

Surfaces



NOT THE SAME OLD THING: INTERVENTION AS PARADIGM AND PERFORMANCE

Feminists Theorize the Political edited by Judith Butler and Joan Scott, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992)

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BOOK REVIEW

FEMINISTS THEORIZE THE POLITICAL

NOT THE SAME OLD THING: INTERVENTION AS PARADIGM AND PERFORMANCE

Sabina Sawhney

***Feminists Theorize the Political* edited by Judith Butler and Joan Scott, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).**

To refuse to assume, that is, to require a notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion altogether; on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction and the political meaning and consequentiality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory.

This statement by Judith Butler in "Contingent Foundations" animates a number of articles in *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Nearly all the contributors to this book premise their work on a refusal to assume. Questioning the various formulations which circumscribe the notion of a female subject, formulations existing in the realm of science, politics (international and domestic), philosophy, law, history, or ethics, the writers present arguments that contest the foundations upon which this subject has, until now, been erected and thankfully laid to rest. Questioning the foundations in this way, of course, brings with it a host of disquieting responses, and a number of articles address themselves to allay the unease of those who see this latest move in feminism as being politically inert.

In any movement there is always disagreement between those who desire immediate action in order to right the wrongs that are blindingly obvious to

them, and those that wish to consider the bases upon which such strategic actions can take place. Or to put it in another way there will always be an argument about taking the quick short-cut (which while it animates a number of people with the heat of action and the promise of immediate results, nevertheless ignores or tramples upon other considerations) and the longer route that is in a danger of losing itself in detours and digressions, and occasionally even seems to lose sight of the goal. While *Feminists Theorize the Political* is an important attempt to influence this on-going argument in favor of the 'long route', in one very significant respect it compels us to reconsider the terms of this debate. The concept of political intervention, which would enable women to claim a greater equality within the system, is itself laid open to inquiry. After all, the strategies that aim for emancipation for women must negotiate with and eventually abolish the distinction between the public and the private, a distinction that has hitherto kept women from participating in the public and the political realm. Politics, thus, becomes a contested issue, such that the "political" is no longer available as an easily accessible, rigidly demarcated space of action that would lend definition to acts, as productive or non-productive, according to the space in which they are enacted. According to Kristie McClure, "'feminist politics' encompasses not only the critical practices through which feminists define, confront, and engage that which we aspire to change, but includes as well the multitude of critical practices among and between feminists It is also, necessarily, to speak not about 'feminist politics' as if one's words were somehow outside the dynamics and divisions of their referent, but to speak from within that domain. In such a context to speak at all is to speak politically." ("The Issue of Foundations" p.342) That is to say, in terms of the debate on political effectivity, the contest is now no longer between those who would act and those who would think -- with *Feminists Theorize* preferring thought, or in this case speech, to action. That would merely repeat the tired old marxist distinction between the workers and the intellectuals, with the latter falsely equating their work to labor.

The task of this anthology is to effect an intervention such that the construction of these identities (workers and intellectuals, or woman of color, mother, feminists, etc.) is subjected to strict scrutiny. As Butler explains, "To establish a set of norms that are beyond power or force is itself a powerful and forceful conceptual practice that sublimates, disguises and extends its own power play through recourse to tropes of normative universality." This, of course, sets forth the requirements for a task of mammoth proportions. Nothing, not identities, not a set of theoretical guidelines, not received history, not personal experience, nothing may be taken for granted or applied without severe questioning. And certain it is that in the pursuit of this (im)possible objective, *Feminists Theorize* seems to lay itself open to the criticism that if the women's movement is going to be engaged in these massive reconsiderations, it will forgo its impetus and momentum and probably lose sight of its goal. But that, strangely enough, seems to be precisely the objective towards which many of the essays in this anthology aim. Now don't get me wrong. I am not saying that the contributors to this anthology (many of whom, like Chantal Mouffe, Vicki Schultz, Drucilla Cornell, and Gayatri Spivak, are noted for their

contribution to feminist politics and feminist criticism) are laboring to turn back the clock on women's rights. But they see a women's movement based on rigid, biological or historically determined identities, proceeding towards narrowly defined goals which ignore or postpone the consideration of those groups that are marginalized by the dominant feminists, as needing a major modification that will effectively transform it.

