The Trouble with Individualism ...: A Discussion with Some Examples

(Added July 2003): This paper was sent to the Australian and Asian editor of *Women's Studies International Forum*. I don't know exactly when I sent it, but given that the rejection letter is dated June 1999 and mentions a 'terrible delay' in getting back to me, it may have been in 1998.

Abstract: This paper is part of a larger project investigating what I have called the ideology of individualism. For some time now it has seemed to me evident that feminism needs to develop a greater awareness of the ways in which references to individuals operate to disguise relations of ruling by populating the social world only with discrete, asocial individuals, at the expense of any acknowledgement of the existence of the social structures of domination. This present paper argues that individualism is a crucial component of all ideological justifications for domination, because it enables relations of ruling to be disguised as intrinsic properties of individuals. As a consequence, ideological individualism prevents any genuine account of individual responsibility, because it blames the victims and exonerates the perpetrators. To illustrate the problem I start with two articles taken from a daily newspaper, which exemplify malestream versions of individualism. I go on to point out that feminism, too, can get caught up in individualism, to the extent that it remains exclusively focused on 'women' and elides the question of male domination. In contrast, I argue that it is only a feminism which starts from the ethical standpoint of opposition to male supremacy, which can provide an adequate account of both women's embeddedness in and our resistance to male supremacist relations of ruling.

In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, called 'How We Turn Boys Into Creeps', Steve Biddulph purports to explain what he variously refers to as 'the damaged state of most men', 'impaired sexuality', 'poor relationships with women' and 'what is essentially a virus of "creep" sexuality'. (Biddulph, 1996) According to Biddulph, men become 'creeps' because of the ways in which 'we' relate to them as boys. It is not clear who is included in this 'we'—'parents' are mentioned, as well as 'older men', along with 'schools', 'families', 'rugby players on tour', 'culture', 'our society' and 'our billboards, TV ads, magazines, movies and rock videos'. But whoever 'we' are, we are responsible for the problem.

Among those responsible Biddulph includes women and girls. He does not actually say that girls and women are responsible for the way men behave. In the case of his two examples—the 17-year-old telephonist harrassed by three senior men in her office, and the school girl named in a murderous fantasy posted on the Internet by one of her male class mates—clearly they are not. But apart from these two examples, women and girls are not the victims of male behaviour, but part of the environment which causes it.

'Most young men', Biddulph informs us, 'go through a stage of great desperation—a woman, any woman, would be gratefully accepted. "Will anyone have sex with me?"' In the next sentence, he tells us that 'young women, too, go through agonies of self-doubt and embarrassment at this age, but boys do not know this'. He informs us that, from the boys' point of view, 'the girls are turning into goddesses, with enormous bounty to bestow', whereas the boys themselves 'feel they have nothing to offer'. Towards the end of the article, he says that 'parents can … teach daughters not to misuse their verbal skills or physical appeal to exploit or denigrate boys', concluding with the comment that 'creepiness can work both ways', i.e. girls can be 'creeps', too.

By reporting sympathetically on the 'great desperation' of 'most young men' for sex with 'any woman', he implies that young men are justified in feeling this way, and that the only problem is that women will not assuage men's 'desperation' by providing them with sex. It is unclear who is responsible for the boys' misguided ideas about girls—for their ignorance about girls' 'agonies of self-doubt and embarrassment', and for their view of girls as 'goddesses'. But given that lack of guidance by others is the problem identified by Biddulph, the responsibility is unlikely to be the boys'. Since girls and women are the only others here, the fault must be theirs—for failing to provide boys with sex, tell boys what girls are really like, and reassure boys that they do have something to offer after all. In his later comment about 'parents' teaching daughters, and the 'creepiness' of girls too, the attribution of responsibility is clearer. Since 'parents' can prevent something reprehensible, any failure on their part to do so would be an obvious dereliction of duty. Girls, too, are at fault to the extent that they fail to learn the lessons about 'misuse' conveyed by their 'parents', and continue to 'exploit' and 'denigrate' boys. And yet, in the case of the behaviour Biddulph is supposedly so concerned about, it is surely the girls who are exploited and denigrated, not the boys.

