmer people of Cambodia studying the tribal arrangements of the citizens of the US.

But Nicholson's account is too scanty to count as evidence for the grand generalisation about the 'white, middle-class' nature of feminist theory with which she began. She does not tell us which aspects of 'women's labour' and 'women's sexuality' are 'white' and 'middle-class', and which are not. Neither does she tell us what is peculiarly 'white' and 'middle-class' about the 'domestic/public separation'. Even women who are not 'white' or 'middle-class' have to struggle with the conflicting demands of paid work in the public sphere and unpaid work in the domestic sphere, of dependence on a male wage, or lack of access to one. And given the world-wide domination of Western economic and cultural imperialism, a critique of Western values, institutions and practices is not entirely irrelevant to the 'Third World'. (For critiques of the massive destruction, amounting to nothing less than cultural and physical extermination, visited on the 'Third World' by the economic policies of the West, aided and abetted by the economic elites of the 'Third World', see: Waring, 1988; George, 1990[1984]; George, 1990).

Another of Nicholson's examples concerns the work of 'writers such as Chodorow'. On this occasion she says that 'the categories that they employ, such as mothering, are not situated within a specific cultural and historical context'. But this assertion is absurd. Categories, as linguistic entities, cannot avoid being culturally and historically specific, whether that specificity is spelled out or not. Problems arise if generalisations made to fit one cultural and historical context are inappropriately and imperialistically applied to another. Whether or not Chodorow did this, is not entirely clear. Sometimes she limited the scope of her generalisations to 'our society', 'the Western family', 'capitalist industrialization', 'the contemporary reproduction of mothering', and sometimes she referred to 'all societies', 'transhistorical facts', etc. But even if she did overgeneralise from her own historical situation, merely pointing that out does not falsify her entire thesis. (See: Yeatman, 1990: 291, for a similar argument). If inappropriate generalisation is a problem in Chodorow's work, that can be countered by citing occasions and situations where the generalisations do not apply. This Nicholson did not do. And by focusing attention on the postmodernist fantasy of 'essentialism', she avoided addressing the very real problems with Chodorow's work—her insistence that

women's mothering is responsible for male domination, and her failure to recognise the centrality of the penis-as-phallus in the inculcation of the meanings, values, beliefs and practices of male supremacy. Instead we are presented with an array of 'postmodernist' mantras—'essentialism', 'totalisation', 'universalisation', 'ahistorical', 'transcendent reason', 'rhetoric', 'desire', 'identity', 'difference', 'modernity' and, most obfuscating of all, 'gender'.

Another example of a less than successful attempt to demonstrate the 'racism' of a particular feminist text concerns Audre Lorde's criticisms of Mary Daly's book, *Gyn/Ecology*. In 'An Open Letter to Mary Daly' (Lorde, 1979b), Lorde has two main objections to Daly's book. Firstly, she criticises Daly for portraying only 'white, western-european, judeo-christian ... goddess-images' and for ignoring images of powerful and divine women from Africa. Daly, said Lorde, 'dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women' (pp.67-8). But my own reading of Daly's references to goddesses in *Gyn/Ecology* is that her purpose was not to present a feminist mythology within which women could find images of female strength and divinity, but rather to criticise and expose the ways in which Western European patriarchal religion and mythology had co-opted and distorted the goddess-worship which preceded it. On that interpretation, Daly's confining of the discussion to Europe was intrinsic to her purpose.<sup>24</sup> As well, Daly's discussion of goddesses did not portray them as figures of female strength and divinity, since she saw them as already containing elements of male supremacist distortion. For Daly they hardly provided unambiguous role models for women to emulate or look up to, since they were already characterisations of male supremacist purposes and values.

Lorde's second objection was that Mary Daly depicted non-European women only 'as victims and preyers-upon each other' (p.67). But to the extent that this is a problem, it is one which is common to feminism in general. How is it possible to speak about the atrocities committed against women, while at the same time asserting women's strength? Besides, Daly did not confine her depiction of women's victimisation to other cultures—most of the second part of her book is devoted to Western Europe, to the witchcrazes and modern Western medical practices.

---

24. Mary Daly made the same point in her autobiography, *Outercourse*, where she said that she had pointed out in a conversation with Audre Lorde that *Gyn/Ecology* was not 'a compendium of goddesses', but was intended as a discussion of 'those goddesses which were direct sources of christian myth' (Daly, 1993: 232).

The basis of Lorde's complaint that Daly's text was complicit with racism is not clear. If the reason for that complaint was that the text was not even-handed, it rests on a misinterpretation of the text. Daly did not, it is true, portray any 'black foremothers', 'black women's heritage' or images of 'noneuropean female strength and power'. But neither did she portray any images of *European* female strength and power. It has never been Mary Daly's purpose to provide historical examples of female strength and power, because for her, history is invariably patriarchal. For Daly, women's strength starts now, with radical feminism, and with women's complete separation from patriarchal institutions, meanings and values. Whatever criticisms might be leveled against the possibility of that project, it is in principle available to all women without exception. Lorde's second objection to Daly's text—that it depicted women of 'other cultures' only as victims—is also a misinterpretation of Daly's project, although even in the misinterpretation it is even-handed. All women are victims of patriarchal practices (if that is the way it must be interpreted). But Daly's critique was not primarily a depiction of women at all, but an exposure of the workings of male supremacy. Women are its chief (although not the only) victims because male supremacy thrives at women's expense. But to demand that women, any women, not be portrayed as victims is to demand that the critique of male supremacy cease.

*Gyn/Ecology* has, however, been subjected to other criticisms on the grounds of its racism. In an article published in the lesbian journal, *Sinister Wisdom*, Elly Bulkin criticised Daly's selective quotation from two of the texts she used in her research (Bulkin, 1980). Bulkin argued that Daly discussed the first of these books, Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, published in 1927, only in favourable terms, while ignoring its racism. Bulkin illustrated this racism with excerpts from Mayo's book. Mayo depicted 'the Indian' in terms of "inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigor itself", and characterised 'the Hindu's woes, material and spiritual' in terms of 'poverty, sickness, ignorance, political minority, melancholy, ineffectiveness, not forgetting that subconscious conviction of inferiority which he forever bares and advertises by his gnawing and imaginative alertness to social affronts'. She also described Indian men as "broken-nerved, low-spirited, petulant ancients", in comparison with "the Anglo-Saxon" of the same age, who "is just coming into the full glory of manhood". She also said that Indians would never be free of British rule

because ““their hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or hold the reins of government”” (Bulkin, 1980: 125-6).

These descriptions are undoubtedly racist, and it is true that Daly did not mention them in her discussion of Mayo’s text. But Daly’s omission can be defended, at least in part, in light of the reason why Mayo was so scathingly contemptuous of Indian men. That reason was the entrenched practice within the Indian higher castes of marrying young girls to much older men. Mayo’s argument was that men who had been mothered by children would never be fit to rule. Her intemperate racist language was a consequence of her horror at the cruelties which marital rape visited on the often very small girl children: ““Aged 9. Day after marriage. Left femur dislocated, pelvis crushed out of shape, flesh hanging in shreds””, etc. (Daly, 1978: 121). She was also outraged that widows were forced to throw themselves, or were forcibly thrown, onto their husbands’ funeral pyres. The racism of her text was directed towards men who treated women and girl children abominably. While that does not excuse it—her outrage could have been expressed in other ways, and racism is also abominable—it does make it more understandable. Her argument can also be criticised on other grounds, for example, her implicit belief that men mothered by adult women *are* fit to rule; her lack of awareness that high caste male children were unlikely to have been cared for by their child mothers, but by adult female servants (for a similar argument to Mayo’s, in relation to the British ruling class and its custom of ‘the Nanny’, see: Gathorne-Hardy, 1972); and her lack of awareness that the rape of female children is not confined to the Indian subcontinent. Nonetheless, what must not be forgotten in any criticism of Mayo’s work is her exposure of what are atrocities under any definition, not only a feminist one. It must also not be forgotten that she was fighting in the interests of women, for a world where such things as the mutilation and casual murder of girl children and the enforced immolation of women would not exist. The racism in Mayo’s text was directed towards the very men who were responsible for the suffering. Challenging the racism would mean defending the men who systematically raped and murdered women and children. It is not uncommon in the feminist ‘race’ debate, to find that challenging racism means defending the men of the subordinated race (e.g. Spelman, 1988), rather than black or third world or indigenous women whose interests are once again elided in favour of men. That Mary Daly refused or neglected to do this is not altogether to her discredit.

Bulkin does, however, make a more cogent point in relation to her discussion of another text cited by Mary Daly, G. J. Barker-Benfield's *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women in Nineteenth Century America*, published in 1976. Daly used this text as a source of information about the career of J. Marion Simms, known in the US at the time of his death in 1883 as 'the father of gynecology'. Daly quite rightly points out that Simms was a brutal butcher who perpetrated the most appalling tortures on women in the guise of 'science', and who was honoured by the male medical establishment for doing so. But as Bulkin points out, although Daly does acknowledge that Simms originally learned his vile trade on the bodies of black female slaves, that acknowledgment is cursory. And yet Barker-Benfield's text describes Simms' experiments on black women in some detail, along with Simms' own admission that he used black women, some of whom he bought for the purpose, because as slaves they had no power to refuse and no right of redress. If Daly's purpose was to expose the worst excesses of male brutality towards women, her failure to present her readers with an account of what Simms did to black women looks suspiciously like complicity with the racist belief that what happens to black women is unimportant. The same suspicion arises in relation to Daly's discussion of the experimental use on women of contraceptive technology. She allows that 'low-income and nonwhite' women are 'victimized in a special way', but she says no more about this, and immediately proceeds to discuss 'well-educated (miseducated) upper-middle-class women'. While her discussion is apt and to the point, in failing to discuss what was done to black and third world women, she once again passed up an opportunity to expose some of the most chilling aspects of gynocide (Bulkin, 1980: 126-7; Daly, 1978: 225-7, 259). Perhaps it is this kind of thing that Audre Lorde was alluding to in her criticisms of *Gyn/Ecology*. But unfortunately she did not say so.

Another example of a position which failed to substantiate arguments to the effect that feminism is, was or has been 'racist', concerns the paper by Hazel Carby already mentioned, 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' (Carby, 1982). In this paper, Carby asserted that 'most contemporary feminist theory does not begin to adequately account for the experience of black women'. She said that this inadequacy cannot be redressed by simply adding black women into already existing feminist theory. What was required, she said, was to 'challenge the use of some of the central categories and assumptions of recent mainstream feminist thought'

(p.213). She then proceeded to analyse three concepts which she identified as central to feminism—‘the family’, ‘patriarchy’ and ‘reproduction’—and argued that it was doubtful whether these concepts could be applied to the history of black women’s oppression and struggle (p.214).

It is not entirely clear why Carby chose these three categories in particular as central to feminism. Presumably they were designated as such in the type of feminism she was reading—all the texts she criticises are socialist feminist texts. The term ‘patriarchy’, in the sense of male domination, is arguably *the* central concept of feminism; but ‘the family’ and ‘reproduction’ (terms which could be taken to refer to the same social phenomenon) are not central at all unless they are identified as male dominant.

In the case of ‘the family’, Carby argued that it was not always oppressive for black women because the black family has often been the site of struggle against racial oppression. But although this might be true enough in relation to black resistance, it is beside the point. Black families could be both a site of resistance to racism, *and* be oppressive for women at one and the same time. When Carby herself acknowledges that ‘we would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us’, she has already conceded the whole of the feminist point about ‘the family’, and hence its relevance to the experiences of black women. She does not, however, acknowledge the reason for ‘the family’s’ oppressiveness to women, i.e. male domination. (Neither does the quotation she uses as an example of feminist theorising about ‘the family’, a passage from Michèle Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today*). Indeed, in her argument against the relevance of the concept of ‘dependency’ for black feminists, she denies the existence of male domination within black families where women are heads of households, and where women are not dependent on a male wage because of the high levels of black male unemployment. But male domination is not limited to the behaviour of individual men as husbands and fathers, and it is unlikely that black women are untouched by the effects of male domination such as male violence and poverty. Hence this is not an argument against the relevance of feminism to the experiences of black women, since the feminist exposure of male domination is not confined to families, black or white, and includes the recognition of the existence of hierarchies of domination among men. It was Carby’s failure to recognise that male

domination includes hierarchies among men which flawed her discussion of ‘patriarchy’ (discussed above).

She does make one point which appears to support her claim to identify racism within feminism. She says that some feminist writings portray the West as ‘more “enlightened” or “progressive”’ than the ‘Third World’, and the latter as ‘backward’. She provides two quotations from a paper by Maxine Molyneux, the second one of which does indeed appear to support Carby’s contention. That quotation reads:

There can be little doubt that on balance the position of women within imperialist, i.e. advanced capitalist societies is, for all its limitations, more advanced than in less developed capitalist and non-capitalist societies. In this sense the changes brought by imperialism to Third World societies may, in some circumstances, have been historically progressive (Carby, 1982: 217; Molyneux, 1981: 4).

