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M Current Research

A new doctoral dissertation in English literature from Göteborg University:

Helena Ardholm. 1998. *The Emblem and the Emblematic Habit of Mind in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*.

In her dissertation, Helena Ardholm argues that the study of the emblem (a Renaissance genre) and the study of literature may be brought together to propose an emblematic approach to reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Ardholm traces the reception of the devotional branch of emblematics from the Renaissance to nineteenth century England to show how the Brontë sisters are able to use emblematic discourse, or the creative principles of the emblem genre, to structure and interpret a variety of spiritual matters in the two texts. Ardholm concludes that the existence of emblematic discourse in the novels not only suggests that the Brontës participate in a larger context of nineteenth century Christian exegetic habits, but also that the novels invite the reader to explore and critically examine a discourse that "reads the world" from the perspective of a particular world view that has been reiterated in devotional practices as well as in English literature at least until the mid-nineteenth century.

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Feminism and the "Difference Fix"

Can feminism still fuel changes for women? Although the question may seem drastic, an increasing theoretization of feminism, characteristic of the 90's, has resulted in a growing body of academic criticism which has brought the issue of the relevance of feminism to the fore. Moreover, the very intensity of the debate on its future alerts us to the fact that an affirmative answer can no longer be taken for granted. What we may perceive as a crisis in feminism can be ascribed to a gradual dismantling of second-wave feminism's ideal of a united sisterhood striving for collective emancipation from the oppression of patriarchy. Feminism has become more diversified; it has become increasingly centred on the individual, and it has been forced to become more responsive to a wider range of political and ethical issues. One notable result of the wider scope of feminism is that we have seen the birth of queer studies, of studies of masculinities, and of a growing body of postcolonial feminist studies. This has been a positive development, but it has been accompanied by serious attacks on some of the cornerstones of second-wave feminism. The ardent advocacy of women's rights by Anglo-American feminists and the focus on the political goal of achieving equality between the sexes have been particularly controversial issues as they are beheld as significant mainly for Western, white, middle-class women.

A central feature of the theoretical evolution of feminism is the escalating attention given to the concept of "difference". As Rita Felski contends, difference seems to function "as a value in itself, seemingly irrespective of its referent or context. Difference has become doxa, a magic word of theory and politics radiant with redemptive meanings" (1997, 1). In this context, the notion of difference is used in two distinct ways, sometimes applied separately, but often in conjunction. On the one hand, "difference" functions as a marker that feminists are aware of differences between women. Race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality are all categories which diversify the experience of being oppressed and make it inconceivable to think of women as a homogeneous group. For instance, as Bell Hooks argues, "race and class identity may create differences in the quality of life that take precedence over the common experience women share" (1984, 4). Because we know that women lead different lives and have different experiences, many feminists find it inadmissible to perceive the struggle for emancipation for women as a unitary project with one clear aim. On the other hand, the extolling of "difference" in contemporary feminist thinking can be attributed to influences from language-centred post-structuralist or psychoanalytic

philosophy (Derrida, Lacan), and from French feminism (Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray).¹ In this strand of feminism, notions of identity, subjectivity, and experience, all of which played a prominent part in feminist politics in the 60's and 70's, are understood as abstractions which lack interior "truth". Differences between the sexes are explained in terms of signifying practices and language is viewed as a patriarchal symbolic system which classifies according to male norms. Consequently, language itself contributes to and reifies the subjugation of women.

The new emphasis on "difference" constitutes a "paradigm shift" in feminist thinking (Barrett 1992), and it is a central feature of what is often referred to as "postfeminism", a term that signals that the theoretical assumptions of feminism have been left behind.² What will concern me here is primarily the political implications of the postfeminist paradigm shift. I will argue that we need to question the fact that working for a social change in the lives of women to a great extent has become a matter of engaging in the project of transforming language use to respect difference. In view of this, I believe we should take seriously Edward Said's warning against "the fetishization and relentless celebration of 'difference' and 'otherness' [which] can... be seen as an ominous trend" (1989, 213). Rather than being viewed as a complementary term to identify or likeness, "difference" in post-feminism often wins the eminence of an ontological "condition", or an autonomous "otherness" which bears an inherent value. This situation has made it increasingly difficult to speak on behalf of "woman" or "women" without being accused of political or theoretical naivety. It is, I believe, important to contest this trend and to draw attention to the urgency of reclaiming the political relevance of feminism. We should ask ourselves why we have seen this turn to theory; how is it motivated, and what problems does it convey?

