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Women's Studies as a strategy for change: between criticism and vision

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Underlying the current dialogue concerning alternative methods for practicing Women's Studies lies the fundamental question of purpose: why study women, their historical contexts and their created works? The answer to this question cannot be logically deduced from any theory or method, but lies outside of the scholarly process. It is rooted in the personally defined intentions of the scholar-teacher herself. The answer which one gives to this question is decisive, for the methods of study that she selects can be judged to be appropriate only in reference to the purpose. To begin with the question of method, rather than that of purpose not only is irrational ('I don't know why I'm doing this, but at least I'm doing it well,' i.e., following the rules), but also contributes to what Mary Daly (1973) has termed the 'invisible tyranny' of method.[1]

An early definition of Women's Studies linked the purposes of Women's Studies scholarship to the aims of the feminist movement: to the eradication of all forms of sexism and thus to the liberation of women. Women's Studies was defined by the founders of the National Women's Studies Association as an 'educational strategy' for change, not because of some abstract principle that change is good in itself but because the founders recognized that we live in a sexist world in which women are devalued, subordinated, and in other ways oppressed. They held that it is that world that needs to be changed and that Women's Studies is a means to this end (*Women's Studies Newsletter*, 1977).

To participate as scholar-teachers in changing a sexist world we do

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more than describe or distill that world. We simultaneously understand and oppose it. Whether we engage in historical analysis, literary criticism, sociological investigation, or interdisciplinary studies, our relationship to our material is critical, because our purpose is to change the sexist world that we are also seeking to understand. We assume, therefore, in our development of knowledge a critical sensibility that holds that coming to knowledge and making judgments are not separate processes, but that (in Flannery O'Connor's phrase) 'judgment is implicit in seeing' (Walker, 1979, p. 49). In this we affirm the power of the full range of our sensibilities, rejecting the belief that forms the basis of the male-defined intellectual tradition, a belief that holds judging and seeing to be necessarily separate processes. Separating seeing from judging dilutes the power of 'seeing' so that it becomes an enfeebled process of blind observation and bland description. Thus released from the full range of human perception and understanding, judgment itself becomes trivialized as mere 'opinion.' We reject this enfeebling approach not simply because it bores us intellectually, but also because it violates the vehemence with which we oppose the sexist world that devalues us.

The development of this feminist critical approach to knowledge begins with an awareness of our relationship to the historical contexts in which we live. Those who teach Women's Studies courses are familiar with the process of developing this awareness. It begins with the fact that in Women's Studies courses women students are no longer studying material that is totally outside themselves, but are learning about the ways in which their social contexts have shaped them as women. In this process social knowledge and self-knowledge become mutually informing. Not only can students illuminate knowledge of themselves through understanding their social contexts, but also they can test interpretations of their social contexts from the perspectives of their own experience. For them the personal becomes intellectual, and the intellectual, personal.[2]

The great possibility of such courses where knowledge of the social world becomes personalized is the chance of connecting psyche and history. These are the moments when we discover that buried parts of ourselves are held in common with others. These 'experiences of consciousness-in-history' are exciting not only because they reveal to us knowledge of ourselves that we have buried and 'forgotten,' but also because they link us to others through the experiences that we

hold in common. To study the history of women, especially as it is recorded through the consciousness of women themselves, is to set the opportunity for discovering how one's life experiences are connected to those of other women. Psyche and history are thus joined in the discovery of the ways that one's personal life has been shaped by being born a woman.

The feminist consciousness that emerges from this connection between psyche and history becomes critical when a student discovers patterns in her own and other women's lives that are not created freely, but are determined by restrictive, male-dominated structures. Through reading critical analyses and examining her own life, a student discovers the ways in which she has been victimized because she is a woman: regarded physically as a non-person, an 'other' who mirrors and validates men (de Beauvoir, 1952); encapsulated and domesticated within the family as mother, where she is regarded as a totally self-less caretaker, an 'it' (Dinnerstein, 1976); denied access to historically created spheres of power, wealth, and social prestige, where she is regarded as an incompetent child who needs to be protected (Gornick, 1971); and perhaps most devastatingly, cut off from her own bodily and personal power as an autonomous human being (Ehrenreich and English, 1979). These discoveries of subordination and victimization, because they are personal as well as historical, often generate anger. Paradoxically, however, the discoveries that produce anger also intensify understanding. Putting one's own struggles in historical context enables a student to distance herself from her personal experiences of victimization at the same time that she learns to uncover these parts of herself and feel them deeply.