Carby interprets this to mean that ‘since “Third World” women are outside of capitalist relations of production, entering capitalist relations is, necessarily, an emancipating move’ (Carby, 1982: 217). But this quotation omits Molyneux’s provisos and qualifications on this point. In the paper cited, Molyneux went on to acknowledge that ‘of course imperialism has also had negative consequences for women’. She said that capitalist employment conditions for women in the Third World ‘are often extremely oppressive—whether in urban sweat-shops, free-zone economies or rural plantations’. She said that ‘development programmes’ have often worsened women’s situations by eroding the respected statuses women had before colonisation, and by making use of existing forms of women’s subordination. And she deplored the growth of large-scale prostitution and sex tourism as consequences of Western imperialism (pp.4-5). Molyneux’s point was that the abolition of such traditional practices as ‘polygyny, the brideprice, child marriages, seclusion, and forms of mutilation such as footbinding or female “circumcision”’ (Molyneux, 1981: 3), could only advance the cause of women’s emancipation, whether that abolition was a consequence of imperialism or of the need for economic ‘development’ within Third World countries. She was also concerned to point out that, too often, such traditions were lauded in the name of ‘national authenticity’, while women’s own demands to be free from traditional constraints were dismissed as ‘foreign influences’ or an ‘imperialist plot’ (p.5).



Carby's discussion misinterpreted Molyneux's task. Molyneux did not subscribe to 'the assumption that it is only through the development of a Western-style industrial capitalism and the resultant entry of women into waged labour that the potential for the liberation of women can increase' (Carby, 1982: 222). On the contrary, she explicitly argued against that view. She referred to its 'economism and reductionism', and pointed out that it involved a failure 'either to problematize relations between the sexes or to acknowledge the differential effect of class relations on men and women'. Molyneux also pointed out that this failure was not a mere oversight on the part of 'socialist states', but the result of 'a quite conscious promotion of "motherhood" and of the idea of women as naturally suited to this role [of domestic labour and childcare] because of their supposed "spiritual, moral and physical needs"' (Molyneux, 1981: 9-11). Her task was to compare the record of *socialist* countries with their official stated policies on women's emancipation. In the case of the Third World, far from arguing for the 'progressiveness' of capitalist relations, Molyneux argued the exact opposite. 'Whatever the failures of socialist society', she said, 'it is evident that in the Third World its record is nonetheless impressive when matched against capitalist societies of comparable levels of development and religio-cultural background' (p.5). Molyneux did not argue that Third World countries were 'backward' in comparison with the 'progressive' West, as Carby said she did: 'Maxine Molyneux falls straight into this trap of "Third Worldism" as "backwardness" ... foot-binding, clitoridectomy, female "circumcision" and other forms of mutilation of the female body have been described as "feudal residues" ... linked in reductionist ways to a lack of technological development' (Carby, 1982: 216, 222). Although Molyneux used the term 'feudal residues' in the first of the passages quoted by Carby, Molyneux was herself quoting from what she referred to as 'official literature'. She was pointing out that this was the way traditional practices were characterised by 'Third World post-revolutionary states', when those practices were seen by the ruling parties in those states as 'an obstacle to economic and social development' (Molyneux, 1981: 4). She was not presenting this view as her own opinion, and hence Carby's arguments against it (pp.222, 227) are irrelevant as a critique of her position. Molyneux did not use the West or capitalism as the exemplar of progress. Her point of comparison was the historical past of those countries themselves. Her criterion of progress throughout the paper was the degree to which women had been emancipated within nation states which claimed to be working towards that goal. On the

feminist criterion of women's liberation, the abolition of cruelty and injustice towards women *is* progress, and it is unlikely to be only 'Western feminists' who are saying so.

There are feminist texts which obliterate the existence of women of racial, ethnic and cultural minorities. This obliteration, at least as it relates to US black women, is succinctly expressed in the title of an anthology of writings on Black Women's Studies, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men* (Hull, Scott and Smith, eds, 1982). But the problem is a consequence of ignoring the feminist insight that all 'human' categories are automatically male unless care is taken to focus attention on women. The problem is exemplified in two papers by Catharine Stimpson, dating from 1970 and 1971, and reprinted in 1988. The first paper, 'Black Culture/White Teacher', is an account of the political contradictions faced by a white teacher teaching black literature. With the benefit of hindsight gained since the paper was first published, Stimpson herself recognises that this text excludes black women writers. The paper, she says in the Introduction, 'makes grievous, ironic errors. Using the generic he, I write as if all black writers are male. This pronomial reductiveness erases black women writers and their daunting, renewing texts' (Stimpson, 1988: xv). She allowed the paper to be reprinted without amendment, however, and she did not comment on the second paper, although it compounds the errors of the first. This paper, "'Thy Neighbour's Wife, Thy Neighbour's Servants": Women's Liberation and Black Civil Rights', does sometimes mention black women. But unless they are mentioned explicitly, they drop out of the account altogether. For example, towards the end of the paper, Stimpson says: 'women [sic] use blacks to describe themselves'. She goes on to quote at some length from a women's liberation pamphlet which draws the analogy between 'women' and 'blacks' no less than eleven times: '1. Women, like black slaves, belong to a master ... 2. Women, like black slaves, have a personal relationship to the men who are their masters. 3. Women, like blacks, get their identity and status from white men ... 6. Women, like blacks, sustain the white man (etc.)'. Stimpson admits to liking this pamphlet, although she eventually disagrees with it. Her disagreement, however, is not because of its erasure of black women, but because it is parasitic on black politics. That women have been excluded from the category 'black', she does not appear to notice.

The problem is inextricably entwined with her main argument, which concerns the failure of black and women's groups to find common cause despite their common

enemy, 'white men and their culture'. The argument sets up two separate and symmetrical categories, 'women and blacks', which leave no place for those who live in both categories. The crucial error, for feminist purposes, of such arguments is their failure to apply the feminist insight into the male supremacist constitution of the male as the 'human' norm. All 'human' categories under male supremacist conditions are male, unless specifically stated otherwise, or 'marked', to use a linguistic term (Spender, 1987[1980]: 19-24). The category 'blacks', too, is male; here too, 'male' is the default option, the 'neutral' referent which switches in automatically, and which can be displaced only by adding extra qualifiers. It may be that it is this kind of exclusion of black women and women from other cultural minorities, that black feminists are referring to when they accuse 'white, middle-class women' of racism. But the error in Stimpson's paper, as with all such arguments, is due to a *failure* of feminist commitment, a failure to recognise the male supremacist implications of using any term referring to a category of human individuals without explicitly rectifying the exclusion of the female.

The charge that feminism is 'white and middle-class' or 'Western' needs to be carefully and critically examined. It needs to be subjected to the same scrutiny, open to the same public debate as anything else said in the name of feminism. I want to suggest that it not be merely routinely reiterated because it is so obvious it needs no discussion, or because it is so threatening it silences debate, or because the questions it raises are just too hard. For my own part, I have found the charge meaningless because it appears to rely on a view of feminism which I do not recognise. I say it 'appears' to rely on such a view, because I have not yet found any instance of the charge where what feminism means is made explicit. But as far as I have been able to establish, the charge relies on a view of feminism which makes no reference to male domination. Without the unifying politics of opposition to male supremacy, 'feminism' becomes nothing more than a multiplicity of sometimes antagonistic categories of 'women', who have nothing in common because some are more privileged than others. This is a 'feminism' of political stagnation.

### ***'Race, Class and Gender'***

The expectation that feminism should address all forms of oppression because all forms of oppression harm women is an important enterprise, but it is not clear from the debate

so far how it should be done. The usual form the debate takes involves attempts to combine different forms of oppression under the headings 'race, class and gender'. But this is unsatisfactory. Such attempts misrepresent the feminist project by excluding the problem of male domination from the outset. Calling the central concern of feminist politics 'gender' (e.g. Andersen and Collins, eds, 1992) ensures that male domination will not even be seen, much less challenged and addressed. But the categories are also unsatisfactory in their own terms. If 'race, class and gender' need to be combined, then they must have been separated out in the first place. The categories each have their own separate objects of knowledge—'race, class, gender'—their own separate forms of oppression—'racism, classism, sexism'—their own separate constituencies of the oppressed—'blacks (etc.), workers, women'—and their own forms of politics—'anti-racism, socialism,<sup>25</sup> feminism'. Once they have been separated in this symmetrical way, the categories have nothing in common, despite the fact that they are undoubtedly combined in people's lives.

This problem is a consequence of the politically neutral language within which the debate has been couched. The terms 'race, class and gender' have already deleted any reference to domination. No form of domination is acknowledged, however characterised (apart from passing, and increasingly rare, references to capitalism). There is no identifiable ruling class; the debate focuses exclusively on categories of the oppressed who are subjected to power relations which are never located in the vested interests of the powerful. If, in contrast, we enter the debate by recognising the existence of male supremacy in the first place, then it is possible to identify the social system of meanings and values by which domination is maintained. While it is important to delineate the ways in which domination is resisted and the human spirit survives under even the most degrading conditions, it is also important to clarify the nature of the system which oppresses. It might be argued that this problem of the neutralisation of political focus could equally well be addressed by entering the debate from the standpoint of resistance to capitalist domination or to white supremacy. But both these forms of politics suffer from the so-far insurmountable problem, from the feminist standpoint, of ignoring or subordinating the interests of women. It is only feminism, with its explicit acknowledgement of the ideological belief that only men are

---

25. Interestingly, socialism is rarely mentioned within the 'race, class, gender' categories debate as the politics which is specific to class. This omission indicates that constructing the categories in this way is as inadequate for class politics as it is for feminist and anti-racist politics.

‘human’, which promises to throw new light on those forms of domination which have traditionally focused only on the interests of men. Bringing feminist insights to bear on race and class domination keeps political attention focused on women, attention which is too easily diverted given the on-going reality of the male monopolisation of who counts as ‘human’. But it also promises to illuminate the phenomenon of domination more generally, in ways in which confining attention to the interests of men, no matter how justified, does not. The early radical feminist insight into the primacy of male domination provides a starting point for elucidating all forms of domination. (For further development of this point, see below).

One text which illustrates the problems with the ‘race, class and gender’ debate is Elizabeth Spelman’s *Inessential Woman*. This text has had a great deal of influence (if frequency of uncritical citation is any guide). It is a brave attempt to fill out the details of a feminist anti-racist position, which ultimately fails, however, largely because of its confusions about feminism. Typically, the book proceeds by way of a number of accusations that ‘dominant Western feminist thought has taken the experiences of white middle-class women to be representative of, indeed normative for, the experiences of all women’ (Spelman, 1988: ix), without providing any adequate argument or evidence. Spelman does discuss the work of a number of feminist theorists—Simone de Beauvoir, Nancy Chodorow, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, Mary Daly. But she gives us no concrete examples from these writings of what might count as ‘experiences of white, middle-class women’; nor does she tell us how these might differ from the experiences of those women who provide her main counter example, i.e. US black women. Her criticism is impaired by her defining feminism in terms of a concern with ‘sexism’ and ‘gender’, and her consequent failure to recognise that feminism’s primary concern is to challenge the male supremacist construction of the male as the ‘human’ norm. Moreover, since many of the targets of her criticism are not feminist on any criterion, those criticisms are irrelevant to her purported task of demonstrating the limitations of feminist theory. Her criticisms of Plato and Aristotle, for example, may be accurate and appropriate. But the writings of Plato and Aristotle hardly qualify as feminist thought; nor does the work of the other male writers she cites (e.g. pp.119-22); nor do the hypothetical examples which she devises for the purposes of her own argument (e.g. chapter six, esp. p.140), but which she did not find in any feminist writings.

Spelman holds feminism responsible for the separation between ‘race, class and gender’:

... the attempt to isolate gender from other elements of human identity such as race and class, along with parallel attempts to isolate sexism from other forms of oppression such as racism and classism, has been instrumental in the preservation of white middle-class privilege in feminist theory (Spelman, 1988: 16).

But it is the very setting up of the categories which keeps them distinct. In fact Spelman never manages to combine them. ‘Class’ is only ever mentioned as an occasional aside; and ‘gender’ becomes another aspect of ‘race’. This usually involves defining ‘gender’ as ‘different ways of being a man’, and pointing out that black men are not superior to white women. In doing so, she not only misses the male supremacist connotations of her own examples, she also misses crucial aspects of the racism. To give just one example: she mentions that Emmet Till was ‘murdered by white men for talking to a white woman’. This example occurs in the context of a discussion of ‘the ideology of masculinity in the United States’ which, Spelman says, ‘hardly includes the idea that Black men are superior to white women’ (p.89). But this interpretation misses the point entirely, not only of the male supremacist implications of Till’s murder, but also of its racist meanings. Till was not murdered by white women, and he was not murdered because he was ‘inferior’ to white women, but because, in the minds of his male racist murderers, he was ‘inferior’ to white men. In the evil logic of racism, he was murdered because he dared to behave like a white man towards a white woman, and because, as a black male, he did not have a white man’s prerogatives. His status as male was crucial in his murderers’ perception of him as ‘above himself’. The question of his social ranking in relation to white women did not arise because the woman was no more than a pawn in a lethal white man’s game.