Both Denise Riley in "A Short History of Some Preoccupations" and Christina Crosby in "Dealing with Differences" give a historical overview of the feminist movement from the early seventies to the present. The historical accounts are tendered from a personal perspective, that is the changes within the movement are charted on a personal register, presenting a survey of texts and personalities that forced both these women to reconsider the issues which engaged them. And each new wrinkle -- Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, or Audre Lorde's "call for a theory which can deal with the reality of the differences which divide women" (137), or an urgent need to consider the relationship of feminism to other oppositional struggles around the issues of class, race, sexual orientation, and postcoloniality -- has made the women's movement and its objectives as originally conceived that much more difficult to smoothen out. The original fabric is no longer adequate to provide a cover for each concern. Hence it is, that instead of trying to patch things up in order to trade off for short term benefits which would merely postpone and increase the complications, this anthology challenges us to start anew.

Well, now that we have established that the task set for this book is nothing short of gargantuan, let us consider how well it fulfills its objectives. Most of the contributors see the primary purpose of their task in terms of strict anti-essentialism, arguing against the notion of an ontologically based identity. The discursive formulation of knowledge and experience that goes towards constituting a singular sense of identity is probed and analyzed in the various essays. For instance, Joan Scott in the essay "Experience" states that it is "not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience." This is not merely a sleight of hand that overturns a causal schema, but is actively related to the project of anti-essentialism. Perhaps the strongest statement of this project is contained in Butler's article: "There is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context; that cultural context, as it were, is already there as the disarticulated process of that subject's production, one that is concealed by the frame that would situate a ready-made subject in an external web of cultural relations."

Hence when Scott warns us about holding on to experience as an explanation or as evidence about our knowledge, she seeks to ward off the dangers inherent in taking the world on trust based on our personal experience of it. For, after all, if neither experience nor the identities produced by that experience are historicized, there would be no impulse for

change. To put it very simply, if no woman, in our experience, had ever driven a car, we might rest easy under the assumption that women were constitutionally incapable of this feat. In that case the cultural context which gave rise to, and supported, such an assumption would not be seen as a constructed process available for intervention, but merely as an effect of knowledge transparently apprehended by an individual with an "ontologically intact reflexivity."

This does not, of course, mean that experience is totally invalidated as a means for achieving knowledge. After all, if in our experience no person has ever been able to sprout wings and fly, we may rightly accept that people *are* constitutionally unable to do so. The problem, therefore, lies not in relying on experience, but in relying on experience *alone*. A refusal to interpret, and an

acceptance of experiential knowledge as self-evident and unmediated, leads to a reification of the subject and essentializes identities.

But once we realize that experience formulates identities and that these static identities get inscribed as valid for all time we become free to question the process of their construction. To quote Scott again, "Treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event isto refuse a separation between "experience" and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. . . . Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning." The discursive production of subjects and our ability to intervene in this production is explored most constructively in "Women 'Before' the Law: Judicial Stories about Women, Work, and Sex Segregation on the Job" by Vicki Schultz, and in "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention" by Sharon Marcus. Both essays deal with various scripts in which certain feminine subjectivities are inscribed, and the possibilities of intervention or alteration are foreclosed since these subjectivities are assumed to be constant.