Feminism and theory

In order to examine the validity of a feminist critique, it is relevant to acknowledge the reasons why, and on what grounds, the "doxa of difference" has gained such recognition in feminist theory, particularly on behalf of theories that presuppose interdependence between individuals and social systems, between agency and determining conditions. The issue is important, for the contemporary emphasis on theories of difference has attained an intrinsic value that does not always stand in proportion to its political value. Further, the faith in a "doxa of difference" should not be viewed as a logical outcome of the heightened sensitivity to difference or to variations

¹ The argument that feminism is inspired by poststructuralist theory can be reversed. For example, Teresa De Lauretis argues persuasively for the impact of feminist theory on poststructuralist thinking in "Upping the Anti [Sic] in Feminist Theory". *The Cultural Studies Reader*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1993).

² For a discussion of this aspect of postfeminism, see for example Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), xi.

in women's complex social reality on the part of feminist researchers. It is equally admissible to interpret recent developments in theoretic discourse as symptoms of a political withdrawal from a feminism which overtly supports the goal of transforming society. Difference has become an epistemological issue rather than a matter of recognizing the differences in the needs of women.

A significant aspect of the increasing theoretization of feminism is that it can be viewed as a by-product of the attempt to permanently and successfully establish the field of Women's Studies in the Universities. As Bell Hooks has noted, the struggle of this discipline to gain prestige has led to some compromise, especially concerning the possibilities of combining theory and political practice:

When people were concerned with the whole question of building a mass-based feminist movement there was a great deal of interest in producing a body of feminist theory that would serve as a blueprint for such a movement. Early on in the feminist movement there was a strong focus on creating a theory and practice that would merge together. And in specific instances the making of feminist theory was seen as practice. The hope was that we would gather cultural momentum to transform society as a whole. It's interesting to note that the institutionalization of feminist thinking and feminist theory inside the academy began to shift this direction. (Interview in *Signs*, 1996: 218)

It is indeed difficult to accommodate feminist practice in an academic environment where the highly assessed qualities of reason and objectivity have often been interpreted in a distinctly non-political way. As Marion Price and Mairead Owen contend, Women's Studies was, and still is, the lowest ranked discipline in the university (1998, 185). One result of this unfortunate situation is that the attempt to gain recognition, acceptance, and entry into mainstream academia has predominantly taken place in the field of theory, which has been the most expansive and prestigious field in the 80's and 90's. We have definitely seen a trend implying a constant move away from empirical investigations towards a purer theoretical domain, uncluttered by unmodish empirical facts and political frankness. Today, few fields of research are as thoroughly theorised as Women's Studies.

My objective is not to dispute the validity of theorising for feminism. On the contrary, theory serves the purpose of making us reflect and forces us to carefully examine our assumptions. However, an exclusive focus on the constraints and oppressive effects of representation, centred around male norms and values leads to a theoretical impasse. It does not make sense to regard woman as entirely "other", as excluded or repudiated from the male symbolic realm. A productive feminist research is only possible if it

considers the individual subject's mediation of discursive and social structures. Indeed, it is only by considering a duality of structure between the individual and society that it is possible to comprehend the relations of dominance and resistance which provide the basis for social change. We must not forget that theory only gains relevance when it is opened up toward historical reality, toward society, and toward human needs and interests. The cultural and ideological composite we refer to as "woman", constructed through a number of representational discourses, must somehow be linked to the lives of real women with individual and collective experiences. A feminism which adheres to a trans-historical and cross-cultural view of male-centred language runs the risk of excluding history viewed as an ongoing process of dominance and resistance, of participation and antagonism, and thus becomes politically unproductive.

Theory and politics

I have described a situation of intensified theoretization in feminist studies. However, this narrative would not be accepted by all feminists since post-feminism claims a rejection of "master narratives" or "grand theory" (Barrett and Phillips 1992, 6). The term "grand theory" refers both to the acknowledging of homogenized power structures and to the logic which founded earlier definitions of identity, agency, politics, gender, oppression, and social reality. According to Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, feminism after the postfeminist paradigm shift has "moved to local studies" in the interest of differences between women :

feminism has moved from grand theory to local studies, from cross-cultural analyses of patriarchy to the complex and historical interplay of sex, race and class, from notions of female identity or the interests of women towards the instability of female identity and the active creation and recreation of women's needs and concerns. (1992, 6-7)