Spelman gives us no information about the ‘white woman’ Till spoke to. Did this woman complain about his speaking to her? In another version of the story (not mentioned by Spelman), Till wolf-whistled at a white woman. Is this what she complained about, if she did complain? Or did Till’s murderers act without her knowledge or consent? Did she collude with the murderers, demanding that Till be punished because he dared to speak to, or whistle at her? Or was she horrified, did she

protest, or did she not know what was happening until it was all over? The answers to such questions are vital if what is at issue is the complicity of white women with racism. By deleting all reference to the woman in the case, Spelman is complicit with the male supremacist belief that women are unimportant. That complicity is also evident in Spelman's failure to draw out the male supremacist nature of the racism. All the actors in the evil scenario were male. In Spelman's account, the woman had no moral agency. We are not told whether she consented or protested, nor whether her protests would have made any difference to the outcome. She is nothing but an icon of white supremacist masculinity, useful as a justification for murder in the racist male mind, but allowed no will of her own. The issue is not whether or not she was 'inferior' to Emmet Till; the issue is that she did not exist at all in her own right. That Spelman missed the point is a consequence of keeping the 'race' and 'gender' categories separate and distinct, and substituting the infinitely malleable concept of 'gender' for male supremacy.

Spelman does attempt to argue the case for the 'white, middle-class' nature of feminism. She criticises feminism for what she sees as its focus of attention on what women have in common at the expense of the differences among women. This has led, she argues, to a form of imperialism whereby the condition of only one group of women is seen to be identical with the condition of all women. Feminism's exclusive focus on 'gender', and its concomitant oppression, 'sexism', has meant, according to Spelman, that women's race and class identity, and 'the racism and classism some women face and other women help perpetuate' (pp.112-3), have been peripheral to, or ignored by, feminist politics. As a consequence, the only kind of 'gender', i.e. the only way of being a woman, which feminism has acknowledged, is that of women who are not subjected to racism and classism—'namely, white middle-class women of Western industrialized countries' (p.3). The solution, then, is to combine all three forms. We need to ask, she says, about the ways in which 'race and class identity may be intertwined with gender identity ... the extent to which gender identity exists in concert with these other aspects of identity' (pp.112-3).

While Spelman is right about the need to combine the three great forms of oppression, her own attempt fails, not only because she separates them too widely in the first place, but also because she misrepresents feminism. Because the entry to them starts from the

interests of women, it must of necessity be a feminist one. Hence, it is important to get the feminism right. This Spelman does not do. Feminism's main concern is not 'gender' or 'sexism', or even 'women' in the sense of what women 'are', but male supremacy. The question of 'women's identity' is problematic, not in and of itself, but because of the male supremacist requirement that the only 'human' identity permissible is male. That some men are more (and less) 'human' than other men is also an aspect of male domination. There is sufficient evidence for the domination of men by men in Spelman's own text, as well as for feminism's awareness of this. And yet, in a bizarre distortion of feminist politics, on a number of occasions she uses this evidence as a weapon against feminism, and argues against 'the common position of women' by pointing to relations of domination among men. As might be expected, the discussion then proceeds to focus on the oppression of men, with women cast in the role of oppressors of men. (One example of this is her reference to the murder of Emmet Till, discussed above).

Another example occurs in her discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (pp.63-4). She disagrees with Beauvoir's statements to the effect that the world belongs to men, and that everything in girls' experience confirms them in their belief in masculine superiority, by pointing out that some women hold positions of superiority over some men: 'a white girl [and] Black men ... girls of the upper classes [and] working-class men'. But Spelman herself has already located these oppressions of race and class in hierarchies among men—'prince and pauper, master and slave ... are all male'. She also allows the same point by quoting without comment Beauvoir's statement: 'In the upper classes women are eager *accomplices* of their *masters*' (emphasis added). If women are accomplices rather than instigators, and men are masters, then what is at stake is primarily the interests of men. That class relations and racial domination are maintained at the expense of some men, makes them no less male interests. That these interests are also defended by women does not make them women's interests in any feminist sense, since they are based on women's subordination. Women benefit from class privilege only to the extent that they embrace their own subjugation to men. This does not mean that women are innocent of racism or class privilege. But it does mean that, to the extent that women defend race or class privilege, they are acting in complicity with male supremacist values.



Spelman does have another reason for asserting that feminist thought has been dominated by the experiences of ‘white, middle-class’ women. That reason is a tendency (which she identified most clearly in Plato and Aristotle, but which she also found in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*) to equate the social position of women with the social positions of ‘other oppressed groups’, e.g. ‘blacks’, ‘slaves’, ‘proletariat’. Spelman quite rightly points out that this ‘women and other oppressed groups’ analogy obliterates the existence of the women of the other oppressed groups, women who are blacks or slaves or exploited workers. If ‘women’ are contrasted with ‘other oppressed groups’, then the only women being referred to are privileged women who are not members of other (than women) oppressed groups. But her argument depends on how important the ‘women and other oppressed groups’ analogy is to feminism. She obviously regards this analogy as at least important, if not central, to ‘dominant Western feminist thought’, since she gives it a great deal of attention.

It is true that the early radical feminists sometimes fell into the trap of referring to oppressed groups ‘other than’ women as though those groups contained no women and hence were only male. For example, Ti-Grace Atkinson said: ‘Women have been *murdered* by their so-called *function* of childbearing exactly as the black people were murdered by their *function of color*’ (and black women by both, although Atkinson did not say so) (Atkinson, 1974: 5—her emphasis. See also: pp.7, 26, 41 and 49). But the analogy has rarely been used by feminists, simply *because* it excludes categories of women. As Robin Morgan put it over twenty years ago, at the beginning of this ‘second wave’ of feminism:

It ... seems obvious that half of all oppressed peoples, black, brown, and otherwise, are *women*, and that I, as a not-starving white American woman living in the very belly of the beast, must fight for those sisters to *survive* before we can even talk together as oppressed women (Morgan, ed., 1970; xxxix—her emphasis).

Spelman’s case depends on the importance of the ‘women and other oppressed groups’ analogy to feminism. But far from being a vital component of feminist theory, as Spelman seems to think, the parallel between ‘women and other oppressed groups’ has never been anything but an aside, an extra bit of special pleading. In the early 70s it was also a reference back to the political movements feminists had been active in and were

leaving behind because of those movements' male dominance—the anti-Vietnam war protests, and anti-racist and civil rights movements. It was an attempt to argue the case for women's oppression by pointing out the similarities between the oppression of women and other forms of oppression. It was also (and still is) a product of frustration. It is usually used in contexts where the speaker is faced by a stubborn refusal to see women's oppression. She draws a parallel between oppression on the grounds of sex and oppression on the grounds of race, because the existence of racial oppression is more visible than women's oppression, probably because the 'race' category contains men. But the analogy is problematic for feminist purposes, because it tends to undermine the feminist challenge to the male monopolisation of 'human' status. It is in fact anti-feminist, not only because it excludes women, but also because that female exclusion is a consequence of the male supremacist belief that all 'human' categories are only male. The analogy does seem to confine the referent of 'women' to women of the privileged race and class, i.e. to women who are not among the oppressed, as Spelman points out. But it also portrays 'oppressed groups' as only male, and in doing so, colludes with the male supremacist belief that only males matter. Missing this point is a failure of feminist commitment. But without the analogy, Spelman's argument about the 'white, middle-class' nature of feminism falls apart.

Bell hooks also criticised the analogy between 'women' and 'blacks' on the grounds that it obliterates the existence of black women (hooks, 1981: 138-44). As indeed it does. She attributes this to the racism of white women who refuse to find common cause with black women. But she failed to see the male supremacist connotations of the 'women and blacks' parallel, that it obliterates black women, not because they are not white, but because they are not men. It is in this sense that all women have a common interest in combating the automatic belief that only the male is 'human'. This common interest may or may not translate into practical politics. But failing to recognise manifestations of male domination will not advance the cause of feminism. The expectation that feminism ought to address all forms of oppression is clearly what is implied in bell hooks' concept of 'sexist oppression'. But by confining herself to a category of the oppressed, 'women', instead of challenging the social structures of domination and those whose interests they serve, she has gone about it in the wrong way. By focusing on the category 'women', rather than the system of male domination which oppresses women (and many men), she emphasises the differences between us,

underlines what keeps us apart, and ensures that the oppressions of 'racism' and 'sexism' will remain separate and distinct since not all women experience racism.

There is a sense in which the demand that feminism address all forms of oppression is redundant. That is exactly what feminism is already doing because feminism is happening wherever women committed to feminism are situated. All feminists are already included because they are women struggling against male supremacy and for their own human rights and dignity. The issues which feminism has placed on the public agenda are already relevant to all women. Exposing male violence, especially sexual violence, or asserting women's human right to control over the conditions of their own existence, including the secure integrity of their own bodies, for example, are not issues of concern only to relatively privileged women. Indeed, the less privileged women are, the fewer resources they have, economic or otherwise, the more pressing and vital such issues become. Feminism raises no barriers against the participation of any woman (or the understanding of any man) because all that is required for a feminist commitment is a feminist commitment. That is not to say that there are no barriers in the way of women's embracing of feminism. There are. Chief among those barriers are those distortions, largely purveyed by the mass media, but also exemplified by much of what I have identified as 'academic feminism', which alienate women from feminism by presenting it as something trivial, ridiculous, offensive or incomprehensible.

If, however, what is being demanded in the name of 'anti-racism' is that every feminist text without exception should include discussions of racism, that is unreasonable because it is impossible. In the first place, complying with that demand would be itself a form of racism. Unless the discussion of racism was intrinsic to the purpose of the text, to introduce it would be no more than a tokenistic using of women of colour to prove one's 'anti-racist' credentials. In the second place, it involves us all in an impossibility. Once 'women' have been divided into a multiplicity of races, how many races, and which ones, must be cited if one is to avoid excluding someone? No one can cite them all, because no one can ever be in a position to know them all, even supposing there is an 'all' to know. And in the third place, it threatens to establish a new hegemony, with 'white' being displaced from the dominant position in the same moment as it is recognised as such, and replaced with the most vocal, literate and published representatives of 'other' races.

As long as the debate remains confined within the terms of ‘race, class and gender’, no progress can be made in exposing the connections between all forms of domination. Not only are the categories as they stand too separated ever to be brought together, setting the debate up in this way also puts difficulties in the way of recognising domination at all, because it focuses attention on categories of the oppressed while leaving unspecified what it is that the oppressed are oppressed by. This is particularly the case with male domination which is explicitly depoliticised by naming the chief concern of feminism ‘gender’.

### ***The Radical Feminist Account***

There are, however, other ways to characterise a feminist account of ‘race’ and racism, ways which do not hold ‘white, middle-class’ women solely and inevitably responsible for racism, which do not set up an irresolvable distinction between ‘gender’, race and class, and which start from the feminist problematic of male domination, or at least implicitly refer to it.

‘Second wave’ radical feminism has from the beginning been concerned with all forms of oppression which affect the life chances and human dignity of women, i.e. with all forms of oppression. By attributing all forms of oppression to male domination, the early radical feminist account linked them together, and provided the beginnings of a framework for understanding all forms of invidious hierarchical distinctions between categories of human beings. This early radical feminist account has never been challenged. It appears to have dropped out of the debate altogether and been forgotten. In what follows I take up this early radical feminist insight into the primacy of male domination, arguing that it was basically correct despite the problems with it.

One of those problems was a tendency to locate the primacy of male domination in ‘history’. The oppression of women, it was argued, provided the model for all other forms of oppression because it happened first in human history. Women were the first social group to be enslaved. Once men learned that other human beings, i.e. women, could be enslaved, they applied that model to other groups of men. THE FEMINISTS, a group of radical feminists formed in New York in October 1968, said in their manifesto: ‘Women, or “females”, were the first class to be separated out from humanity and thus

denied their humanity' (THE FEMINISTS, 1973[1969]: 360). The New York Redstockings said in their mimeographed Manifesto in 1969:

Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest. All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented (Redstockings, 1969: 599).

Ti-Grace Atkinson said:

The oppression *of* women *by* men is the source of *all* the corrupt values throughout the world ... Since the oppression of women is generally agreed to be the beginning of the class system and women the first exploited class, every culture or institution or value since that time contains that oppression as a major foundational ingredient and renders all political constructs after that initial model of human oppression at the very least suspect (Atkinson, 1974: 5, 30—her emphasis. See also p.42).

Robin Morgan said:

women ... comprise the oldest oppressed group on the face of the planet ... [There is a] profoundly radical analysis beginning to emerge from revolutionary feminism: that capitalism, imperialism, and racism are *symptoms* of male supremacy—sexism. Racism as a major contradiction, for example, is surely based on the first “alienizing” act: the basic primary contradiction that occurred with the enslavement of half the human species by the other half (Morgan, ed., 1970: xxiii, xxxix—her emphasis).

Shulamith Firestone said:

the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor at the origins of class, as well as furnishing

the paradigm of caste (discrimination based on biological characteristics) ... [Radical feminism] sees feminist issues not only as *women's* first priority, but as central to any larger revolutionary analysis ... the current leftist analysis ... does not relate the structures of the economic class system to its origins in the sexual class system, the model for all other exploitative systems, and thus the tapeworm which must be eliminated first by any true revolution (Firestone, 1970: 9, 37—her emphasis).