Dealing with the issue of sex segregation in the job market, which leads to women being confined to those positions which provide fewer opportunities for advancement, lower wages, and less respect, Schultz investigates the reasons why such patent wrongs are not remedied by the law. Her explanation is that segregation continues because of the way in which law and culture together interpret this reality: "Consciously or unconsciously, the courts have created a framework for interpreting segregation that obscures and limits the law's potential to transform it." The courts take a historically and experientially produced concept of woman's identity and aspirations as if it were ontologically valid, and on that basis excuse the employers from participating actively to modify the current situation. So,

since women have always been relegated to the private sphere of home and home-oriented issues, their desire for employment must be considered in reference to their naturally domestic natures. This justifies the employers' inability to make possibilities of advancement accessible to women since that would interfere with the women's primary preferences. Thus discouraging women from applying for demanding jobs, or couching the advertisement for such positions in gendered terms, is merely an employer's response to the nature of women. Responding to the lawsuits brought by women under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act to challenge sexual discrimination, the employers, in Schultz's dramatization, rationalize their decisions by denying any culpability: "It's not our fault," say the employers. "We don't exclude women from the men's jobs. The trouble is, women won't apply for them--they just aren't interested. They grow up wanting to do women's work, and we can't force them to do work they don't want to do."

Comparing the decisions in the early race discrimination suits (the operative term is 'early') with those alleging sexual discrimination, Schultz finds an interesting disparity. Judges were more readily convinced of the fault of the employers despite their recourse to a similar argument that the minorities lacked interest in work. "This approach," as Schultz explains, "followed from judges' recognition of the history of labor market discrimination. If a people's aspirations have been formed in the context of historical oppression, it is unreasonable (even cruel) to ask them to prove that they have not chosen their lot." But clearly, a similar understanding of the issue is denied in the case of women. The article persuasively argues, with impressive references to various economic and sociological studies, that career aspirations, and identities based on such aspirations are not rigid, and forever stable entities, but, on the contrary are fluid, and responsive to changes in the work environment. But the Courts' decisions are based on the belief that women's preferences are fixed in the pre-work sphere and conditions in the work-world have no power to effect any alteration in their inclinations. The writer argues that if we accept the fact that "female identities remain in flux, then the workworld is no mere passive reflector of preexisting properties of gender, but rather a central site where the category of 'woman' is contested and created."

Sharon Marcus adopts a similar approach to the issue of rape. Refuting the argument that postmodernism, by conflating the real and the fictive, does a major disservice to the reality of a raped woman's experience, Marcus argues instead that the primary problem lies in a refusal to think about rape in terms of language, interpretation, and subjectivity. "Whose 'no' can never mean 'no'? How do rape trials condone men's misinterpretations of women's words? How do rape trials consolidate men's subjective accounts into objective 'norms of truth' and deprive women's subjective accounts of cognitive value?" Even the most determined recluse from the media is certainly aware of the William Kennedy Smith trial and the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings which brought all these questions to the forefront. I make the Hill-Thomas reference deliberately even though the hearings did not constitute a rape trial, despite the violation felt by many of

those watching the televised process. Marcus contends that rape must not be viewed solely as a singular act of physical violence which women are powerless to combat, but rather, rape should be placed in a narrative: "a series of steps and signals whose typical initial moments we can learn to recognize and whose final outcome we can learn to stave off." Thus the sexual harassment that Hill described may be seen as the initial steps which contain the potential that may lead to rape. That does not mean, as Marcus warns us, that verbal harassment is equivalent to rape, or that our feelings of violation on watching the process meant that the screen had actually raped us. But subscribing to the "continuum" theory, in which one type of action is not substituted for another, enables us to understand and recognize the script of rape which we have the power to modify and revise. Which is not to say that the inability to understand the initial steps in the process justifies our victimization. The article attempts an intervention in the representation of rape and contends that a recognition of, and a revision in the rape script (which has hitherto seen women as "inherently rapable") would enable women to empower themselves. Continuing with my example, media led education as to what constitutes sexual harassment and its probable outcomes, may lead women to intervene early on in the process and hence forestall the outcome, thus denying rape its inevitability.