Judging what we see is rooted in our personal connection to the object of our understanding as well as our distancing ourselves from it. To reflect upon the historical oppression of women and to assert that 'it need not be' (Rich, 1976) presumes both the ability to take the oppression of women as an object of understanding as well as to feel the oppression in a deeply personal way. Moreover, this refusal to tolerate the conditions that we discover proceeds from the historical consciousness that the world could be different. It assumes that alternatives are possible to the historically created male-dominated structures that presently oppose the freedom of women. By clarifying that which we oppose, we set the groundwork for creating a vision of that for which we long.

Because this alternative vision emerges from one's own sense of devaluation and struggle as a woman in a male-dominated society, it is fundamentally a personal vision of one's life freed from these constraints. The dream of freedom for oneself in a world in which all women are free emerges from one's own life experience in which one is not free, precisely because one is a woman. The liberation of women is thus not an abstract goal tacked onto the creative process, but is the motive for that process. Individual freedom and the freedom of all women are linked when one has reached the critical consciousness that we are united first of all in our unfreedom. Hence, the personal dream of freedom is also the feminist vision of liberation.

We know from our classes in Women's Studies the importance of pushing our criticism past itself to the visions that the criticism suggests. Unless we do that, we offer no hope for directing the anger that is often generated by the critical awareness, and we are left with paralyzing fury or hopeless resignation ('Is this another moan course?', a Women's Studies major asked on the first day of class). To push beyond criticism, however, is not to relinquish it, but to hold it in tension with vision. The criticism indicates to us an absence or a problem which our imagination can transcend. This transcendence is a visionary transformation of the conditions which we oppose, a new world view rather than a mere extension or rearrangement of present structures. Feminist vision is thus, not a feasibility study, but an imaginative leap that stands opposed to sexist society. As negations of the conditions that we criticize, visions both reflect those conditions and oppose them. In the words of Josephine Donovan, 'The feminist critic is thus on the cutting edge of the dialectic. She must, in a sense, be Janus-headed: engaged in negations that yield transcendences' (1975, p. 80).

By engaging in 'negations that yield transcendence' our Women's Studies classes are 'educational strategies' for change. First, by articulating that which we oppose and by envisioning alternative futures, we identify the goals and strategies for action; that is, we clarify what it is we want to move *away from* as well as what it is we want to move *toward*. Change is thus informed by purpose and goal. Second, through the classroom process itself we create changes in the forms of learning: in student-teacher relationship, in the personal-intellectual mediation, in the dialogue and negotiations from which critical perspectives and transcending visions emerge. In the processes of creating these changes

in the classroom itself, we not only produce models for other contexts, but also learn about processes for creating feminist change. We learn, for example, that criticism and vision are not static ideations but are related in a continuing mediation in which they themselves are changed. Hence, the very processes of creating alternative possibilities changes the way in which we understand the problems we criticize; and to the extent that we realize our visions, the problems themselves will be transformed.

Thus, to play upon the dialectic implied in Flannery O'Connor's aphorism, through teaching Women's Studies as an educational strategy for change we affirm that 'judgment is implicit in seeing' *and that seeing is implicit in judging*. Refusal to accept the conditions which oppose us is the ground upon which we both understand those conditions and imagine alternatives to them. Our negations ground our seeing.[3] To be a feminist seer is thus to appropriate the full range of human possibilities of seeing and to give them new meaning. We experience *and* understand, discover *and* create, judge *and* envision, grasp *and* take care of. This process teaches us to move beyond the male definitions and dichotomies that falsify our experiences and possibilities, to creating spheres of thought and action where we can simultaneously discover and create ourselves and the world in which we live.

We bring the criticism-vision dialectic to our classrooms with an intensity and frequency that is less visible in our scholarship. The reasons for this difference, if not happy, are at least intelligible. They are rooted, first of all, in the process and criteria for judging academic acceptability of our work. Published research and not teaching has become the activity *sine qua non* for survival and advancement within the academy. Hence, because it is judged to be less important for academic success, classroom teaching affords greater freedom for responding to issues and creating alternative approaches to knowledge that may transcend the male-defined tradition of education. In addition, Women's Studies students frequently goad us into confronting pertinent issues and devising methods that are appropriate to those issues, thus reminding us of the Women's Studies commitment to change for women. Conversely, our publications are for the male-defined intellectual tradition because our survival within the academy is dependent upon their acceptability within that tradition. In this lies our problem. First, the male-defined tradition has institutionalized the 'tyranny of method' as the requirement for 'good' scholarship.