But locating the link in hypothetical accounts of the 'origins of patriarchy', in a distant past before the advent of written records, is not entirely satisfactory as a theoretical enterprise. It is more akin to myth-making than to historical research (see, e.g. Dunbar, 1970. For a more recent and more convincing attempt, see: Lerner, 1986). The historical facts appealed to as evidence are few and far between. Given that the historical times referred to have left few traces, we cannot really know what happened thousands of years ago. Neither am I convinced that the knowledge would have any relevance for present purposes, given that the conditions described no longer exist, i.e. societies untouched by the rapacious demands of world-wide capitalism. However, the appeal to 'history' was not integral to the early radical feminist account. It need not be taken literally, but can be read as a metaphor for the pervasiveness and intransigence of domination, and as a genuine attempt to understand all forms of domination because all forms oppressed women.

It can also be interpreted as no more than a necessary rejoinder to the male left insistence on putting socialism first. All feminists, including socialist feminists, were aware that socialism, as least as it had been traditionally defined by men, would not automatically lead to the liberation of women. Feminists became tired of being told by male politicians that the liberation of women could wait until after the socialist revolution, that, because women's subordination was connected to the private ownership of the means of production, the abolition of that private ownership would automatically mean the abolition of women's subordination. Experiences in organisations of the male left, of being pushed into the background and used as domestic servicers, had led to a healthy scepticism on the part of politically committed women, and had taught feminists the need for women to organise independently.

But the radical feminist emphasis on the primacy of women's oppression, and hence the primacy of male domination, went further than this. It was not simply an organisational strategy for establishing political priorities, although it was certainly that. It was also a radically different way of looking at the world, different, that is, from the male dominant status quo. It placed the interests of women first, and from that standpoint, spoke in the name of the universal human by asserting that the overcoming of women's subordination would mean the overcoming of all other forms of subordination as well. For Ti-Grace Atkinson, for example, the oppression of women by men created a world where no one could be free:

A human being is not born from the womb; it must create itself. It must be *free, self-generative*. A human being must feel that it can grow in a world where injustice, inequity, hatred, sadism are not directed at it. No person can grow into a life within these conditions; it is enough of a miracle to survive as a *functioning* organism (Atkinson, 1974: 5—her emphasis).

On the radical feminist account, the struggle against male domination had political priority over other forms of politics, not only because of a pressing need to redress the harms done to women, but also because the liberation of women would mean the liberation of all. But although the early radical feminists saw all forms of domination as the result of male domination, they did not tell us how this was so, apart from the appeal to 'history'. They tended simply to assert a link without analysing it. The present task, then, is to extend this early radical feminist insight by identifying the links between male domination and social domination in general.

### ***Racism, Masculinity and Dehumanisation***

There is some support in anti-racist literature for the early radical feminist belief that all forms of domination are variations on the theme of male domination, although this is not explicitly acknowledged. It usually takes the form of asserting some kind of link between racism on the one hand, and masculinity and what is non-specifically referred to as 'sexuality' but which is actually male sexuality, on the other. This link is not given a central emphasis. In fact it is not even a link at all except in the sense that both racism and masculinity/(male) sexuality are mentioned in the same context. It is only ever

referred to tangentially and briefly, as an addition to the main theme, an interesting by-product but never the crux of the matter. It would appear that the reason for this is, once again, the male supremacist belief that only men are ‘human’. In other words, nothing very much has been said by connecting racism and masculinity, because all that has been said is that racism is part of being human since masculinity is ‘humanity’ per se. The fact that there are other human beings, namely women, for whom racism has a different meaning, perhaps a less lethal one, perhaps no meaning at all, goes unnoticed. What also goes unnoticed are the ways in which ideological justifications for the domination of men by men mimic those already operating in the domination of women by men. This does not mean that women have some essential immunity to racism (or misogyny or any other form of elitist exclusion), although it does mean that women do not have the social power to wreak the havoc that men do. There have always been women who have supported men in their projects, no matter how evil, as well as identifying their own interests with those of men. Supporting and identifying with men is the only way women are permitted access to the ‘human’ under male supremacist conditions, but that does not mean that women are not responsible for what they do. Both sexes can also fall into the easy automatic patterns of institutionalised racism. But it can be argued (although the anti-racist literature does not) that masculinity is the meaning of racism in the sense that it operates to render someone else subhuman in order to bolster one’s own masculinity, or, in the case of a woman, the masculinity of the man or men she identifies with or wants to be recognised by. The link between masculinity and domination is dehumanisation. Domination requires the dehumanisation of those whose human rights cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the vested interests of the powerful, just as masculinity requires the dehumanisation of women. But the parallel is not drawn in the anti-racist literature.

Ali Rattansi, for example, briefly mentions masculinity in the context of racism without drawing any inferences. He says:

both working-class and middle-class masculinities are involved ... [in] racial harassment and violence ... with defences of the neighbourhood against racialized “others” which Cohen refers to as the “nationalism of the neighbourhood” ...; the proving of masculinity by beating up “Pakis” ...; the sexual harassment of black women; and an aspect that



deserves much greater research, in the middle-class and professional context, the complex intertwining of masculinity, class and racism in the exclusion of blacks from employment or promotion by white male managers (Rattansi, 1992: 27).

Apart from a later brief discussion of 'the complex intertwining of racism with sexuality' (pp.29-30), where he refers to the irrationality and intransigence of racism, Rattansi does not develop this theme any further. His discussion of masculinity is confined to these two contexts and does not appear anywhere else in the text. Although he appears to be suggesting here that the racism is in some sense a consequence of the masculinity and 'sexuality', apart from linking masculinity with 'nationalism' he does not draw out the implications. He does not say anything about the masculinity of black men. The 'masculinities' referred to are the prerogative of white males, but black men are masculine too. Does black male masculinity differ from white male masculinity, given that the proving ground of 'masculinity' is 'beating up "Pakis"'? What happens to black male masculinity in the context of racist dehumanisation? And what are we to make of the inclusion in this list of the reference to the sexual harassment of black women? Black women are not sexually harassed only by white men, and neither are black women the only women to suffer sexual harassment. Nonetheless, despite these problems, it is clear that Rattansi does perceive a link between masculinity and racism.

The link between masculinity and imperialism/racism wends a curious trajectory through Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (Said, 1987[1978]). It is obvious from a number of references and discussions throughout the text that, for Said, there is a connection. What is less obvious is the exact nature of the connection and the importance Said assigns to it. It often appears in the text without his remarking on it, suggesting the possibility that on at least some occasions, he is not even aware the connection has been made.

It appears most frequently in the form of suggestive hints scattered throughout the text. Many of these are purely terminological, that is, they depend on the connotations of the terms used rather than being explicitly spelled out. For example, Said characterises western Orientalism's own view of itself as involving a 'stripping [of the Orient] of its veils' (p.76). He says that western Orientalist scholars have a 'learned reliance on the Orient as a kind of womb out of which they were brought forth' (p.88), that they

‘survey[ed], ... the passive, seminal, feminine East’ (p.138), and that the colonisers ‘poured out their exuberant activity onto the fairly supine, feminine Orient’ (p.220). He summarises Orientalist assumptions about the East as involving ‘the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability’ (p.206). He mentions a number of times that the Orient was ‘penetrated and possessed’ by the West (p.211), an attitude blatantly underlined by the title of an Orientalist text of 1904, which he cites, *The Penetration of Arabia* (p.224). He quotes another Orientalist as saying, “‘A society colonizes when ... it brings to virility a new society to which it has given birth’” (p.219). And in a statement whose significance is obviously lost on him because he does not comment on it (see below, p.197), he says that the effect of the new US social science on the Arab or Islamic Orient ‘is to keep the region and its peoples *emasculated*, reduced to “attitudes”, “trends”, statistics: in short, *dehumanized*’ (p.291—emphasis added).

But even when he discusses the connection in some detail, he fails to draw out the male supremacist implications. At one early point in the book, he illustrates the discourse of Orientalism, by which the West ‘*made* [the Orient] Oriental’ (his emphasis), with a discussion of ‘Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan’. This account of Flaubert’s produced, he said, ‘a widely influential model of the Oriental woman’:

she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was “typically Oriental”. My argument is that Flaubert’s situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled (p.6—his emphasis).

He concludes a later, more detailed, discussion of the work of Flaubert by commenting:

Woven through all of Flaubert’s Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient

and sex. In making this association Flaubert was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance of a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient. And indeed, the motif itself is singularly unvaried ... Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate.

Said himself, however, refrains from doing so. He ends the discussion by saying: 'it is not the province of my analysis here, alas, despite its frequently noted appearance (p.188).

But when Said's many suggestive hints have been juxtaposed in this way, there emerges a coherent constellation of themes within that discourse of Orientalism which organised the West's 'knowledge' of the Orient and justified its domination. That constellation provides an unexpected substantiation of the early radical feminist insight concerning the primacy of male domination. That the domination of women by men is the model for all forms of domination, that men first learn to want to dominate, and how to do it, in relation to women, is made strikingly evident in Said's text once his scattered references are brought together. The pattern of the male domination of men bears the traces of its origins in the male domination of women.

Within the discourse of Orientalism, 'the Orient' is feminised. It is made 'like a woman'.<sup>26</sup> It is given female characteristics and treated the way women are treated. It is never allowed to speak for or represent itself. He, the European male, speaks for 'her'. Not incidentally, Said did not comment on the fact that Flaubert's depiction of 'the Oriental woman' differed not at all from standard phallogocentric depictions of any women anywhere. Neither did he comment on the male supremacist implications of his own use of a text about a woman to illustrate Orientalism's approach to the East in general. If a text about a woman is typical of this approach, if it can 'stand for the pattern of relative

---

26. There is a fascinating sentence in Said's text which, if read in a certain way, says exactly that. The full sentence reads: 'as early as Aeschylus's play *The Persians* the Orient is transformed from a very far distant and often threatening Otherness into figures that are relatively familiar (in Aeschylus's case, grieving Asiatic women)' (p.21). If we read only the underlined words, the sentence becomes: 'the Orient is transformed into women'. But even taking the whole sentence into account, the meaning remains. The Orient is transformed from a threat into familiarity by being depicted as women. It is presumably irrelevant that the women are not in fact familiar, since they are 'Asiatic'. Obviously all women are the same in not posing any threat.

strength between East and West', if it is an instance of a 'singularly unvaried' and 'remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient', then the fact that it *is* a text about a woman is not just an interesting side issue. It is a vital clue to the operation of that form of domination which is Western imperialism, of which Orientalism is one manifestation.

The differences between the west and 'the Orient' line up in the same way as male supremacist discourses construe the differences between the sexes. For example, Lord Cromer, Orientalist scholar and British governor of Egypt which he 'ruled almost single-handedly between 1883 and 1907' (Said, 1994: 239-40), summed up the differences as follows, in a passage quoted by Said:

"The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism".

Having delineated the supreme quality of the 'European' intellect to his own satisfaction, Cromer proceeded to contrast this with what he variously designated 'the mind of the Oriental', 'the Egyptian', and the present day Arab. The thinking of this personage is, according to Cromer, 'eminently wanting in symmetry' and 'is of the most slipshod description'. He is 'singularly deficient in the logical faculty' and 'incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions'. He is much given to 'lengthy' explanations which are 'wanting in lucidity', and 'will probably contradict himself half-a-dozen times before he has finished' (Said, 1987[1978]: 38). Substitute 'male' for 'European' and 'female' for 'Oriental' in this passage, and it could be transposed to any of a myriad of texts expatiating on the nature of the feminine.

But above all, in the discourse of Orientalism the East is there to be fucked. This is partly a figure of speech. In a kind of reverse metonymy, the whole—'the Orient'—is made to stand for a part—the female part (and sometimes boys—a land 'of cut-rate boys and women', as Frantz Fanon once said—Fanon, 1970[1952]: 161). But in another sense it is not a figure of speech at all. European men actually went to the Orient to use their penises. Or rather, having feminised the Orient, they behaved towards it in the

fashion appropriate to its feminine status. They imperialised and colonised the Orient, along with most of the rest of the non-European world, using their penises as well as other weapons of warfare. This is not surprising. Colonisation is a kind of warfare, one in which there is a gross disparity of power, and men have always used their penises as weapons, i.e. raped, in war (and not only in war). Neither is it surprising that this aspect of Western domination has received so little attention, given the continuing hegemony of male interests, and in particular the male interest in keeping sex out of the arena of public political debate and safely ensconced in the realm of the natural, the private, the pre-ordained and the unarguable, an interest which is not confined to white Western men. Even Said, who provides clear evidence of it, does not put it in such stark terms. Instead he refers to a non-specific 'sexuality', the meaning of which wavers between a licentiousness attributed to the Oriental male, a sensuality attributed to the whole Orient, and the actual sexual practices of European men. These are, of course, all aspects of the same thing, a male sexuality used to conquer and control, which is justified by projecting the responsibility for it onto the 'other'—it is the Orient which grabs the Western conqueror's penis and makes him use it, just as women do everywhere. But Said does not bring the strands together. Significantly, 'Sexuality' does not appear as an entry in the index and hence cannot be traced throughout the text.

