
Feminism: Alive and Kicking

DEBAT

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Lately it has become popular to chime the death knoll of feminism, perhaps to say the final farewell with melancholy, or at least to make sure that its resurrection will make feminism unrecognizable to its adherents. This farewell to feminism appears in both unsurprising and surprising places: In the media one can read men denouncing women's abandonment of feminism in choosing the "fast track" —thankfully, it is added, men have been able to take over the "feminine" values that can give the world a human face. Many male academics are happy to view feminism as not worth having to live with, since they think that feminist theory means "how women think differently from men." And many energetic students read the message of post-structuralism — the hottest kind of theory in academic debates — to be that it is now time to say our final farewell to feminism and replace it with something as yet unknown.¹

Let me say at once that in my view feminism is alive and kicking — and ready to make trouble where trouble is needed. Feminism can still make plenty of trouble in

the universities — to show that there might just be a connection between research and gender; in the parliament — arguing for the rights of lesbian and single women to have access to reproductive technology; and in our homes — as we variously accept and resist entrenched gendered practices. Having said that, let me add that what being a feminist means to me today is different from what it meant to me over twenty years ago, when I first began describing myself in those terms. What it meant to me then had something to do with the radical potential of validating “women’s experience.”² What it means to me now has something to do with how gender and sexuality are pivotal factors in the complex of identities (including class, racial, national, ethnic, and religious aspects) that frame people’s lives. In this configuring of identities, gender and sexuality still may be treated as grounds for violence (as in massive war-rapes) and for political resistance. Life has not gotten simpler in these last twenty years, and neither has feminism.

In fact, in living forms there are many avenues for renewal, and the debates spawned by what we happily call “post-structuralism” have been a vital source of self-critique and renewal for advocates of feminism. But not because post-structuralism has been responsible for the death of feminism, in order to leave us instead with individuals who choose to play on or against gender identities as the avenue for an aestheticized politics. The radical potential in post-structuralist theory lies elsewhere: in its critique of essentialism in identity thinking and in its rethinking the parameters of power and political resistance.

It has become by now a somewhat tedious rhetorical question: if “women” do not exist, can there be any future for feminism? Those who have been most radical in their denunciation of the category of women (e.g., Denise Riley’s claim “that there *aren’t any* ‘women’”³ and Judith Butler, “Do the exclusionary practices that ground

feminist theory in a notion of ‘women’ as subject paradoxically undercut feminist goals to extend its claims to ‘representation?’”⁴) have never severed ties with feminist politics. On the contrary, they view their criticisms as aimed against essentialist constructions of identity, against the notion of a coherent and stable unified subject (“women”) that could serve as a foundation for feminist politics, in order to free feminism from a metaphysical and ontological inheritance that is counter to its own goals. In showing the constructions, exclusions, and instabilities involved in the category “women”, Riley and Butler oppose themselves on this point to Luce Irigaray, who writes: “Women’s liberation, and indeed the liberation of humanity, depends upon the definition of a female generic, that is, a definition of what woman is, not just this or that woman.”⁵

In rejecting the attempt to define woman, and focussing instead on how the category “women” is produced, writers like Riley and Butler reject an ontological dualism between the sexes. But the alternative they propose is not a neo-liberal version of individualism, where individuals are free to “play” their gender according to their “choice”.⁶ Such an interpretation of post-structuralist debates in feminism misses some of the crucial issues: post-structuralists generally abandon the notion that the “individual” is a key term in analysis, since “subjects” themselves are effects of power and are full of fractures and lacks. Nor is “choice” on safe ground, since the term appeals to a notion of a self-knowing and self-willing agent that is the mark of modernity that post-structuralists attack. Rather, post-structuralists have been busy deconstructing concepts like “individual” and “choice”. This is not to say that they don’t run into theoretical storms that they have difficulty in navigating and that create room for these misunderstandings to arise.⁷ But the politics spawned by post-structuralist debates, including within feminis-

ms, are inimical to the politics of individualism.