To violate the canonized methods of our disciplines through employing the critical-visionary approaches appropriate to feminist change is to risk certain rejection by the academic gate-keepers. Second, the anti-feminism that is implicit in the above approach is rendered explicit in the academy's judgment of scholarship that has women as its subject and is published in Women's Studies journals. Regardless of its adherence or lack thereof to the institutionalized methods, scholarship about women is viewed with suspicion for its perceived lack of seriousness, importance, and contribution to 'the field'.

It is no wonder that many academic women have decided that if they wish to continue studying and writing about women while pursuing an academic career, the realistic course of action is the cautious one: writing about women, their historical contexts and creative works, but employing scrupulously the established methods of the male-defined intellectual tradition. This cautious resolution to the dilemma that the academic woman faces is unfortunately a compromise that robs our work of the Women's Studies commitment to feminist change. By producing information about women as the male traditions would 'see' us, we may slip through the immediate academic personnel hoops at the expense of tacitly supporting present conditions of female oppression and distortions of our experiences. By choosing not to see and judge but only to 'observe' and describe, we reify the conditions of our own — and thus all women's — oppression and further entrench the male-defined tradition which imposes the methodological tyranny.

And yet, criticizing this compromise taken by some academic women does not remove the underlying dilemma that women in the academy face. To have a woman-centered university (Rich, 1979) requires at the very least having women in the university, and beyond that, having women in positions of power to make changes for women. To criticize the culture, history, and procedures that undergird the institution through whose ranks we seek to advance, and to expect that our criticism will be accepted as a valid means to that advancement, is to face a tough problem, indeed. How we personally mediate the various contradictions inherent in this problem cannot be prescribed, but emerges from our own commitments and needs as well as the conditions that we face.[4] Whatever the specific risks and compromises that we may choose, whether we leave the academy or attempt to advance or survive within it, the goal of creating change *for* women guides us in our struggle.

To choose to apply our scholarship to this purpose is to employ the dialectical approach to knowledge which we employ in our classes. Like the classroom activity, our scholarship can criticize and imagine alternatives to conditions outside of itself (i.e., sexist institutions and practices), and thus suggest goals and strategies for changing those conditions. It can study as models the lives of women from the past who engaged in this struggle and who can teach us today. Moreover, just as the pedagogy of Women's Studies classes is itself a means for creating change, so scholarship about women can change the means by which we understand ourselves and the world in which we live. To change the forms through which our experience is mediated – especially that of language – is to break through the tyranny of the ultimate method by which our selves and our possibilities are made known to us.

The transformation of categories and concepts is basic to our capacity to engage in 'negations that yield transcendences.' To imagine a different world requires first of all the ability to perceive the world differently and to open ourselves to formerly denied possibilities. The taken-for-granted-world mediated by familiar categories is not a natural 'given' but consists of historically created forms that define feelings and give meaning to experience. The given categories not only define conscious processes, but also permeate the unconscious, creating what Herbert Marcuse has identified as the 'false automatism of immediate experience' (1969, p. 39). This link between psyche and symbol, thus, binds us deeply to the perceptions and purposes of the symbol makers, i.e., those who have the power to define their symbols as universal and absolute. Today this means that our conscious and unconscious processes are informed by categories and concepts that, in the words of Monique Wittig, 'teach us about ourselves through the instrumentality of specialists' (1980, p. 107). We are defined, and come to regard ourselves as means through which others' purposes are realized, as objects for manipulation and control, and as interchangeable parts in an apparatus that has no plan. Thus, we are defined not only *in terms of* the instrumentality, but we *become* the instrumentality of those who perpetuate the tyranny of method.

To rupture these categories is to break the limitations upon perception and to create new ways of seeing and of expressing that perception. It is also to reclaim ourselves as our own ends as we refuse to accept being the means for others. It should come as no surprise to us

that it is the feminist poets who are taking the greater risks in shattering those old forms and creating new ones: in critically uncovering the cultural meanings of the categories that take women as instrumentalities (Griffin, 1981) and in creating new categories that simultaneously touch and liberate our experience.[5] Those who transform categories risk confronting experience in itself as they reject the familiar signposts to its meaning. In the words of Adrienne Rich 'No one who survives to speak / new language, has avoided this: / the cutting-away of an old force that held her / rooted to an old ground' (1978, p. 25).