Once the suggestive hints are extricated and combined, however, the connection between masculinity and imperialism becomes clear. Imperialism, whether it takes the form of outright slavery, of the colonial dispossession of indigenous peoples, of the multinational control and exploitation of distant lands and their national economies, or of the forcible imposing of foreign cultures, requires the defining of subjugated populations as less than human. This removes all ethical barriers to exploitation since it characterises people as not belonging to 'Mankind'. The abolition of moral restraint allows domination free rein to expand unchecked by any humanitarian consideration for those who are not entitled to human rights and dignity because their land and lives are forfeit in the interests of the dominators. Hence imperialism requires dehumanisation. But so does masculinity in the sense that it is a 'human' status bought at someone else's expense. Domination already has a model of human beings who are not fully 'human'—women.

Applying that model to other men does of course involve a contradiction—those men defined as ‘inferior’ are both men and not-men at one and the same time. But the contradiction is managed by interpreting the maleness of ‘racially inferior’ men as a hyper-masculinity. Any maleness at all in men of the ‘inferior races’ is too much. Since it cannot be abolished despite the best efforts of the white dominators, it must have an intransigent power unavailable to the dominators, for whom masculinity is a precarious achievement constantly under threat from women who remain human despite the best efforts of the male supremacists. That intransigent masculinity of ‘inferior’ men functions as a repository for the worst excesses of the dominators’ fantasies of phallic power. An apt depiction of this ideology of white male supremacy can be found in the work of Frantz Fanon. Speaking in the voice of the white supremacist ideologue, he said:

As for the Negroes, they have tremendous sexual powers. What do you expect, with all the freedom they have in their jungles! They copulate at all times and in all places. They are really genital. They have so many children that they cannot even count them. Be careful, or they will flood us with little mulattos (Fanon, 1970[1952]: 111).

As a further illustration he quoted a particularly virulent specimen of this ideology, the work of a certain Michel Cournot:

“The black man’s sword is a sword. When he has thrust it into your wife, she has really felt something. It is a revelation. In the chasm it has left, your little toy is lost. Pump away until the room is awash with your sweat, you might as well be singing ... Four Negroes with their penises exposed would fill a cathedral ... To be comfortable without problems, they always have the open air. But then they are faced with a constant insult: the palm tree, the bread-fruit tree, and so many other proud growths that would not slacken for an empire, erect as they are for all eternity, and piercing heights that are not easily reached at any price” (p.120).

Fanon accounted for beliefs of this kind in terms of the over-intellectualisation of ‘the civilized white man’ who ‘retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual

licence, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest'. 'Every intellectual gain', he said, 'requires a loss in sexual potential' (p.117). He also referred to an intrinsic link between sexuality and violence: 'We know how much of sexuality there is in all cruelties, tortures, beatings' (p.113). These 'pre-logical' and infantile longings are projected onto 'the Negro' who, said Fanon, 'symbolizes the biological' (p.118). Like sex, the Negro is uncivilised. His natural habitat is the jungle, and he lives in the open air unconfined by the rules and prohibitions of civilisation. Like sex, he is wholly 'Nature'. He becomes sex in the mind of the 'Negrophobic' white man, according to Fanon, because he is presented as so like sex. Sex is 'Nature', the Negro is 'Nature', therefore the Negro is sex.

But although Fanon was right about the existential terror felt by the white male dominator faced with the man he has dehumanised, he failed to account for the fact that that terror took a sexual form. Certainly white supremacist ideology presents the Negro as 'Nature', but that can be accounted for by exposing the ideology of dehumanisation: He is not 'Man', therefore he is animal-like. In itself, this provides no reason for the obsessive focus on sex. Fanon was right to perceive the problem in terms of the Negro's exclusion from a human status, and the solution in terms of a recognition of his right to human dignity. He was also right to expose the oppressiveness of whiteness as the model of the 'universal human'. He utterly failed, however, to perceive that his model of 'the human' to which he aspired was only male. This is partly a consequence of the constant reiteration of the word 'man' throughout the text. (Presumably in the original French text, the word 'homme' was repeated as resoundingly). Although what he said is sometimes relevant to women without qualification, for example: 'I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize I have one right alone: that of demanding human behaviour from the other' (Fanon, 1970[1952]: 163), at other times it is difficult or impossible to substitute 'woman' for 'man' and retain Fanon's meaning. When he said 'man' that was exactly what he meant, and not 'woman'. 'Man' is not the genuinely universal human, i.e. including women too, in Fanon's text, any more than it is in any other context.

But the male interests of Fanon's text betray themselves in other ways as well. In *Black Skin White Masks*, women appear only as the bearers of white supremacist ideology. They are white women who profess to be terrified of being raped by a black man, but

whose noisy protestations he believed concealed an active desire for sexual degradation and violence at the hands of black men: 'Basically, does this *fear* of rape not itself cry out for rape? Just as there are faces that ask to be slapped, can one not speak of women who ask to be raped?' (p.110—emphasis in the original). Or they are light-skinned women of colour who scornfully reject black men as husbands, preferring degradation and maltreatment by a white man to marriage with a black man (chapter 2). Or they are white prostitutes deluded by the myth of black male sexual potency. Of women of colour he 'knows nothing', apart from 'the all-but-whites' who regard black men as violent and inferior (p.127).

Fanon did not completely ignore the possibility that men, too, could be bearers of white supremacist ideology, that the ideological portrayal of black men as sexual superstud was linked to the interests of white men. But he referred to white men in this context only fleetingly. At one point he raised the issue in the form of questions to which he gave no answers, questions which referred to 'a feeling of impotence or of sexual inferiority' on the part of 'a white man who hates black men', to a belief in the Negro 'as a penis symbol', and to lynching as 'sexual revenge' (p.113). On another occasion he raised the issue in a statement which located the blame firstly with women, with men tacked on as an afterthought: 'One thing must be mentioned in this connection: a white woman who has had a Negro lover finds it difficult to return to white men. Or so at least it is believed, particularly by white men' (pp.121-2). This is in fact the emphasis throughout his discussion of sexuality and race. It is women who are primarily to blame for the ideology which connects sexual violence with black men. For Fanon, the link was deeply embedded in the white female psyche, and he made it clear that it was white women he was talking about, since he admitted he knew nothing about 'the woman of colour'. He went to some length to argue the link psychoanalytically. Starting from a premise which he found in the work of Marie Bonaparte, he stated categorically that 'the desexualization of aggression in a girl is less complete than in a boy'. Although this might seem an odd assertion given that sexual aggression is typically male, what he meant was that the aggression was turned inward, that is, the girl directed it against her mother and, by extension, against herself because she too was a woman like her mother. At between five and nine years of age, he said, the girl tries to get her father, who is the appropriate aggressor, 'a libidinal aggressive' Fanon called him, to respond to the aggression that her 'unconscious demands of him'. The father 'refuses in a way' (a



significant qualification given the prevalence of father-daughter rape?), and so the girl looks around for another vehicle on which to project her desire to be subjected to sexual aggression. Since she is of an age to be aware of 'the folklore and culture' around her, it is the Negro, demonised by her culture, who 'becomes the predestined repository of this aggression', said Fanon. But because it is her own wish, it is a form of self-aggression. It is a well-known fact about women, 'commonplace', said Fanon, that they want to be hurt during the sex act. Hence, 'when a woman lives the fantasy of rape by a Negro ... it is the woman who rapes herself' (pp.126-7).

This is vicious misogyny, and like all forms of woman-hating, it serves a purpose, that is, to absolve men of responsibility for the harm they do women. This discussion of Fanon's occurred in the context of a chapter headed 'The Negro and Psychopathology'. But the psychopathology involved in this syndrome was simply that white women believed that they were more likely to be raped by black men. Otherwise, their desire to be raped was no more than a normal outcome of feminine libidinal development. It was characteristic of all (white) women. It was only pathological when white women directed this desire exclusively towards black men who, according to Fanon, were no more sexual than white men. In fact, Fanon absolved all men, of whatever colour, himself included, of responsibility for rape. If women 'want it', then men who rape are merely complying with what women 'want'. Rapists are nothing but passive tools in the hands of avid women. Thus was Fanon complicit with the male supremacist ideology which holds women to blame for the depredations of men.

Fanon did not make any link between racism and the masculinity of white men because of his overriding concern with the masculinity of black men. He failed to identify the nature and origin of the ideology which attributed a hyper-sexuality to black men, because he failed to locate it first and foremost with racist white men. For Fanon, white men were brothers. True, they were deluded, and as genocidal colonisers and racist torturers and murderers, worse than deluded. But it was Fanon's belief and hope that black and white men would eventually be capable of mutual recognition and respect, once the evils of European imperialism had finally been overcome. The white man was his chief interlocutor, his aim was 'to show the white man that he is at once the perpetrator and the victim of a delusion' (p.160). It was to him that Fanon addressed his arguments. It was with the white man that Fanon claimed equality and with whom he

shared a common humanity despite the terrible history of colonialism. Those who would eventually hold hands across the great chasm of colonialism and racism were all men, black and white together at last beyond hatred and contempt. The hero of his text was the black man. It was the black man who must learn to extricate himself from the psychological ravages of colonialism, who 'in a sense makes himself abnormal' (ibid.) by envying the white man and his culture, by trying to elicit guilt in the coloniser, by trying to ape the white man and his ways. And it is the black man who is the chief victim of the neurotic sexuality of white supremacy, who is dehumanised by being portrayed as nothing but a 'penis symbol', who is deprived of a sexuality by the woman of colour's dismissive scorn. The Negro who aspired to full human status despite the centuries of dehumanisation was not a woman. Black women do not appear in Fanon's text at all, neither as those who need to be shown the ways in which black people can be unwittingly complicit with their own oppression, nor as those whose admission to full membership of the human race cannot be long delayed. But without women, how can men be human? Fanon did not ask the question.

Neither did Said. Although Said was more careful than Fanon to avoid the ritualistic repetition of the word 'man', and although he sporadically included references to work by women and to the importance of feminism, no more than Fanon did he show any awareness that the original model of dehumanisation is male supremacy, the exclusion of women from 'human' status because we are not men.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, by equating 'dehumanisation' with being 'emasculated' (see above) he is fully complicit with the ideological belief that only men are 'human'. If dehumanisation means being deprived of masculinity ('emasculated'), only men can lose their 'human' status since women do not have any masculinity to lose. It is not in fact the whole 'region and its peoples' who are 'emasculated', conceptually or otherwise, by US social science, only the men, although all are dehumanised. It may be that this is merely a terminological quibble. It is not a term Said uses frequently. But it is symptomatic of the continuing effectiveness of male supremacy's chief blind spot, namely the humanity of women. The solution is

---

27. In this context, it must be noted that Said did not receive any help from most of what has been published as 'feminism', as I have been at pains to point out throughout this present work. It must also be noted that these texts by Said and Fanon are no worse than any of a myriad of others I could have chosen to illustrate the on-going hegemony of the male monopolisation of 'human' status. The problem is not a personal deficiency of these two authors, but a social system of meanings and values with which individuals can be complicit but which they can also resist and challenge as long as they know about alternatives.

not to 'include' women while everything else remains the same. There is in fact no immediately obvious solution to the problem of women's exclusion from 'humanity'. But acknowledging that it is in fact the case in the ideological structures and processes of male supremacy, while insisting that it ought not to be and acting to change it, is a necessary first step towards ending domination.

A suggestive, if brief, account of the connections between masculinity and domination in all its forms is provided by Sandra Harding's description of the establishment, maintenance and reproduction of 'the stereotypically masculine personality ... the natures of the humans who design and control patriarchy and capital'. Harding went on to say:

The frantic maintenance of dualisms between mind and body, between culture and nature, between highly-valued self and devalued others, take their first forms in the process of becoming a male person who must individuate himself from a devalued woman. Thus infant boys' psychological birth in families with our division of labor by gender produces men ... who will need to dominate ... It produces misogyny and male-bonding as prototypes of appropriate social relations with others perceived to be respectively unlike and like themselves ... From this perspective ... the vast panorama of the history of race relations becomes one more male drama in which the more powerful group of men works out its infantile project of dominating the other (Harding, 1981: 152, 153).<sup>28</sup>

And, it might be added, the vast panorama of the history of capitalism, whose chief value is the accumulation of limitless hoards of wealth by greedy men obsessively proving to each other who has the biggest. The obscenity of capitalism is the concentration of the world's wealth in the hands of a few men, including those 'salaried employees' of capitalist enterprises, managers, entrepreneurs, skilled artisans of profit-producing technology, paid at grossly inflated rates because they keep the wealth coming, while a large proportion of the world's population, in every country but

---

28. Unfortunately, Harding was later to repudiate this kind of insight, without, however, either acknowledging her own earlier embracing of it, or providing any reason for the shift in her point of view (Harding, 1986: 185).

especially in the third world, lacks access to even the barest minimum of resources to ensure lives of comfort, happiness and dignity, and while the earth's resources are depleted and the biosphere polluted. The obscenity is compounded by the refusal or incapacity of national governments to tax the rich and redistribute wealth more equitably, a reluctance which is not confined to Western nations. Those men responsible for maintaining institutions of domination remain heedless of the horrendous consequences of their actions because they are committed to the values of dehumanisation.