Also included in the 'we' who turn boys into creeps are mothers, not surprisingly given the prevalent tendency to blame mothers for everything from dingy whites to serial killers. True, he mentions mothers explicitly only once (apart from references to 'mum and dad' and 'parents'). The mention occurs in the context of a favourable citation of the work of Bettina Arndt. It is Arndt, according to Biddulph, who advises mothers to inform sons about 'women's

sensibilities' and 'the woman's point of view', thus implying that women do not already do this, and that information is all that is required. It also implies that individual mothers have the power to counteract the pervasive misogyny of a social environment which rewards males for woman-hating, and punishes them with ostracism, ridicule and outright violence for non-conformity with the ethos of masculinity. Arndt also advised mothers, according to Biddulph, about 'the importance of … not recoiling from their sons' sexuality but affirming it in a non-seductive way'. The implication of this advice is that mothers of sons do currently either recoil or seduce, for if they did not, there would be no point in giving the advice. A further implication is that it is this maternal propensity for 'recoil' or 'seduction' which 'turns boys into creeps'. Apart from this single direct mention, he also manages to blame mothers for their sons' behaviour by connecting men's sexual violence with their childhood experiences. Since the primary caretakers of childhood are mothers, mothers are obviously more culpable than the rest of 'us'. He does not need to say it in so many words. He can rely on the readers' collusion with what 'motherhood' means under conditions which deny women social power while making them responsible for the lives of helpless dependents.

He does allocate some responsibility to men. 'Fathers, uncles and elders' need to provide boys with guidance on how to 'relate to women with courtesy, with confidence, with care'; and fathers are included in 'mum and dad' and 'parents'. But the allocation of personal responsibility does not extend to the 'creeps' who sexually harrass and abuse girls and women—since the problems originate in childhood, 'creeps' are 'damaged' and their sexuality 'impaired' under circumstances they could not control because they were powerless children. Throughout the article, Biddulph absolves the boys of responsibility for their own behaviour. The generalised 'we' does not include boys—they are turned into 'creeps' by someone else. Neither does it include the men those boys become. By locating the source of the problem in childhood, the men who were once boys become nothing but victims. At one point, it does appear as though Biddulph is going to acknowledge that men are coming to realise their responsibility for their own behaviour. He mentions 'men's groups and retreats all over the country' where 'sex is now being widely discussed'. But given that the men in these groups speak 'with amazement and relief' and that Biddulph's own reaction to this phenomenon is 'delight', it seems unlikely that those discussions include men admitting responsibility for their brutal, degrading and humiliating treatment of girls and women.

He also absolves males of responsibility with his uncritical acceptance of the belief that males have an absolute right to sex with 'any woman'. Like Bettina Arndt, he does not question the desire itself. He sees sexual desire as a 'natural' property of individuals ('a surge of hormones', for example, as he puts it at one point), which the individual brings with him (in this case) to his encounters with other individuals. It is something which pre-exists the social. As nothing but the natural endowment of individual organisms, it does not need to be morally evaluated. It is only a problem when being denied that right leads to male 'desperation'. He sees nothing wrong with a male sexual desire which displays a self-centred demand for satisfaction at any price, and a callous indifference to womens' desire to be treated as unique and worthwhile people in their own right, and not just as receptacles for the penis.

He does, of course, deplore 'creep' behaviour, but he is only concerned with the way men feel about themselves, and not with the consequences for women. He refers to men's 'shame' and 'self-loathing', but does not see that these feelings might indicate that at least some men are aware that their behaviour is wrong, and hence signs of a guilty conscience. (Interestingly, Biddulph does not mention 'guilt'—perhaps this word comes too close to attributing the responsibility he is at such pains to avoid). In Biddulph's account, these feelings are not the consequence of shameful and loathsome behaviour, but its cause: 'The ashamed man is not given to melting tenderness or warm good humour', he tells his readers. What he is saying in effect is that it is not surprising that men behave so badly given how bad they feel about themselves. His solution is to tell men to feel good about themselves: 'the antidote to shame is openness and self-acceptance', he says. But if shame is the appropriate response to shameful desire and behaviour, openness and self-acceptance can only come from questioning that desire and desisting from the behaviour. Although Biddulph rejects 'creep' behaviour, he does not question the desire which motivates it. By portraying men and boys as passive non-agents as far as their sexual desire is concerned, he gives tacit approval for the behaviour he supposedly deplores.