As we reject the 'old ground,' we should also reject its assumptions that only the poets who inspire us have the license to cut the conventions that once appeared to hold us down. The very definition of scholarship as uncritical and unimaginative, and therefore unable to be a strategy for change is a pretentious weight that holds us to this 'old ground.' To negate and transcend it, we must risk cutting ourselves free from its familiar but false categories and promises.

Notes

1 'The tyranny of methodolatry hinders new discoveries. It prevents us from raising questions never asked before and from being illumined by ideas that do not fit into pre-established boxes and forms. The worshippers of Method have an effective way of handling data that does not fit into the Respectable Categories of Questions and Answers. They simply classify it as nondata, thereby rendering it invisible' (Daly, 1973, p. 11).

2 See, for example, Rutenberg, 'Learning Women's Studies,' this volume Chapter 5.

3 The idea of the negation of domination giving rise to alternative possibilities derives from the concept of 'critical theory' associated with the work of those of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt. While the idea of negation is a useful one for feminist critical theory, the content and promise of that negation is not derivative from the male critical tradition, but is grounded in women's concrete, lived experience.

4 A collective strategy is no less complex, but it does create power in union that may be lacking in individual rank. For an excellent analysis of an example of successful campus organizing, see Karen Childers, Phillis Rackin, Cynthia Secor, and Carol Tracy, 'A Network of One's Own,' unpublished paper.

5 For an excellent analysis of Adrienne Rich's work from this perspective, see Diehl (1980).

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14

In praise of theory: the case for Women's Studies[1]

Mary Evans

One of the most obvious results of contemporary feminism has been the establishment of a new academic subject: that of Women's Studies. None of the courses can be said to have been welcomed with wild enthusiasm by the male academic establishment: at best a benign tolerance has allowed academics to teach courses about that half of the population which has been generally invisible in much of traditional scholarship. Yet at the same time as those of us teaching Women's Studies have been arguing with the more articulate battalions of male chauvinism, we have also been faced with a more problematic form of opposition, in the shape of criticism from other feminists who have voiced either misgivings or outright hostility to the mere idea of Women's Studies, and have condemned Women's Studies as incompatible with feminism. These criticisms have often been far more difficult to deal with than those of the academic arrière-garde since they are often better arguments and are capable of including those acute fits of sisterly soul-searching which can paralyse all further activity. Disagreeing with Professor D.E.D. Wood is one thing, disagreeing with a woman who prefaces all her remarks with an invocation of sisterhood is another, and far more fearful, experience.

The argument put forward by some feminists suggests that Women's Studies represent either the exploitation or the de-radicalization (or both) of feminism and the women's movement. By becoming part of what is an elitist, and essentially male system of higher education, it is argued that those who teach (and presumably also those who study)

Women's Studies only serve their own professional interests and those of patriarchy and the male ruling class. The energies that should be directed towards the transformation of social and sexual relationships are, it is suggested, dissipated in narrow scholastic battles which serve only to perpetuate those hierarchies of control and authority to which the women's movement is opposed.

Inevitably this argument poses the crucial question of whether or not Women's Studies – as a distinct area of study within the academy – is feminist in any meaningful sense. Many feminists would agree that a distinction must be made between Women's Studies and feminist studies, and that only the latter is a viable and defensible form of feminist activity. As I shall argue in this paper I do not think this is the case.

Women's Studies is feminist studies

My major reason for supposing that no distinction exists between Women's Studies and feminist studies is two-fold: first, because Women's Studies and feminist studies both challenge male intellectual hegemony. In asserting, describing and documenting the existence of women, both women's studies and feminist studies propose a radical change in the theoretical organization of the universe. To quote Maurice Godelier, himself paraphrasing Marx:

> We might say that the dominant ideas in most societies are the ideas of the dominant sex, associated and mingled with those of the dominant class. In our own societies, a struggle is now under way to abolish relations of both class and sex domination, without waiting for one to disappear first (1981, p. 17).