I am not arguing that racism, colonialism, imperialism or the worst aspects of capitalism can be wholly accounted for in terms of male supremacist masculinity. I do not know whether or not explaining masculinity will explain all forms of domination, whether, as Ti-Grace Atkinson put it, 'the oppression *of* women *by* men is the source of *all* the corrupt values throughout the world', or not (Atkinson, 1974: 5). What I am arguing is that no account of domination is adequate unless it is also seen in its male supremacist guise. For whatever else those forms of domination are, they are also forms of masculinity, of that moral and political phenomenon whereby the male sense of self is maintained at the expense of someone else's human dignity. That someone else is always initially female. It is in this sense that male domination is the earliest and primary form of domination, not in the sense that it happened first in history, but in the sense that it happens first in the life of each individual and provides the mould from which all forms of dehumanisation are cast. What links all forms of domination together is contempt. The holding of other human beings in contempt is what they all have in common, what gives domination its meaning and force. The first object of contempt is female, the mother who is 'contemptible' because she is a woman lacking the symbol of 'human' status, the penis. The primacy of male domination, chronologically and motivationally in the lives of individuals, is due to the fact that contempt is first learned in connection with the inculcation of masculinity. Contempt is the psychic mechanism which ensures that male infants will become men, and that women will have no alternative but to serve men because that is the only way they can get access to the 'human', a subsidiary and despised access though it might be.

Contempt is the chief meaning and value of a world ruled by men. Although all men have a special ontological status at women's expense under conditions of male

supremacy because they bear emblazoned on their bodies the symbol of 'human' value, the world of men is not a realm of equality. Some men are less worthy than others because they occupy low positions in the hierarchies of power which organise the male world. Such men are both 'feminised' and 'hyper-masculinised'. They both partake of the devalued status accorded women, and continue to be men because they possess the penis. Lacking power, they become like women, without rights, without access to decision-making, without control over the conditions of their existence, without protection against exploitation, violence and murder. But as penis bearers they are also 'human' in the only way recognised by the dominators. To the extent that men of the subordinated groups adhere to the belief that penis-possession signifies 'human' status, by ignoring the existence of women, by giving themselves permission to treat women with contempt, by demanding the same masculine prerogatives as the dominators, they remain complicit with the meanings and values of a world in which no one can be free.

## Conclusion

My task throughout has been to argue that, without acknowledgement of the meanings and values of male supremacy which structure a reality where only men are 'human', the term 'feminism' either has no unifying point of reference, or is complicit with those meanings and values of male domination. I have argued that feminism's obvious concern with women only makes sense as a concern to expose the ways in which women are dehumanised under conditions of male supremacy, and to rectify that dehumanisation through women taking our lives and destinies into our own hands by extricating ourselves from male-defined institutions, and by creating or reasserting our own meanings and values outside male control. I have also argued that that enterprise involves women striving for a human status which does not depend on the diminution of anyone else's human rights and dignities. I have suggested that that enterprise is already possible because it is in many ways already conceivable, although the task is by no means ended because male supremacy has not yet been overcome. Indeed the struggle has just begun. Despite the centuries of women's resistance to male definition and control, feminism has made little headway against the hydra-headed monster of male hegemony. Nonetheless, the struggle must continue.

I began with an exposition of some of the basic debates in sociology, because it became increasingly clear as I read the feminist academic literature, that the ideology of individualism was continuing to exert a subterranean influence, even in those texts which presented themselves as most strongly committed to a 'social constructionist' perspective. That perspective, confined as it was to challenging arguments appealing to 'nature', tended to be too narrow in scope to allow other important implications of the concept of 'social construction' to be addressed. I found too little awareness of the extent to which the human individual is a social being all the way through, and of the implications of that for the feminist project of exposing and transforming the political dimensions of personal life. Seeing feminism's primary antagonist as a social system was necessary, I felt, if feminism was to resolve some of the contradictions into which it has been driven by a continuing covert adherence to a belief in the ontological primacy of 'individuals'. If the subject-matter of feminism is a social system rather than just 'women', it becomes possible to evaluate what is said by women in the name of feminism on moral and political criteria, rather than on the basis of the experiences or feelings of women as discrete individuals. It becomes possible to challenge anti-

feminist positions which masquerade as ‘feminism’ simply because they are held by women who identify as feminist; and it becomes possible to keep feminist energy and attention focused on the main enemy rather than dissipated throughout a multitude of differences among women. If the subject-matter of feminism is a social system rather than a matter of female personal experience, it becomes possible to identify ways in which even women consent to our own oppression and adhere to meanings and values which operate against our own best interests; and it becomes possible to hold men accountable for the wrongs they do to women, while still acknowledging that they have choices and can refuse to comply with male supremacist requirements that men treat women as less than human. Within the schema of a social system, individuals are *both* bearers of social relations, *and* the loci of moral and political judgement, decision and action which can lead to resistance and refusal.

I then went on to define what kind of social system it was that feminism is opposing, that is, the social system of male supremacy structured by meanings and values which maintain the male as the ‘human’ norm. I argued that feminism’s undoubted concern for women arises out of the recognition that women are debarred from human status under conditions of male supremacy, and that that is the source of the atrocities against women identified by feminism. In other words, ‘women’ are problematic in feminist terms because the relations of ruling under which we live are maintained at our expense. Feminism is unquestionably concerned with the multitude of ways in which women are human too, including not only the various ways in which we live our lives, but also the very fact that we exist at all. But I also pointed out that, unless the feminist standpoint is acknowledged in the first place as the moral and political opposition to male supremacy, feminism loses its central unifying focus, and ‘women’ become nothing but the occupants of their present ‘social locations’, caught up in mutual antagonisms to the extent that some ‘social locations’ are more privileged than others. I argued that without the explicit identification of male supremacy as the problem, there is no feminist standpoint, that ‘women’s life activity’ or ‘women’s experience’ is not alone sufficient to define feminist politics.

In Part II, I argued in some detail that there is much that is labelled ‘feminism’ which is complicit with male supremacist relations of ruling because it refuses, or neglects, to name them as such, or because it actively sets out to destroy the feminist standpoint

which does. The academy is an important site for the formation and distribution of meaning, far too important to allow it to be turned against the ruling interests. The gates must be kept barred against the bad crazy women threatening to cut off the phallic source of all meaning and pleasure. Unfortunately for the success of this endeavour to exclude threats to phallic supremacy, the master needs ‘trusties’. He needs discourses defending his interests visibly authored by women in order to demonstrate that his interests are women’s too. But women are notoriously untrustworthy as defenders of phallocracy. There is no unequivocal sign marking off the reliable good women from the bad castrating ones. Sometimes the gatekeeping fails because the good woman and the bad woman are the same woman, struggling with the seductions and coercions of malestream thought, at one point losing her way in the tangled thickets of what counts as knowledge, at another point, finding the way clearly marked by the interests of women in opposing male supremacy, only to lose it as the jungle closes in around her once again. Sometimes the gatekeeping fails because the master is fooled into believing that she is working in his interests because she is working in a traditional malestream discipline, whereas what she is actually doing is using her feminist insight to challenge and transform that discipline. Sometimes, sadly, it is the feminist who is deceived into believing that she is operating in women’s interests by the mere fact that she is working in the field of Women’s Studies, a self-deception which can only be exacerbated by the tendency to re-name Women’s Studies ‘Gender Studies’.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes the gatekeeping simply fails for no perceptible reason (apart, that is, from the general reason that no form of domination is inevitable).<sup>30</sup>

---

29. Jocelyn Pixley has suggested that ‘Gender Studies’ might have been justified originally as an improvement on ‘Women’s Studies’, because the designation ‘Women’s Studies’ implies that the problems are only women’s, whereas ‘Gender Studies’ would facilitate dealing with men as well. But although the word ‘gender’ is sometimes used to mean male domination, its chief use and function is to deny it. And academic departments of ‘Gender Studies’ are in fact devoted to anti-feminist substitutions for feminism, of which the most fashionable at the moment is ‘queer theory’.

30. A recent heartening example is the appointment of Sheila Jeffreys to a tenured position within Melbourne University’s Department of Political Science (or ‘Silence’, to use Somer Brodrigg’s delightful terminology for such departments). Although in Jeffreys’ case there are perceptible reasons for her appointment—her own scholarship and organisational and administrative skills, as well as support from people of integrity of both sexes, but especially Verity Burgman—her forthright condemnation of male supremacist meanings and values, and her unwavering refusal to be intimidated into silence or equivocation, should logically have debarred her from academic recognition. That it has not is cause for hope. There are, of course, other examples of feminists who have succeeded in academe despite their unequivocal feminist commitment, both in Australia and elsewhere, Renate Klein and Robyn Rowland at Deakin University in Geelong, being two who spring most readily to mind. But I cannot list them all because I do not know them all.



I have said nothing in these pages about what is to be done in activist terms. My task has not been to address any of the various ways in which feminists in academe have struggled to place feminism on the Western intellectual agenda. Rather, my task has been to clarify what feminism is in the most general terms, to provide a number of illustrative examples of academic feminist writings which fall short of feminist aims, and to discuss some of the ways in which that happens. Certainly the theoretical schema I have outlined here has a multitude of practical implications. But decisions about what needs to be done, including what needs to be done within the academic domain, are the prerogative of those who are doing it. My own contribution to the struggle has been the clarification of feminist politics on the level of meaning. How that meaning translates into practical activism will depend on the particular problems and difficulties individual activists are faced with. How one engages with specific realities cannot be dictated beforehand. Each of us has to decide for herself (and himself) what is to be done, whether or not anything can be done, and how far one can go before the monstrous régime makes it too hard to go on. As Phyllis Chesler put it in the titles of the first and last chapters of her latest book, *Patriarchy: Notes of an Expert Witness*, 'Heroism is our only alternative' and 'Sister, fear has no place here'. Women are no strangers to heroism, despite its traditional monopolisation by men; and although fear is an appropriate response to the Leviathan of male supremacy, we cannot allow fear alone to stop us.

## References

- Abbott, Pamela and Wallace, Claire (1990) *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspectives* London and New York: Routledge
- Abbott, Sidney and Love, Barbara (1972) *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* New York: Stein and Day
- Abercrombie, Nicholas, Hill, Steven and Turner, Bryan S. (1980) *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* London: George Allen and Unwin
- Aboriginal and Islander Women (1975a) 'Black Women in Society: Discussion', in Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, ed. (1977) *Women and Politics Conference 1975: Volume 2* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, pp.198-209
- (1975b) 'Aboriginal Women's Speak-Out', in Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, ed. (1977), pp.209-13
- Adams, Parveen and Minson, Jeff (1978) 'The "Subject" of Feminism' *m/f* **2**, pp.43-61
- Alcoff, Linda (1988) 'Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism' *Signs*, **13** (3), pp.405-36
- Andersen, Margaret L. and Collins, Patricia Hill, eds (1992) *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology* Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company
- Atkinson, Judy (1990a) 'Violence Against Aboriginal Women: Reconstitution of Customary Law—The Way Forward' *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* **2** (46), pp.6-9
- (1990b) 'Violence in Aboriginal Australia: Colonisation and Gender. Part I' *The Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker* **14** (2), pp.5-21
- (1990c) 'Violence in Aboriginal Australia: Colonisation and Gender. Part II' *The Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker* **14** (3), pp.4-27
- Atkinson, Ti-Grace (1974) *Amazon Odyssey* New York: Links Books
- Bacchi, Carol Lee (1990) *Same Difference: Feminism and Sexual Difference* Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Barrett, Michèle (1984) *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* London: Verso
- (1991) *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* London: Polity Press
- Barry, Kathleen (1995) 'Feminist Political Consciousness As Ideology' *Trouble and Strife* **32**, Winter, pp.67-72
- Beal, Frances M. (1970[1969]) 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female', in Morgan, ed., pp.382-96
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1970[1949]) *The Second Sex* trans. and ed. by H. M. Parshley, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Beechey, Veronica (1979) 'On Patriarchy', *Feminist Review* **3**, pp.66-82
- Bell, Diane (1983) *Daughters of the Dreaming* Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/George Allen and Unwin
- (1987) 'The Politics of Separation', in Marilyn Strathern, ed. *Dealing With Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond* Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp.113-29
- (1991a) 'Intraracial Rape Revisited: On Forging a Feminist Future Beyond Factions and Frightening Politics' *Women's Studies International Forum* **14** (5), pp.385-412
- (1991b) Letter to the Editors *Women's Studies International Forum* **14** (5), pp.507-13
- (1991c) 'Aboriginal Women, Separate Spaces, and Feminism', in Gunew, ed., pp.13-26