Let me mention a few of the theoretical challenges that post-structuralists face in attempting to reflect on politics. The concept of collectivity, for example, has traditionally been a pivotal concept in political theories, including the radical theories of Marxism (the concept of “class”) and earlier versions of feminist theory (e.g., the “standpoint of women”). But if one deconstructs the “subject” of politics, and argues that there is no ontological reference which can found the representations of political discourse, how is it possible to connect an analysis of the effects of power and the strategies of resistance to any kind of social grouping? It is this dilemma that has led critics of post-structuralism to view it as impotent for addressing political critique and the possibility of change.⁸ Butler defends a post-structuralist avenue by arguing for provisional unitives and coalitions in dealing with concrete actions.⁹ But these provisional groupings are still that — social groupings, even if not eternally existing forms. Although this answer to the question of how post-structuralism can think collectivity may be unsatisfactory to many, it is still an attempt to think through sociality and is not a reversion to individualism.

Perhaps an even more difficult problem for post-structuralist theorists is the question of agency. If subjects are themselves effects of power, how is it possible to think critique and resistance to forms of power? This had led Butler to pursue the question in *The Psychic Life of Power*: “If subordination is the condition of possibility for agency, how might agency be thought in opposition to the forces of subordination?”¹⁰ Here she faces a question that has an analogue in ideology critique, where the problem is how individuals and groups, whose consciousness itself is shaped by alienating social conditions, can develop a critique of these conditions. Her solution, which invokes the “ambivalence” of the subject because of

incommensurable temporal modalities¹¹, may be considered inadequate by critics. But in any case, it is not a reversion to a facile notion of individual choice.

A third theoretical difficulty for post-structuralism is the question of materiality. Critical political discourses since Marx have put the question of materiality as central for analysis (e.g., the structure of capitalism in Marxism and Critical Theory, or the sexual division of labor in earlier feminist theories¹²). Post-structuralists claim that their emphasis on discourse is not a rejection of materiality, but rather a new avenue for thinking it. For example, writers like Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz follow Foucault in emphasizing that the body is an effect of social inscriptions. The body (or rather, bodies) is not itself a prior fixed category but is constructed according normative laws or historical vicissitudes. There are significant differences between these two writers in their thinking of bodily materiality.¹³ But neither writer treats one’s relation to bodily inscription as one that is freely chosen by individuals, since the various notions of the subject and choice have been problematized in the theorization of bodies.

Post-structuralist theory has without doubt contributed significant vigor to current feminist debates. But one should recall at the same time that since one of the central aims of these theories is to interrogate normative and exclusionary practices, it would be foolish to create a normative and exclusionary version of post-structuralist feminist theory. On the contrary, there is still room for many kinds of feminisms, both in practice and theory. For example, one of the most crucial issues for feminists today is to address the massive violence against women in the form of war-rape in countries like the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The theorists mentioned above, though they seek to address the complexity of identities, nonetheless do not take as their task an analysis of these concrete crises.¹⁴ Instead of ringing the death bells for feminism, let us ce-

lebrate the continuing birth of new ideas and strategies that can help feminists grapple with the oppressive and repressive effects of power that are very much on the agenda in the contemporary world.

NOTER

1. See Helle Husum, "Er feminismen en død sild?", *Kvinder, Køn og Forskning*, 7.årgang, nr. 1, s.77-79.
2. For example, see Dorothy Smith, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology" in Sandra Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), pp.84-96.
3. Denise Riley, "Am I that Name?" *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), p.2.
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.5.
5. Luce Irigaray, in "The Other: Woman", i: *love to you*, translated by Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996),p.65.
6. Butler admits that *Gender Trouble* can be misread as a form of voluntarism, and hence she sought to clarify and deepen the theory of "performativity" in *Bodies that Matter*.
7. For example, see the debates in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser,

Feminist Contentions (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Butler's revised attempt to account for agency in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.10ff.

8. For example, see Seyla Benhabib's and Nancy Fraser's essays in *Feminist Contentions*.

9. *Gender Trouble*, p.15.

10. *The Psychic Life of Power*, p.10.

11. *Ibid.*, p.14.

12. See for example, Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism", in Harding, pp. 157-180.

13. For example, Grosz is greatly influenced by Irigaray and argues that sexual difference "occupies a preontological—certainly a preepistemological—terrain", *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 209. Butler, on the other hands, offers a more radical rejection of ontological thinking in her theory of materialization. (See *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.9ff.

14. In fact, post-structuralists are often criticized for giving attention to the Other, but never to concrete others. For example, Derrida does not cite women writers, and numerous anthologies on feminism and post-structuralism have no articles by black women.

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