Women's Studies is part of that struggle: a self-conscious determination to show that both the content and form of existing knowledge is related to the unequal distribution of social power between men and women. The second reason that I would propose for there being no distinction between feminist and Women's Studies is that the distinction often rests upon a falsely homogeneous view of feminism. Women's Studies is seen as the reactionary, incorporative, pro-status quo activity whilst feminism is always radical, always antithetical to existing society.

Yet feminism – as everyone in the women's movement knows – comes in a variety of forms, some of which are far from incompatible with industrial capitalism as we know it. To suppose, therefore, that feminism and feminist studies, has an inevitable theoretical coherence and radicalism which Women's Studies lacks is to run the risk of reifying a quite mythical unity.

There are, then, two forms of feminist attack on Women's Studies. The first, outlined above, is that Women's Studies are not feminist studies. The second, to be discussed here, is that neither feminist studies nor Women's Studies are desirable. It is thus argued by some feminists that any academic study of women is divorced from the interests of the women's movement, that it engages energies that would be better used elsewhere and that it serves the interests of a small, élite group of female academics.

Theory versus experience

A further argument, derived in part from a hostility to theoretical speculation that is a well-documented feature of British life, deserves less detailed attention. Nevertheless, it does demand mention. It is the contention – argued most passionately by some feminists – that there is no necessary difference between reported, subjective experience and theoretical and analytical work. This position would therefore assign the same importance, both practical and theoretical, to the work of a feminist theorist (by which I mean someone who has attempted a coherent analysis of her situation and that of other women) and any statement about her situation by any woman. This is emphatically not to say that a woman expressing horror or dislike at her situation does not have the same right to express that dislike or the same claim to be taken seriously as the theorist with a range of five-volume arguments at her disposal, but that a distinction has to be made between the analysis of subordination of all women and the subjective and personal reaction to that subordination by one woman.

Yet analysis of the situation of women is in some ways deeply problematic for the women's movement, since the first phenomenon that meets us when we attempt to analyse the situation of women is that it is many and varied. Thus we confront a fundamental issue within the women's movement: exactly what constitutes the oppression

of women and who decides if it exists? It is clear from the reaction of many women (both in this country and in the Third World) that Western feminism has often made too many, too ethnocentric judgements about the nature of oppression.

In our attempt to achieve objective analytical accounts of the situations of women we are, therefore, stuck with theory. If this can be tolerated – and clearly some feminists do not tolerate it, seeing theory as a masculinization of that apparently exclusively female virtue of feeling – the existence of theory still poses problems for feminists. Three difficulties about the existence and elaboration of feminist theory and analysis come to mind. The first is the issue of the accessibility of theoretical discussion about women to all women, with the implication that it is possible that feminist theory may become the preserve of a small élite, which occasionally issues statements on what to think and how to think it, to the rest of the women's movement. The second issue is the problem of how feminist energy should be directed, and whether or not the intellectual and indeed practical resources that are directed into the development of feminist theory and Women's Studies would not be better employed in other ways, such as participation in grass-roots organizing. The third problem concerning feminist theory is the criticism that the development of feminist theory serves the career and professional interests of those involved in its development, makes experts of a small group and – this is related to the first point – denies the rank and file of the movement access to decision making and control of the formulation of policy.

Whilst these issues are common to the Left as Western Europe has known it, they are also a large part of feminism's dissatisfaction with traditional Left wing parties and organisations. Indeed, as Sheila Rowbotham, Lynn Segal and Hilary Wainwright have argued, it is essential to feminism that it should organize in a much more democratic and less authoritarian way than the traditional male Left. The contribution of feminism to the Left has been, they argue, the demonstration that political power does not have to ossify in the hands of a small élite and that it is possible for radical, left-wing organizations to be both effective and democratic. It is arguable that Rowbotham and her co-authors place too much emphasis on disillusionment with the authoritarian male Left in explaining the commitment to democracy within the women's movement since that very Left which is castigated in *Beyond the Fragments* has not been without its own democratic impulses

recently. Nevertheless, whatever the origin of its democratic ideals, the British women's movement is deeply hostile to, and suspicious of, institutionalized power in any shape or form, be it intellectual or organizational. Yet despite this suspicion, British feminism does have an indigenously produced theoretical tradition of some sophistication, within and related to a women's movement which is deeply suspicious of all forms of élitism.