- Bell, Diane and Nelson, Topsy Napurrula (1989) 'Speaking About Rape Is Everyone's Business' *Women's Studies International Forum* **12** (4), pp.403-416
- Benhabib, Seyla and Cornell, Drucilla, eds (1987) *Feminism As Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Late-Capitalist Societies* Cambridge: Polity Press
- Benjamin, Jessica (1989) *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* New York: Pantheon Books
- Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press
- Bernauer, James and Rasmussen, David, eds (1988) *The Final Foucault* Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press
- Black Women's Liberation Group (1970) 'Statement on Birth Control', in Morgan, ed., pp.404-6
- Bligh, Vivian (1983) 'Study into the Needs of Aboriginal Women Who Have Been Raped or Sexually Assaulted', in Fay Gale, ed., *We Are Bosses Ourselves* Canberra: AIAS
- Bowles, Gloria and Klein, Renate Duelli, eds (1983) *Theories of Women's Studies* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Braidotti, Rosi (1991) *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press
- Brennan, Teresa and Pateman, Carole (1979) "'Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth": Women and the Origins of Liberalism' *Political Studies* **27**(2), June
- Brodribb, Somer (1992) *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* Melbourne: Spinifex Press
- Brownmiller, Susan (1975) *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* New York: Simon and Schuster
- Bulkin, Elly (1980) 'Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics', reprinted in *Sinister Wisdom* **43/44**, 1991, pp.114-34
- Butler, Judith (1987) 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault', in Benhabib and Cornell, eds., pp.128-42
- (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* London: Routledge
- Butler, Judith and Scott, Joan W., eds (1992) *Feminists Theorize the Political* London and New York: Routledge
- Campbell, Beatrix (1988) *Unofficial Secrets: Child Sexual Abuse—The Cleveland Case* London: Virago
- Campioni, Mia (1987) 'Bringing It All Back home: Love and Hate in Lesbian Relationships' *Gay Information: Journal of Gay Studies* **17-18**—Lesbian Issue
- (1991) 'Women and Otherness' *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies* **1** (1)
- [in press] 'Revolting Women, Women in Revolt', in a forthcoming publication from Routledge, edited by Paul Komesaroll et al.
- Carby, Hazel (1982) 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', in Centre for Cultural Studies *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* London: Hutchinson, pp.212-35
- Card, Claudia, ed. (1991) *Feminist Ethics* Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas
- Chesler, Phyllis (1994) *Patriarchy: Notes of an Expert Witness* Monroe Maine: Common Courage Press

- Chodorow, Nancy (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press
- (1985) 'Beyond Drive Theory: Object-Relations and the Limits of Radical Individualism', in Chodorow, 1989, pp. 114-53
- (1989) *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* New Haven and London: Yale University Press
- Code, Lorraine (1991) *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press
- Coveney, L., Jackson, M., Jeffreys, S., Kay, L. and Mahony, P. (1984) *The Sexuality Papers: Male Sexuality and the Control of Women* London: Hutchinson
- Coward, Rosalind (1978) 'Re-Thinking Marxism', *m/f* 2, pp.85-96
- Coward, Rosalind and Ellis, John (1977) *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Culley, Margo and Portuges, Catherine, eds (1985) *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching* Boston and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Dalston Study Group (1978) 'Was the Patriarchy Conference "Patriarchal"?', in *Patriarchy Conference Papers on Patriarchy: London, 1976* Brighton: Women's Publishing Collective, pp.76-80
- Daly, Mary (1978) *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* London: The Women's Press
- (1992) *Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage* Melbourne: Spinifex Press
- De Lauretis, Teresa (1987) *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
- Dell'Olio, Anselma (1972) 'The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War', in Klagsburn, ed. (1973) *The First Ms Reader* New York: Warner Books Inc.
- Delmar, Rosalind (1986) 'What Is Feminism?' in Mitchell and Oakley, eds, pp.8-33
- Dinnerstein, Dorothy (1976) *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* New York: Harper Colophon Books
- Donald, James and Rattansi, Ali, eds (1992) *'Race', Culture and Difference* London: SAGE Publications Ltd
- Driver, Emily and Droisen, Audrey, eds (1989) *Child Sexual Abuse* London: Macmillan
- Dunbar, Roxanne (1970) 'Female Liberation as the Basis for Social Revolution', in Morgan, ed., pp.536-53
- Dworkin, Andrea (1974) *Woman Hating* New York: E.P. Dutton
- (1981) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* London: The Women's Press
- (1983) *Right-Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females* London: The Women's Press
- (1988) *Intercourse* London: Arrow Books
- Eagleton, Terry (1991) *Ideology: An Introduction* London and New York: Verso
- Eisenstein, Hester (1984) *Contemporary Feminist Thought* London and Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks
- (1985) 'Introduction', in Eisenstein and Jardine, eds.
- Eisenstein, Hester and Jardine, Alice, eds (1985) *The Future of Difference* New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press
- Eisenstein, Zillah (1981) *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* Boston: Northeastern University Press
- Eisenstein, Zillah, ed. (1979) *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* New York and London: Monthly Review Press

- Faludi, Susan (1991) *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* New York: Crown Publishers Inc.
- Fanon, Franz (1970[1952]) *Black Skin White Masks* London: Paladin
- (1970[1961]) *The Wretched of the Earth* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Feminist Review, eds (1987) *Sexuality: A Reader* London: Virago
- Fesl, Eve (1984) 'Eve Fesl', in Rowland, ed., pp.109-15
- Firestone, Shulamith (1981[1970]) *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* New York: Bantam Books
- Fisher, Berenice (1984) 'Guilt and Shame in the Women's Movement: The Radical Ideal of Action and Its Meaning for Feminist Intellectuals' *Feminist Studies* 10 (2), Summer, pp.185-212
- Flax, Jane (1983) 'Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics', in Harding and Hintikka, eds, pp.245-281
- (1990) *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press
- Foucault, Michel (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* edited by Colin Gordon; New York: Pantheon Books
- (1985) *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume Two* New York: Vintage Books
- (1988) 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', in Bernauer and Rasmussen, eds, pp.1-20
- Fraser, Nancy and Nicholson, Linda J. (1990) 'Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism', in Nicholson ed., pp.19-38
- Freud, Sigmund (1913) *Totem and Taboo* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965
- (1923) 'The Ego and the Id', in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis; The Pelican Freud Library, Volume 11* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984, pp.339-407
- (1925) 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes', in *On Sexuality: PFL, Volume 7* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977, pp. 321-43
- (1927) 'Fetishism', in *On Sexuality*, pp.345-57
- Friedman, Marilyn (1991) 'The Social Self and the Partiality Debates', in Card, ed., pp 161-79
- Frye, Marilyn (1983) *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press
- Gagnon, John H. and Simon, William (1974) *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* London: Hutchinson
- Gatens, Moira (1983) 'A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction', in Judith Allen and Paul Patton, eds, *Beyond Marxism: Interventions After Marx* Leichhardt, Sydney: Intervention Publications, pp.143-60
- (1986) 'Feminism, Philosophy and Riddles Without Answers', in Pateman and Gross, eds, pp.13-29
- (1991) *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
- Gathorne-Hardy, Jonathan (1972) *The Rise and Fall of the British Nanny* London: Hodder and Stoughton
- George, Susan (1990[1984]) *Ill Fares the Land: Essays on Food, Hunger and Power* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books

- (1990) *A Fate Worse Than Debt* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Giddens, Anthony (1977) *Studies in Social and Political Theory* London: Hutchinson and Co.
- (1979) *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press
- (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* London: Polity Press
- (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* London: Polity Press
- (1993[1976]) *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies* London: Polity Press
- Gilligan, Carol (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press
- Grieve, Norma and Burns, Ailsa, eds (1994) *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought* Melbourne: Oxford University Press
- Grimshaw, Jean (1981) 'Aboriginal Women: A Study of Culture Contact', in Norma Grieve and Patricia Grimshaw, eds *Australian Women: Feminist Perspectives* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp.86-94
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1989) *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Gunew, Sneja, ed. (1990) *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct* London and New York: Routledge
- (1991) *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge* London and New York: Routledge
- Gunew, Sneja and Yeatman, Anna, eds (1993) *Feminism and the Politics of Difference* Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Habermas, Jürgen (1971[1968]) *Knowledge and Human Interests* translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon Press
- Hamilton, Annette (1975) 'Aboriginal Women: The Means of Production', in Jan Mercer, ed. *The Other Half: Women in Australian Society* Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp.167-79
- (1981) 'A Complex Strategic Situation: Gender and Power in Aboriginal Australia', in Norma Grieve and Patricia Grimshaw, eds *Australian Women: Feminist Perspectives* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, pp.69-85
- Haraway, Donna (1988) 'Situated Knowledges' *Feminist Studies* 14(3), Fall
- Harding, Sandra (1981) 'What Is the Real Material Base of Patriarchy and Capital?', in Sargent, ed., pp.135-63
- (1983) 'Why Has the Sex/Gender System Become Visible Only Now?', in Harding and Hintikka, eds., pp.311-24
- (1986) *The Science Question in Feminism* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press
- (1986) 'The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory', in Harding and O'Barr, eds, 1987, pp.283-302
- (1987) 'Conclusion: Epistemological Questions', in Harding, ed., pp.181-90
- (1991) *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press
- ed. (1987) *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* Indiana and Milton Keynes: Indiana University Press
- Harding, Sandra and Hintikka, Merrill B., eds (1983) *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* Dordrecht, Boston and London: D. Reidel Publishing Company

- Harding, Sandra and O'Barr, Jean, eds (1987) *Sex and Scientific Inquiry* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press
- Hartsock, Nancy C. M. (1974) 'Political Change: Two Perspectives on Power' *Quest* 1(1), Summer
- (1985) *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* Boston: Northeastern University Press
- (1987) 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', in Harding, ed., pp.157-80
- Hawkesworth, Mary E. (1989) 'Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth' *Signs* 14(3), pp.533-57
- Hoagland, Sarah Lucia (1988) *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* Palo Alto CA: The Institute of Lesbian Studies
- Hoagland, Sarah Lucia and Penelope, Julia, eds (1988) *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* London: Onlywomen Press
- Hobart Women's Action Group (HWAG) (1974) 'Sexism and the Women's Liberation Movement: or, Why Do Straight Sisters Sometimes Cry When They Are Called Lesbians?' *Refractory Girl* 5, Summer, pp.30-3
- Hole, Jacquelyn (1994) 'Women Victims Denied Help by Black Legal Centre' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April
- Honneth, Axel (1994) 'The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today' *Constellations* 1(2), pp.255-69
- hooks, bell (1981) *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* London: Pluto Press
- (1984) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* Boston: South End Press
- (1990) 'Feminism: A Transformational Politic', in Rhode, ed., pp. 185-93
- (1991) 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women', in Gunew, ed., pp.27-41
- Huggins, Jackie (1991) 'Black Women and Women's Liberation', in Gunew, ed., pp. 6-12
- (1994) 'A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women's Relationship to the White Women's Movement', in Grieve and Burns, eds, pp.70-9
- Huggins, Jackie et al. (1991) Letter *Women's Studies International Forum* 14(5), pp. 506-7 (signed by twelve women: Jackie Huggins, Jo Willmot, Isabel Tarrago, Kathy Willetts, Liz Bond, Lillian Holt, Eleanor Bourke, Maryann Bin-Salik, Pat Fowell, Joann Schmider, Valerie Craigie, Linda McBride-Levi)
- Hull, Gloria T., Scott, Patricia Bell and Smith, Barbara, eds (1986) *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* New York: Feminist Press
- Humm, Maggie (1989) *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- Itzin, Catherine, ed. (1993) *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Jaggar, Alison M. and Struhl, Paula R., eds (1978) *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.
- Jaggar, Alison M. (1983) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* United Kingdom: Harvester Press
- (1990) 'Sexual Difference and Sexual Equality', in Rhode, ed., pp.239-54
- Jardine, Alice (1985) *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press

- Jeffreys, Sheila (1990) *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* London: The Women's Press
- (1991) 'Lesbian Sex Therapy and the Lesbian Sexual Revolution' *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies* 2(1), June 1992
- (1993) *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* Melbourne: Spinifex Press
- Johnson, Jill (1973) *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* New York: Simon and Schuster
- Johnson, Miriam M. (1988) *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives* Berkeley and London: University of California Press
- Joseph, Gloria I. and Lewis, Jill, eds (1981) *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Perspectives* Boston: South End Press
- Kant, Immanuel (1990[1785]) *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* New York: Macmillan Publishing Company
- Kappeler, Susanne (1995) *The Will to Violence: The Politics of Personal Behaviour* Melbourne: Spinifex Press
- Keller, Evelyn Fox (1978) 'Gender and Science', in Harding and Hintikka, eds, pp.187-205
- (1983) *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* New York: W. H. Freeman and Company
- (1985) *Reflections on Gender and Science* New Haven and London: Yale University Press
- (1982) 'Feminism and Science', in Harding and O'Barr, eds, pp.233-46
- Kennedy, Florynce (1970) 'Institutionalized Oppression vs. The Female', in Morgan, ed., pp.492-501
- Keohane, Nannerl O., Rosaldo, Michelle Z. and Gelpi, Barbara C., eds (1981) *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited
- Kirby, Vicki (1993) 'Feminisms, Reading, Postmodernisms: Rethinking Complicity', in Gunew and Yeatman, eds, pp.20-34
- Kramarae, Cheris and Treichler, Paula, A. (1985) *A Feminist Dictionary* Boston, London and Henley: Pandora Press
- Kramarae, Cheris and Spender, Dale, eds (1992) *The Knowledge Explosion: Generations of Feminist Scholarship* New York and London: The Athene Series, Teachers College Press, Columbia University
- Kumar, Mina (1994) 'Bringing Class Out of the Closet: Book Review' *Ms* V(3), pp.75-6
- Langton, Marcia (1989) 'Feminism: What Do Aboriginal Women Gain?' *Broadside: Newsletter of the National Foundation for Australian Women* 1(1), November, p.3
- Larrain, Jorge (1979) *The Concept of Ideology* London: Hutchinson
- Le Dœuff, Michèle (1991) *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* translated by Trista Selous, Oxford UK and Cambridge MA: Blackwell
- Leidhardt, Dorchen and Raymond, Janice, eds (1990) *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* New York: Pergamon
- Lerner, Gerda (1986) *The Creation of Patriarchy* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press
- (1993) *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Lesbian Ethics* 4(2), 1991