Biddulph nowhere acknowledges the cultural imperatives which give men permission to treat women with contempt. His frequent references to 'culture' are meaningless—'cultural understanding and direction', 'the "don't feel—act macho" culture', 'cultural baggage',

'distinctive cultural overload', 'pub culture', 'yob-culture', and 'our billboards, TV ads, magazines, movies and rock videos'. He does not say what it is about 'culture' that 'turns boys into creeps'. His discussion of 'rock videos' is particularly fatuous as a criticism of what is wrong with 'culture'. 'Rock videos', he says, 'are particularly insidious in the use of degrading porn images reducing people to objects'. But while it may be true that both sexes are degraded and 'reduced to objects' in pornographic imagery, that does not have the same meaning for women as it does for men. While the 'object' men are reduced to is the penis, women are fragmented into a set of body parts serving the penis. While the penis is active, desiring and always satisfied, the female body parts are depicted only because they gratify the penis. Men desire pornography, while women are subjected to it. The problem is not 'crude sexual imagery', as Biddulph puts it, but sexual imagery which gives men permission to demean and dehumanise women in the service of the penis and of the men whose desire and behaviour it is.

Biddulph also mentions 'the inequality of gender relationships', but only as another way of exculpating men who, he says, 'feel themselves, secretly, to be creeps; but only because they have been trapped in the inequality of gender relationships'. Here, the term 'gender' is put to use to serve the interests of excusing men for their own behaviour. It is men who are 'unequal' and 'trapped' in 'gender' relationships. It is 'gender relationships' which are at fault, not the men whose desire colludes with the male supremacist devaluation of women, and who act accordingly. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Thompson, 1991: 163-76; Thompson, 1996a: 125-33), 'gender' has been used for anti-feminist purposes from the beginning. Because it is meaningless it can be paraded as the subject-matter of 'feminism' while being used against the interests of women, in this case, the interest women have in not being subjected to unwanted male attention.

Biddulph's article is an example of what I have come to call 'the ideology of individualism'. For Biddulph, the social world consists of nothing but already constituted individuals. These can be grouped into collectivities on the basis of attributes already in place, and they can interact. But they can also fall outside the social sphere of meanings and values, rights and responsibilities, and continue to remain what they already are. Men and boys just happen to have a sexuality which arises spontaneously in each male individual. It

can be used well or badly, it can be acted out or denied satisfaction (by women). But men are not responsible for their sexual desire because it is nothing but a personal attribute, of no social significance until it is brought into interaction with others. As long as it remains on the level of desire, male sexuality is confined to a private sphere of non-interference. It cannot be questioned, investigated or evaluated, even by men themselves, until it is 'impaired' and 'damaged', blocked or allowed expression, by 'us', i.e. by other individuals. 'We' (among whom Biddulph includes women and girls) are omniscient and all-powerful. 'We' are already equipped with everything necessary for effective action. 'We' are 'free'—to know what the problems are and to solve them, to influence others for their own good and for our own—and 'we' are 'equal' because there are no impediments to controlling the conditions of existence, beyond an easily rectified unwitting ignorance. 'We' are responsible for male sexual desire, even if 'we' are female, while men and boys are responsible only for feeling good about themselves, but not for a sexual desire which demands satisfaction at others' expense.

None of these depictions allows for an adequate account of human agency, i.e. of what can be done and what cannot. If male sexual desire has no social significance, if it is nothing but a personal property of discrete individuals, it remains a compulsive urge rather than a matter for contestation, debate and, if necessary, change. If 'boys' (and men) can be 'turned into' something by someone else, they have no human agency. If 'we' can make others into something they are not (in some original 'state of nature' before any social influence is felt), then 'we' have a power that passes the bounds of belief.

This allocation of responsibility is not accidental. Rather, it is one individual instance of a systematic tendency to hold women responsible for male violence, either for causing it (as in the case of the mothers and wives of serial killers), or for failing to prevent it or stop it (as in the case of the mothers of sexually abused children).

Another example of the same phenomenon is David Stratton's review of the film, *Hollow Reed*. (Stratton, 1996) The film tells the story of a gay man's fight to gain custody of his nine-year-old son who is being battered by the man who is the mother's lover. The title of the review, 'My Mother, My Enemy', encapsulates its message—it is the boy's mother who is

his enemy, and not the man who is bashing him. Stratton expands on this theme thus: 'It's really not the quick-tempered, at times vicious, Frank [the lover] who's the chief villain here: it's Hannah [the mother] who, despite all the evidence, chooses selfishly to keep her lover despite the traumas and violence he's inflicting on her defenceless son'. He goes on to tell the reader that the film was written, produced and directed by women. He then writes: 'It's very much to the film's credit that the conflicting issues are depicted with scrupulous fairness, and that, for most of the film, it's the boy's father who is most sensitive to his needs'. In other words, Stratton attributes 'scrupulous fairness' to a film which, according to his interpretation, holds a woman responsible for violence perpetrated by a man. But where is the justice in portraying a woman as 'the chief villain' when it is a man who is bashing the boy? He obviously feels some slight unease about this, since he hastens to assure the reader that the film was made by women, as though that fact warranted the film's 'scrupulous fairness'. But if mother-blaming is a social construct, women can be complicit too, even to the extent of blaming themselves. Pointing to the film's female authorship is not in itself sufficient reason to excuse its misogyny (if that is in fact what the film portrays—the text at issue here is Stratton's review, not the film itself). The meanings and values remain misogynist, whether they are purveyed by women or by men.