One of the most positive aspects of this anthology is that the articles dealing with the issues of (post)coloniality in connection with feminist politics do not constitute merely a token presence. Besides "Shahbano" which seems to have pre-empted Lata Mani's "The Production of Colonial Discourse: Sati in Early Nineteenth Century Bengal" as the requisite article in any anthology which wishes to make a nod to (post)coloniality and gender issues, *Feminists Theorize* also includes Ann Maria Alonso's "Gender, Power, and Historical Memory: Discourses of Serrano Resistance," Rey Chow's "Postmodern Automats," Zakia Pathak's "A Pedagogy for Postcolonial Feminists", and Spivak's "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics".

Pathak's "Pedagogy" is of especial interest to me as someone who has studied within the system at the University of Delhi, of which she writes. Her strategies, in English Literature courses, for bringing a text from Britain or United States into dialogue with the conditions in recently decolonized nations, destroys the illusion of an insurmountable gap between the written word and the culture in which it is received. Her teaching (or, as she explains her decision to use the plural form throughout the essay --the consensual teaching procedure of her colleagues) interrupts the practice, "which historicizes the work in the producing culture but regards historical intervention in its reception as an inexcusable tampering with the truth of the work." The inexcusability, I assume, occurs only within the context of the decolonized nations; the reception of the work in its producing culture is usually considered to be a legitimate area of study. Pathak gives interesting and extremely useful examples of the way in which she manages to connect the taught text with the contemporary culture in which it is being taught, so as to liberate literature, especially English literature, from its iconic position in a vacuum sealed package. In her teaching of *The Murder in the Cathedral*

by T. S. Eliot, for instance, she encourages her students to relate the text to the topic of an emerging national identity in India, and to consider the question of subject-formation within the context of religious affiliations and the role of the State in determining such issues.

The article, however, requires an analysis of the causes why this type of teaching is seen as irrelevant and illegitimate by the Academy. The investment in maintaining First World texts uncontaminated by contextual interpretation in the Third World (and I am using the terms: 'First and Third World' advisedly) is directly related to the issue of postcoloniality, a relation that remains unexplored by this article. Decolonization of a nation-state does not automatically lead to a similar effect in the minds of the colonized. The hierarchical position of the First World texts, and the concomitant status of those connected, however peripherally, to these texts (as interpreters, teachers, administrators) is radically threatened by the interventions suggested by Pathak. Hence neither the syllabus nor the examination questions currently set by the University, are available for change in the direction detailed in Pathak's essay. This is not to imply that change will never be forthcoming, merely to suggest that the essay would benefit from an examination of the political stakes involved in such transformation.

Though I have counted Spivak's essay as among those dealing with postcolonial issues, it is difficult to categorize "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics" as belonging to a particular slot. Part auto-historical and anecdotal, part philosophical examination, part literary criticism, and part political analysis, the article defies any easy definition. Bringing discourses from different disciplines as well as various feminisms into dialogue with each other, Spivak delineates the fragmented cultural context that produces the subject and her critique.

"And what is it to know, or to be sure that a knowing has been learned? To theorize the political, to politicize the theoretical, are such vast aggregative asymmetrical undertakings; the hardest lesson is the impossible intimacy of the ethical." Spivak ends her essay with these words which seem abundantly available for parody or malicious mis-interpretations. The essay is, after all, difficult to understand, and a hurried reading does not induce the comfortable feeling of having mastered all the issues touched upon in the article. The question that insistently shapes this essay: "How does the postcolonial feminist negotiate with the metropolitan feminist?" is firmly secured within the domain of the ethical, that is, the problem of exchange with the other/s, when all that goes into shaping the self and the other is never accessible for immediate understanding. Spivak brings some elements of what constitutes her own subject position--as teacher and lecturer "ethnic in the US, racial in Britain, negotiating for decolonized space"-- to bear upon this question.