The quote is revealing for two specific reasons. Primarily because it explicitly depoliticizes feminism and removes present-day feminist theory from the collective interests of women, but also because the authors suggest that women's needs are not definable, but need to be actively created or recreated by the feminist researcher. Indeed, the "creation and recreation" of women's needs suggests that there is a free market of needs and desires which are there for the post-feminist researcher to distribute arbitrarily. What I find significant in this connection is that when needs are "created" in this manner, they do not only reflect the needs of the subject of study but also the political preferences of the researcher. Accordingly, when Barrett rejects the notion of theory and scientific social analysis, she does it in favour of "values and principles" (Barrett 1992, 217). Her statement marks a defi-

nite shift of emphasis away from the real needs and interests of women to the needs created by the researcher. Obviously, this is a liberating and inspiring situation for the feminist researcher which undoubtedly contributes to the appeal of post-feminist theory. Still, we should take seriously the signs that academic feminism has abandoned its political ambitions of societal change. Moving away from social movements and historical precision, feminism has instead channeled its ethical pathos in the direction of individual therapy and libidinal liberation. In the words of Barrett, feminism has turned to "culture... subjectivity, the psyche and the self" (1992, 204).

Barrett's description of the turn to subjectivity in feminism leads us to the recognition that while post-feminist theory has distanced itself from modernist meta-narratives, it is still possible to discern a similarity between the postfeminist fragmented subject and the humanist bourgeois subject, autonomous and disengaged from history, whose individual needs are there to be actively liberated, "created or recreated". However, the idea that a localized narrative somehow evades theory and scientific social analysis in favour of "values and principles" as suggested by Barrett, is hardly self-evident. As Rosemary Hennessy has suggested, it is rather the case that by disguising one's own theoretical framework one conceals its "continuing ideological work" (1993, 122). There is an apparent risk that the focus on locality and culture may produce analyses where the differentiation of needs is not adequately accounted for and where material differences are made natural. This seems a particular threat at a time in history when inequality is often naturalized and economic gaps have achieved political legitimacy.

The freedom of the feminist researcher to select the factors which shape identity and society is in its implication what qualifies the use of the term postfeminism. For if gender is only one of the categories which determine the lives and identities of women, and if it is not primary in different women's experiences, then this must lead to a real sense of quandary when it comes to weighting gender, race, class, ethnicity or nationality. In particular, it opens up the issue whether gender should be privileged as a category of analysis. In other words, is it still significant to give priority to gender studies? In theory, the answer would surely be negative. There is no reason why the experience of gender oppression should be considered primary in comparison with other forms of oppression. Still, there are pragmatic and historical reasons why feminism still makes sense.

Why feminism still makes sense

A starting point for making visible the relevance of a feminist critique is to clarify the difference between viewing differentialism as essential or ontological and between differentialism as a cultural or social phenomenon. These distinct understandings of difference have often been automatically conflated. As a result, studies of minority communities have often focused on identity as "otherness" and on transgressions of codes. There is no rea-

son, however, why differences between women or the fact that identity cannot be essentialized should make it less valuable to study communities that have political interests and needs in common. Social structures and systems do not create identical women but they structure the distribution of material resources, of power, and of knowledge. In this sense, feminism does not rely on the existence of "woman" or "women" as foundationalist categories; to dismiss a feminism which aims for equality is therefore to ignore that difference is to a great extent determined by material conditions. In fact, a critical practice which promises to expose the gender/race/class construction of woman may be said to preserve it by making difference natural. As Teresa Ebert suggests, the "'radical, unassimilable difference' in racist, patriarchal capitalism is not the 'postmodernist identity' of women of color but the conditions oppressing them. The 'radical, unassimilable difference is poverty... Poverty cannot be ended; it cannot be assimilated within bourgeois society... Poverty (i.e. *need*) is the radical, unrepresentable, suppressed 'other' to bourgeois pleasure" (1995, 361). If feminism wants to meet the needs of all women, the issue of poverty must be a primary concern.

The point of my argument has not been to argue for the necessity to adopt a Marxist research practice. However, I hope to have indicated, though briefly, that a type of feminism that does not look at identity as a construction which is the locus of connection between socioeconomic and ideological factors and historical moments, including the researcher's own, will risk ideological blindness. The concept of difference does not have a value in itself; it is a rhetorical construct with political implications. The way we conceive of differences between people significantly affects the way material resources are divided between women, children, and men globally. Hence, we must discuss, in a more open way than is usually done, the ethical and political implications of constructing local identity studies without considering the real effects of our research practices. For, in a situation where feminism cannot be ontologically grounded in gender or sex difference, it is the ability of feminism to combine theory (explanations of the world) and practice (finding ways to change the world), locally or on a global scale, that constitutes the main asset of feminism and makes it indispensable for both men and women in an academic setting and in practice.

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