These allocations of responsibility are not innocent. Both texts function systematically to exculpate men by blaming women. Biddulph's article depicts 'boys' as devoid of responsibility for themselves, and the rest of 'us', including women and girls, as all-powerful moulders of men (literally); while Stratton's review turns the focus of condemnation away from a man's violence and directs it towards a woman. The problem with these texts is not one of personal bias on the part of two prejudiced individuals, but what they represent—the acceptability of the belief that women are responsible for male violence. The problem is not that two individual men hold this view, but that it passes without comment or protest. Hence, neither text can be dismissed as simply one man's personal opinion (although they are certainly that). Because they are meant to be understood, and understanding is only possible through participation in a common stock of meanings and a shared recognition of certain values, these texts are not isolated instances. Rather, they are part of a wider system of meanings and values which is ideological to the extent that it champions powerful vested interests under the guise of neutrality, in this case, the vested interest men seem to have in

keeping their sexuality out of the realm of public dispute.

So pervasive is the ideology of individualism, so deeply embedded in our cultural inheritance, so entrenched in what counts as reality, that it even appears within feminist ranks. To the extent that feminism remains exclusively focused on 'women' without at the same time recognising how women are situated within the social relations of male domination, it will tend to reproduce the individualistic ethos of the age. Although feminism must focus on women, i.e. female individuals, in a world which either ignores our existence or limits us to men's auxilliaries, what needs to be said about women cannot be confined only to women, since to do so is to portray women as somehow 'outside' the social relations of male supremacy. And while feminism is certainly a resistance to those social relations, that resistance does not emanate from inherent properties certain individuals happen to have; rather, it is an on-going struggle to see those relations for what they are and our own embeddedness within them. Relations of ruling do not operate only through violence and coercion, but also through the hearts and minds of even the most oppressed and exploited.

Power-as-domination is not only aversive, exploitative and constraining, it can also be seductive and ordinary. It operates through manipulating people into consenting to their own oppression, or even into actively desiring its most violent and degrading aspects. Unless the seductions and pleasures of domination, as well as its normality and business-as-usual, are acknowledged, no adequate account can be given of the ways in which social domination can be resisted.

To the extent that feminism's focus of attention is solely on 'women', it succumbs to the ethos of individualism, and any attempt to import a 'social constructionist' perspective must fail. Without acknowledgement of the social relations of male domination within which 'women' are already constituted, and which comprise the social reality feminism is struggling against, that aspect of 'the social' which is crucially relevant to the feminist political project is missing.

The 'feminist' context most obviously complicit with an ideology of individualism is the sexual libertarianism of the self-styled 'sex radicals', also known by its proponents as the

'Sex Debates' or the 'Sex Wars'. (King, 1990—the capital letters are King's). The quotation marks around the word 'feminist' in the preceding sentence are intended to bring into question the feminist status of sexual libertarianism. It has been convincingly argued that it is in fact anti-feminist (Jeffreys, 1990; Jeffreys, 1993; Leidholdt and Raymond, eds, 1990; Reti, ed., 1993; Thompson, 1991; Thompson, 1996a), because of its insistence on placing 'sexuality' beyond political critique, because of its espousal of the meanings and values of domination, and because of its virulent attacks on feminist struggles against pornography and male sexual violence. But because sexual libertarianism is self-defined as 'feminist', and published and discussed as 'feminism', it is very much part of the public face of what counts in the malestream as 'feminism'. As such, it needs to be addressed within feminism, not, however, by being accepted as one aspect of feminism, but by being rejected as an inimical adversary masquerading as 'feminism'.

For sexual libertarianism, 'the social' appears only in the form of restriction—repression of the individual's inherent properties, prohibition of its inherent desires, moralistic prescription curbing its inherent freedom. Within this context, the individual already possesses a sexual desire before the influence of 'the social' makes itself felt through the reactions of other individuals, either those who disapprove of and constrain the desiring ones, or those who recognise in others the same desire as their own and join together in the common cause of defending their right to freedom of sexual expression. Largely excluded from sexual libertarianism is any suggestion that sexual desire itself might not be an intrinsic property of individuals, but rather one of the ways in which we are 'socially constructed'.