Retrieving Beauvoir's figure of the pregnant woman from "The Mother" in *The Second Sex* and placing it in the domain of the Sartrean ethical (Spivak asserts that for Beauvoir, "the in-itself [en-soi] 'is' woman in nature's laws--gestation--species-life, and the for-itself [pour-soi] 'is' the rearing mother and the child as adult."), she then moves on to a discussion of Cixous's figure of the mother in relation to the issue of plurality in the "Laugh of the Medusa." Spivak approvingly quotes Cixous's injunction to women to give "the mother to the other woman" since it "is necessary and sufficient that the best be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born' to her." Thus to give the mother to the other woman, a "selfless love" becomes the cornerstone of relationships with other women.

After defining the 'mother' from Beauvoir and using that figure to illuminate Cixous's conception of relationships among women, Spivak now deals with the situation of the postcolonial feminist attempting a dialogue with the radical metropolitan feminist. Does Cixous's injunction, to give the mother to the other woman, help the postcolonial feminist negotiate an intimate relationship with the feminist from the metropolis? Refusing the relationship is not a possibility for the feminist in the decolonized nation-state; it is, as Spivak says, "part of her historical burden," a legacy of imperialism. "The paradigms of academic intelligibility of feminism in Algeria and in the Maghreb have been, for the large part, modulated in the intellectual configurations of Western thought. They have offered the frame and the genesis. . ." (Chafika Marouf, quoted in 'French Feminism Revisited') Hence Spivak brings the essay, "Bound and Gagged by the Family Code" by Marie-Aimée Hélié-Lucas, an Algerian feminist, into this inter-national/textual weave to gauge the usefulness of the French Feminist Guidelines for a postcolonial feminist.

Considering that within the decolonized space neither the nation nor the issue of national identity may be taken for granted, and that under the imperatives of the various nationalisms the postcolonial woman is required to postpone the production of her individuality as a feminist, the French Guidelines as they stand do not quite do the trick. Hélié-Lucas's solution, given this context, is a demand for a collectivity, a women's alliance: "We [women] should link our struggles from one country to the other for reasons of *ethics*. . . . We have everything to gain in being truly internationalist." Spivak interprets this 'internationalism' as one "that takes a distance from the project of national identity when it interferes with the production of female individualities." That is (and this is where Spivak admits to using an essentialist formula) a woman persistently critiques the production of a homogenized identity, whether that identity is organized around the home, with a patriarch at its center, or around religion with the Pope, priests, or the Ayatollah as nodal-points, or around individual nation-states. This persistent critique connects the women together.

Until this point, "French Feminism Revisited" is a brilliant essay, taking on some of the most vexed issues of postcoloniality and feminism and dealing with them in a way that is extraordinarily evocative and rigorous. But now, Spivak turns to Luce Irigaray's critique of humanism in Irigaray's discussion of Lévinas in "The Fecundity of the Caress." She reads Irigaray as urging "lover and beloved to give the woman to the other, indeed to rememorate being-in-the-mother as the impossible threshold of ethics, rather than inaugurate it as the Law of the Father." After all, as she says, not "all of us are mothers, but we have all been children." So that is it. The answer to the question about the relation between the postcolonial and the metropolitan feminist. We all must come together and give the mother to all, not just to the women. It is a call for an impossible ethics of intimacy, a call that seems to depend more on a vaguely realized mystical/sexual relationship, than on the hard specificities of the encounter. I have to admit to a certain disappointment about the proposed resolution, but that may be due to my own inability to comprehend the grandness of the endeavor.

I do believe, however, that Spivak's essay is one of the reasons for the strength of the anthology, *Feminists Theorize the Political*. The issues that she deals with do not admit of an easy resolution and she impels us to look at the problems from an original angle, like a number of other essays in the collection. Most of the articles are interesting and provocative and incite the readers to revolutionize their old patterns of thinking. In conclusion I have just one reservation about the appropriate genre for feminist interventions in the political and theoretical arena. A collection of such interventions one after the other, as in this anthology, tends to reduce the impact of each, so that their collective impression is less than the sum of its individual parts. I do not have an easy answer to this problem, except perhaps to suggest that along with the radical changes proposed by the writers in the disciplinary domains, a similar approach to the issue of genres of intervention would be equally productive.

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