To return to the three problems about Women's Studies and feminist theory which I posed earlier. The first issue which I identified is whether or not feminist theory will become the exclusive activity of a small élite. The issue is a particularly crucial one in the case of Britain, where an exceptionally élitist system of higher education restricts the means of theoretical production to a very small number of people, and an even smaller number of women.

But it would be wrong to suppose that there is a *single* kind of feminist theory: some feminist writing, of great theoretical complexity, is accessible and readily comprehensible, whilst other feminist writing is virtually indecipherable to anyone without immense resources of time, patience, imagination and encyclopaedias on French intellectual practice. Nor is there any single home of those guilty of theoretical obscurantism; they lurk amongst feminist Marxists, feminist psychoanalysts and structuralists of all kinds and persuasions. Whilst some feminist Marxists write with great clarity and precision, others plunge their readers headlong into debates and definitions of shattering incomprehensibility. However, whilst I do not defend the deliberate use of obscure language in order to perplex, mystify and induce feelings of inadequacy, I would argue that there might be a case in some instances for the development of a highly precise theoretical language. Marxist feminist accounts of the economy, or the class structure, are one instance where the use of what is in a sense a technical language could be justified.

But there is no necessary reason within the practice of producing theory why a precise theoretical language, or theory itself, should become the preserve of a small élite. Theory is much more likely to become élitist for reasons outside itself; that is, the social conditions in which intellectual life takes place produce the possibility of élitist theory, rather than the theory itself. To condemn theory because of the possibility, however small, that it will remain the preserve of an élite, suggests a quite uncritical, and indeed reactionary, acceptance of

a society in which access to higher education and critical thought is denied to many people. The implication of a claim that all analysis must be understood by all, is that those committed to change must accept the given divisions within any society and not attempt to do anything to change those divisions except in terms of those existing divisions. Thus we would have theory for graduates, the school-leavers with O levels, the almost illiterate and so on. The production of all these different theories would satisfy those who want to make feminism accessible to everyone, yet they would do nothing to challenge existing inequalities or hierarchies.

The risks of anti-theoreticism

Perhaps the crucial problem of feminist theory is not, however, its accessibility but about the resources that its production commands. The second issue about feminist theory is, therefore, the criticism that producing theory drains the women's movement of energy and talent that might be better spent elsewhere. Feminism (like socialism), it is argued, faces the appalling spectre of being so pre-occupied with interpreting events in the light of theory that it is rapidly overtaken by events and becomes the victim, rather than the vanguard, of history.

Yet an equally awful prospect is that feminism, in refusing to develop a coherent theory, remains at that stage of primitive subjectivism that is characteristic of some of the most reactionary social organizations in existence. That is not to say that all theories are necessarily right, but that the exercise of the construction of a rational case is the first step towards a real understanding of the social world. It is not for nothing that Jane Austen identified 'mean understanding' as one of the most unhappy states for human beings to live in. She well understood the horror of having to live in a circumscribed social world in which people – but perhaps most particularly women by virtue of their domestic seclusion – were constantly in the presence of over-developed opinion and quite under-developed understanding. Of the great nightmare characters of fiction, Jane Austen created perhaps the most vivid representatives of that state of existence in which self-interest, personal inclination and unreflective feeling could, in its human embodiment, create hell for other people. It may seem strange to cite the work of Jane Austen as relevant to the problems of contemporary feminism, but I would argue that she warns us against one of the risks which anti-theoretical feminism runs: that of refusing the accumulated knowledge of the past two thousand years. When some of Austen's more headstrong romantic heroines either throw themselves, or threaten to throw themselves, into some absurd romantic venture, they are cautioned by the author or a more careful character, to consider what has happened to other individuals who have followed too much the devices and desires of their own hearts. The heart, and all kinds of spontaneous feeling, was not, Austen realized, necessarily the best guide to the form of action most likely to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. To assert, therefore, as do some feminists, particularly in the United States, that women should 'get in touch with their own feelings' and 'reclaim their own subjectivity', is to follow a path which could lead to the most closed and unproductive of dead ends.

Feminist theory can, hopefully, lead us away from the blind alley of subjective feeling and subjective action. Yet the case against theory makes a great deal of the distinction between the production of theory and action which seems to suggest a theory of knowledge in which thought and action have no effect on each other. This view invokes a picture of human beings as headless chickens: the head, full of theory, lies inert and ineffective, while the headless body, empty of direction, rushes around in mindless circles. This dichotomy between theory and practice leads to some bizarre conclusions about the social world: that 'action' or practice is in some way separable from thought and that theory is always the soft option and action always the role of the true believer. It is seldom allowed that human beings have not only achieved a practical mastery of nature, but have also created most elaborate systems of thought, belief and ideology, which have critical effects on the material conditions of life of millions of people. The production of counter-ideologies may, therefore, be as much part of a struggle of the oppressed as any other.