- Lloyd, Genevieve (1984) *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* London: Methuen
- (1988) 'Woman As Other', paper delivered at the ANZAAS Conference, University of Sydney, May
- Lorde, Audre (1978) 'Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving', in Lorde, 1984, pp.45-52
- (1979a) 'Sexism: An American Disease in Black Face', in Lorde, 1984, pp.60-5
- (1979b) 'An Open Letter to Mary Daly', in Lorde, 1984, pp.66-71
- (1984) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press
- Lugones, Maria (1987) 'Playfulness, "World"-Travelling and Loving Perception', *Hypatia* 2(2), Summer, pp.3-20
- Lukács, Georg (1971[1922]) 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in Lukács *History and Class Consciousness* London: The Merlin Press
- Lukes, Steven (1973) *Individualism* Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- (1974) *Power: A Radical View* London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd
- (1977) *Essays in Social Theory* London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd
- ed. (1986) *Power* Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell
- Maccoby, Eleanor Emmons and Jacklin, Carol Nagy (1974) *The Psychology of Sex Differences* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press
- MacKinnon, Catharine (1981) 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory', in Keohane, Rosaldo and Gelpi, eds, pp.1-30
- (1987) *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press
- (1990) 'Legal Perspectives on Sexual Difference', in Rhode, ed., pp.213-25
- (1991) *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press
- Maclean, Ian, Montefiori, Alan and Winch, Peter, eds (1990) *The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- MacLeod, Mary and Saraga, Ester, eds (1989) 'Challenging the Orthodoxy: Towards a Feminist Theory and Practice' *Feminist Review* No. 28, Spring
- Mailer, Norman (1971) *The Prisoner of Sex* London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson
- Marx, Karl (1975[1845]) 'Concerning Feuerbach', in Lucio Colletti, ed. *Early Writings* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick (1974[1846]) *The German Ideology* edited and abridged by C. J. Arthur, New York: International Publishers
- McNay, Lois (1992) *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* London: Polity Press
- Miller, Jean Baker (1976) *Toward a New Psychology of Women* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Millett, Kate (1970) *Sexual Politics* London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971
- Mills, C. Wright (1970[1959]) *The Sociological Imagination* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Mitchell, Juliet (1974a) 'On Freud and the Distinction Between the Sexes', in Mitchell, 1984, pp.221-32
- (1974b) *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books
- (1984) *Women: The Longest Revolution—Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* London: Virago

- Mitchell, Juliet and Oakley, Ann, eds (1986) *What Is Feminism?* New York: Pantheon Books
- Modleski, Tania (1991) *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* New York and London: Routledge
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (1988) 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse' *Feminist Review* **30**
- Molyneux, Maxine (1981) 'Socialist Societies Old and New: Progress Towards Women's Emancipation?' *Feminist Review* **8**, Summer, pp.1-34
- Montefiori, Alan (1990) 'The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals', in Maclean, Montefiori and Winch, eds, pp.201-28
- Moraga, Cherrie and Anzaldúa, Gloria, eds (1983) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* Watertown, MA: Persephone Press
- Morgan, Robin, ed. (1970) *Sisterhood Is Powerful* New York: Random house/Vintage Books
- Mosey, Anne (1994) *Central Australian 'Remote Area Aboriginal Night Patrols': A Review* Alice Springs: Drug and Alcohol Services Association
- Myron, Nancy and Bunch, Charlotte, eds (1975) *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement* Baltimore, Md: Diana Press
- Nelson, Topsy Napurrula (1991) Letter to the Editors *Women's Studies International Forum* **14**(5), p.507
- Ng, Roxana (1993) 'Sexism, Racism and Canadian Nationalism', in Gunew and Yeatman, eds, pp.197-211
- Nicholson, Linda J. (1990) 'Introduction', in Nicholson, ed.
- Nicholson, Linda J., ed. (1990) *Feminism/Postmodernism* London and New York: Routledge
- Norton, Eleanor Holmes (1970) 'For Sadie and Maude', in Morgan, ed., pp.397-404
- Oakley, Ann (1972) *Sex, Gender and Society* Melbourne: Sun Books
- Offen, Karen (1988) 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach' *Signs* **14**(1), Autumn, pp.119-57
- (1990) 'Feminism and Sexual Difference in Historical Perspective', in Rhode, ed., pp.13-20
- Ogden, C. K. and Richards, I. A. (1972[1923]) *The Meaning of Meaning* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Omolade, Barbara (1985) 'Black Women and Feminism', in Eisenstein and Jardine, eds, pp.247-57
- O'Shane, Pat (1976) 'Is There Any Relevance in the Women's Movement for Aboriginal Women?' *Refractory Girl* **12**
- Pateman, Carole (1980) "'The Disorder of Women": Women, Love, and the Sense of Justice', in Pateman, 1989, pp.17-32
- (1983) 'Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy', in Pateman, 1989, pp.118-140
- (1986) 'Introduction: The Theoretical Subversiveness of Feminism', in Pateman and Gross, eds
- (1988) *The Sexual Contract* Cambridge UK: Polity Press
- (1989) *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* Cambridge UK: Polity Press
- Pateman, Carole and Gross, Elizabeth, eds (1986) *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory* Sydney, London and Boston: Allen and Unwin
- Penelope, Julia (1990) *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues* New York: Pergamon Press, Athene Series

- Phillips, Anne (1987) *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class* London: Virago
- Phillips, Derek L. (1977) *Wittgenstein and Scientific Knowledge: A Sociological Perspective* London: Macmillan
- Pierce, Christine (1991) 'Postmodernism and Other Skepticisms', in Card, ed., pp.60-77
- Porter, Elisabeth J. (1991) *Women and Moral Identity* Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force (1988) *Report: Beyond These Walls* Brisbane
- Rattansi, Ali (1992) 'Changing the Subject? Racism, Culture and Education', in Donald and Rattansi, eds, pp.11-48
- Raymond, Janice (1986) *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* London: The Women's Press
- (1989) 'Putting the Politics Back into Lesbianism' *Women's Studies International Forum* 12 (2), pp.149-56
- (1994) *Women As Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle Over Women's Freedom* Melbourne: Spinifex Press
- Refractory Girl* 5 (1974) Summer
- Refractory Girl* 6 (1974) Autumn
- Rhode, Deborah L. (1990) 'Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference', in Rhode, ed., pp.1-9
- Rhode, Deborah L., ed. (1990) *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference* New Haven and London: Yale University Press
- Richardson, Diane and Robinson, Victoria, eds (1993) *Introducing Women's Studies* London: The Macmillan Press Ltd
- Roberts, Helen (1981) 'Some of the Boys Won't Play Any More: The Impact of Feminism on Sociology', in Spender, ed.
- Rose, Hilary (1987) 'Hand, Brain, and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences', in Harding and O'Barr, eds, pp.265-82
- Rowland, Robyn, ed. (1984) *Women Who Do and Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Rowland, Robyn and Klein, Renate D. (1990) 'Radical Feminism: Critique and Construct', in Gunew, ed., pp.271-303
- Rubin, Gayle (1984) 'Thinking Sex', in Vance, ed., pp.267-319
- Russ, Joanna (1985) 'Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement', in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts: Feminist Essays* Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, pp.43-54
- Russell, Diana E. H. (1984) *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse and Workplace Harassment* Beverly Hills: Sage Publications
- (1987) *The Sexual Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* New York: Basic Books Inc.
- Said, Edward (1987[1978]) *Orientalism* London: Peegrine Books
- (1994) *Culture and Imperialism* London: Vintage Books
- Sargent, Lydia, ed. (1981) *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* Boston: South End Press
- Saunders, Hilary (1975) 'Women Hold Up Half the Sky' *Aboriginal and Islander Identity* 2(6), October, p.28
- Schor, Naomi (1992) 'Feminism and George Sand: Lettres à Marie', in Butler and Scott, eds.
- Sculthorpe, Heather (1990) 'Review of Domestic Violence Resource Materials' *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* 2(46), October, pp.15-16

- Segal, Lynne (1984) *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* London: Virago
- The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition (1973)
- Smith, Barbara, ed. (1983) *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* New York: Kitchen Table: Women Of Color Press
- Smith, Dorothy E. (1987[1972]) 'Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology', in Harding, ed., pp.84-96
- (1987) *The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* Boston: Northeastern University Press
- (1990) *The Conceptual Practice of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* Boston: Northeastern University Press
- Snitow, Ann, Stansell, Christine and Thompson, Sharon, eds (1984) *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* London: Virago
- Spelman, Elizabeth (1988) *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* London: The Women's Press
- Spender, Dale (1987[1980]) *Man Made Language* London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- (1982) *Women of Ideas (and What Men Have Done to Them): From Aphra Behn to Adrienne Rich* London: Ark Paperbacks
- Spender, Dale, ed. (1981) *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines* Oxford: Pergamon
- Stanley, Liz (1992) 'The Impact of Feminism on Sociology in the Last 20 Years', in Kramarae and Spender, eds, pp.254-69
- Stanley, Liz and Wise, Sue (1993) *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology* London and New York: Routledge
- Stimpson, Catharine R. (1988) *Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces* New York and London: Routledge
- Stoltenberg, John (1990) *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* New York: A Meridian Book
- Summers, Anne (1975) *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia* Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books
- Sykes, Bobbi (Roberta) (1975) 'Black Women in Australia; A History', in Jan Mercer, ed., *The Other Half: Women in Australian Society* Victoria: Penguin Books, pp.313-21
- (1984) 'Bobbi Sykes', in Rowland, ed., pp.63-9
- THE FEMINISTS (1973[1969]) 'THE FEMINISTS: A Political Organization to Eliminate Sex Roles', in Koedt, Levine and Rapone, eds. *Radical Feminism* New York: Quadrangle Books
- Thompson, Denise (1974) *A Science of Sociology or A Sociology of Science: An Inquiry into the Nature of Sociological Explanation* unpublished research project, University of New South Wales
- (1976) *The Metaphysics of Social Theory, or Virtue is Knowledge: A Minor Investigation of Critical Theory* unpublished Honours thesis, University of New South Wales
- (1991) *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality* Sydney: The Gorgon's Head Press (self-published)
- (1992) 'Against the Dividing of Women: Lesbian Feminism and Heterosexuality' *Feminism and Psychology* 2(3), pp.387-98
- (1994) 'Retaining the Radical Challenge: A Reply to Wendy Hollway' *Feminism and Psychology* 4(2), pp.326-9

- (1995) 'Theory and Its Discontents: Another Reply to Wendy Hollway' *Feminism and Psychology* 5(4), pp.531-3
- (1996) 'The Self-Contradiction of Postmodernist Feminism', in Renate Klein and Diane Bell, eds *Radically Speaking* Melbourne: Spinifex Press
- Tong, Rosemary (1989) *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* London: Unwin Hyman
- Trebilcot, Joyce (1991) 'Ethics of Method: Greasing the Machine and Telling Stories', in Card, ed., pp.45-51
- Tuana, Nancy, ed. (1989) *Feminism and Science* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
- Tucker, Margaret (1977) *If Everyone Cared* Sydney: Ure Smith
- Vance, Carole S., ed. (1984) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Venceremos Brigade (1975) 'Black Women's Statement' *Aboriginal and Islander Identity* 2 (6), October, p.18
- Walker, Alice (1982) 'One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)—An Excerpt', in Hull, Scott and Smith, eds, pp.37-44
- Wallace, Michele (1982) 'Black Feminists Search For Sisterhood', in Hull, Scott and Smith, eds, pp.5-12
- (1990) *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* New York and London: Verso
- Ward, Glenyse (1987) *Wandering Girl* Broome: Magabala Books
- Ware, Celestine (1970) *Woman Power: The Movement for Women's Liberation* New York: Tower Publications, Inc.
- Waring, Marilyn (1988) *Counting For Nothing: What Men Value and What Women Are Worth* Wellington, New Zealand: Allen and Unwin, Port Nicholson Press
- Washington, Mary Helen (1982) 'Teaching *Black Eyed Susans*: An approach to the Study of Black Women Writers', in Hull, Scott and Smith, eds, pp.208-17
- (1985) 'How Racial Differences Helped Us Discover Our Common Ground', in Culley and Portuges, eds, pp.221-29
- Weedon, Chris (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell
- Williams, Raymond (1983) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* London: Flamingo/Fontana Paperbacks
- Winch, Peter (1958) *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- (1987) *Trying to Make Sense* Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1951[1922]) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- (1958[1953]) *Philosophical Investigations* Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Woolf, Virginia (1946[1929]) *A Room of One's Own* London: The Hogarth Press
- (1952[1938]) *Three Guineas* London: The Hogarth Press
- Yeatman, A. (1990) 'A Feminist Theory of Social Differentiation', in Nicholson, ed., pp.281-99