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*Pillory - if someone is
pilloried, they are publicly criticized by
a lot of people, especially in newspaper.*

Introduction

The general tenor of the arguments in this book is that radical feminism is not one form of feminism among others, but simply feminism 'unmodified' (MacKinnon, 1987: 16), and that the common practice of qualifying feminism with any of a variety of pre-existing frameworks serves to disguise the core meaning of feminism. In the 1970s, those frameworks tended to be summed up under the headings 'liberal feminism', 'socialist feminism' and 'radical feminism'; subsequently, they have multiplied into a plethora of 'feminisms' which defy enumeration. But such a characterization 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 a platform for attacking it from within.

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 conventionally male-identified, it is hardly surprising that a 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. 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. 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

last
course

question of male domination. While this may be inadvertent, it is none the less systematic. Constructs 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.¹

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 theorizing 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'.

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 three 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 (Lerner, 1993; Spender, 1982). (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 (pun intended) 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).²

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*, that is, 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 criticize one aspect of a text which in other respects displays impeccable feminist credentials.

The texts which I use to exemplify this kind of academic feminism 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 theorizing and not peculiar to particular authors.

My task is not to sort out who is a feminist and who is not. The issue of defining feminism is not a question of who is (or is not) a feminist. While it may indeed be the case that no one has the right to tell anyone else whether or not she is a feminist, that is not what is involved. To see it in that way can only impede the progress of feminism because it stymies the important project of self-clarification by placing a ban on saying what feminism is. It reduces 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' needs to be radically contested and debated. But that cannot happen as long as feminism continues to be implicitly defined only in terms of anything said or done by anyone who identifies as a feminist.

As an exercise in radical feminist theory, this present work is somewhat unusual. Radical feminist writing has not on the whole tended to engage in 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 theorizing. 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.³ 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 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

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of the social system which is male supremacy. 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 One is called 'Understanding Feminism'. In it I discuss what is at stake in feminist politics. In Chapter 1 I define feminism as a moral and political struggle of opposition to the social relations of male domination structured around the principle that only men count as 'human', and as a struggle for a genuine human status for women outside male definition and control. I also discuss what is involved in a feminist standpoint. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the concept of ideology. Chapter 2 discusses some objections which have been raised to the use of the term, and argues that it is useful as a designation of the ways in which domination is disguised in order to justify it and make it palatable. In this chapter I also criticize arguments to the effect that truth is complicit with domination, and discuss the issue of comprehensibility in feminist theory. In Chapter 3 I investigate some of the ways in which ideology works, through the inculcation of pleasure and desire, and through interpreting relations of ruling as the personal preferences or attributes of individuals. Part Two is called 'Misunderstanding Feminism'. It is devoted to criticisms of a number of ways of characterizing feminism other than in terms of the opposition to male domination. Chapter 4 discusses the feminist reluctance to define feminism. Chapter 5 discusses a number of implicit definitions of feminism in terms of 'women', 'patriarchy', 'sexism', 'gender' and 'dichotomies', arguing that all these meanings have limitations as the chief designator of a feminist politics. Chapter 6 looks at the question of 'differences between the sexes'. In Chapters 7 and 8 I discuss in some detail the question of 'differences among women', and in particular the contentious issue of 'race' and the part it has played in feminist politics. In the last chapter, I use the early radical feminist insight that male domination is the primary form of social domination in order to suggest alternative ways of bringing a feminist perspective to bear on racism and imperialism.

Notes

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

2 'Letter to Ruge', Kreuznach, September 1843, in *Early Writings*, Penguin Books, 1975: 209.

3 The reference is to Ludwig Wittgenstein's distinction between 'showing' and 'saying': 'What *can* be shown *cannot* be said' (Wittgenstein, 1951: 4.1212). The distinction may be absolute in the case of logic. 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.

Part One Understanding Feminism

1 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. 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 [feminist]; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least' (Jardine, 1985: 20). Even compilers of feminist dictionaries are reluctant to engage too rigorously in definition. Maggie Humm, for example, 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' (Humm, 1989: xiv).

These warnings against definition would have some point to them, were it not for the special circumstances of the current condition of feminist theorizing. There is 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. 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' (Mills, 1959) of postmodernism soak up all meaning, and the backlash against feminism masquerades as feminism itself. 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