Profiteering feminists?

The final criticism of feminism theory which has been named here is that the production of theory by feminists is motivated exclusively by the desire for self-aggrandisement of some kind. Protagonists of this argument go on to suggest that the production of feminist theory is in

itself often suspect, in that it increases the discrepancy between highly educated women – able to write, and presumably understand, theory – and those women with little or no higher education.

The first part of this criticism of feminist theory – that it enhances the status, and the wealth, of those women producing it – is difficult to accept as a measured or rational criticism. It is undeniable that a few – a very few – women have grown rich by writing feminist, or quasi-feminist books, but in comparison to these quite exceptional cases there are literally hundreds of women in schools, universities and various other institutions who have battled, and are battling, to suggest that women do have special interests, and that the discussion and consideration of these interests merits attention. Furthermore, a brief look at those women who have written best-selling feminist works shows us that even feminist riches are intensely problematic. Poor Kate Millett, racked by guilt and conscience, beset by requests for help and money, exposed to every scurrilous intrusion of a totally irresponsible mass media, is a creature worthy of great feminist sympathy and understanding rather than a somewhat mean-minded envy for the income which her writing generated. Simone de Beauvoir received serious critical attention for the essays and novels which she wrote before the publication of *The Second Sex*, but as soon as that book was published she, like Kate Millett, was discussed and pilloried as a figure of fun and curiosity. The moral of these two cases is therefore, that successful feminists (or feminists who are successful in terms of the market place of capitalist production) cannot hope to enjoy that success. For a woman to write critically about her situation guarantees notoriety and hostility. Should that feminist criticism strike a sympathetic and resonant note in a large audience – as did *The Second Sex* and *Sexual Politics* – the more likely that the author will be submitted to every intrusive device of mis-representation of which the media is capable.

But many other feminists do not, of course, write best-sellers. We toil away in more prosaic and limited ways: proposing courses on Women's Studies, attempting to do feminist research or to encourage women students to set their sights above the given limits of female achievement. We must ask if these activities prolong élitism, or serve our professional interests. Suppressing, at this stage a desire to launch into biographical anecdote, I would argue that this is emphatically not the case: in most cases our professional interests would be best served by keeping well away from Women's Studies, let alone feminism.

But the reasons for saying that this is the case are more complex than might be supposed. The simple answer – and indeed an important part of the answer – is that Women's Studies is seen by many male academics as both a personal and an intellectual threat. It is very difficult to demonstrate this in academic terms: that is, I cannot say that you should turn to journal X or Y to see an example of this blatant prejudice. Academics are generally loathe to put on paper something which might correspond to an unsubstantiated opinion, or prejudice. The bias against women is much more subtle therefore than blatant, clear sexism, and frequently takes the form of the exclusion of women rather than bias against them.

So many male academics simply didn't see women as part of the social world, rather than taking a conscious decision to exclude them from it. To be asked, therefore, to make a conscious decision about *including* women, is something of a problem for individuals who have previously refused to recognize that the issue exists. It takes an effort of will to appreciate that the boundaries of a particular subject are neither as accurate nor as inclusive as has been hitherto supposed. Feminism poses, therefore, a genuine instance of a paradigm shift – a shift which like many other shifts is inevitably resisted by those committed to the modes and practices of thought and existing knowledge.

Sex-blind disciplines?

In resisting the discussion of women in the curriculum, academics (of both sexes) generally fall back on two arguments. First, that the existing literature on women is inadequate and second, that although it is conceded that it may be necessary for women to occupy a more central place in the disciplines than previously, the central issues of all subjects are sex-blind, and will remain untouched by the discussion of women.

The denial of the relevance of the study of women, and the specificity of the female case, to the central issues of a subject has important practical and intellectual consequences within the academy, one of which is the possibility of the pejorative labelling of women who produce work on women as narrow specialists in esoteric fields, whilst more conventional studies become important works of scholarship.

The history of theoretical feminism in Britain and the United States has yet to be written. However, when it is documented it would seem