However, at least one sympathiser goes so far as to consider the idea, only to dismiss it. Carol Vance makes a distinction between what she calls 'degrees of social construction theory', of which there appear to be two. One theory, she says, 'posits that even the direction [of] sexual desire itself, for example, object choice or hetero/homosexuality, is not intrinsic or inherent in the individual but is constructed'. This, she tells us, is 'the most radical form of constructionist theory'. (Vance, 1987: 18) In a footnote, she says that she is not intending to suggest 'that the most radical forms of social construction theory are necessarily the best'. She doubts, she says, whether they 'can be plausibly maintained'. She finds it implausible that sexual desire might be socially constructed, because in her view that would leave 'no room for the body' (pp.31-2n2, 23, 26).

The second theory which Vance wants to categorise as a 'social constructionist' perspective, is one which holds that 'the direction of desire and erotic interest are fixed' and which 'implicitly accepts an inherent sexual impulse'. This perspective, that of the 'sex radicals' (note the individualistic terminology), rejects any idea that sexual desire might be 'constructed by prevailing cultural frames'. It still qualifies as 'social construction theory', according to Vance, because it treats as 'cultural', 'the behavioural form [erotic] interest takes …, the subjective experience of the individual and the social significance attached to it by others' (pp.18-9—her emphasis). Later she tells us that 'some of the problems in social construction theory, particularly the critical reaction to it … in lesbian and gay political circles, originate in the meaning of this theory to members of oppressed groups in the contemporary sexual hierarchy' (p.26). In a footnote, she refers the reader to Gayle Rubin's paper, 'Thinking Sex', for 'the concept of sexual hierarchy' (p.34n16). In other words, the idea that sexual desire might be socially constructed has caused problems for those 'sex radicals' whose politics depends on placing sexual desire beyond political debate.

Vance's task here is to include under the banner of 'social construction' those theories of sexuality which have a vested interest in not questioning sexuality. But her argument rests on one dubious premise and an equally dubious assumption. The premise is that 'sexual impulse, "sex drive", or "lust" … resides in the body due to its physiological functioning and sensation' (p.19). The assumption is that the body is not 'socially constructed'. She does not state this latter idea explicitly, but if sexual desire is not 'socially constructed' because it emanates from the body, then obviously the body is not 'socially constructed' either. This opposition between 'body/desire' and 'the social' causes Vance some uneasiness, since she sees herself as a staunch critic of 'essentialism'. On the other hand, without it her objection to the idea that sexual desire is 'socially constructed' vanishes. She wants to maintain that the body is not socially constructed because she needs the body as a guarantee of the truth of sexual desire; but her adherence to a social constructionist perspective requires that nothing be left unaccounted for outside the realm of the social. She states her dilemma thus: 'As we consider restoring the body to social construction theory, we wonder if it is possible to be a materialist without sliding into essentialism?' Her answer fails to resolve it: 'The answer will not be found in a return to essentialism, whether frank or disguised, but in exploring more sensitive and imaginative ways of cnsidering the body' (p.26).

What Vance fails to recognise is that avoiding the slippery slope of essentialism involves refraining from setting up an opposition between 'the body' (pure nature?) and 'the social' ('constructed' or 'created') in the first place. If we regard bodies as 'social', that is, as meaningful and value-laden phenomena, we can then proceed to ask questions about the meanings which bodies carry, and the ways in which various types of bodies are valued (or not, as the case may be). Bodies themselves then become social entities. If even bodies are social, at least for feminist political purposes, there is no reason why sexual desire should not be regarded as social too. If it is the social meaning of bodies which is of concern to feminism—hatred and suppression of the maternal body, for example, or glorification of penis-possession as symbol of the only permitted 'human' status—there is no 'body' outside its social meanings for a sexual desire to reside in.

Vance's argument falls into the trap of what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'the self-evidence of biological individuation'. As Bourdieu points out, this piece of 'common sense' thinking

> prevents people from seeing that society exists in two inseparable forms: on the one hand, institutions …, and, on the other, acquired dispositions, the durable ways of being or doing that are incorporated in bodies (and which I call habitus). The socialized body (what is called the individual or the person) is not opposed to society; it is one of its forms of existence. (Bourdieu, 1993: 15)

Vance, however, needs to appeal to a pre-social 'body' if she is to provide a location where sexual desire can be placed beyond political critique. Her defence of 'sex radicals' requires an ideology of individualism which relegates all the feminist questions about sexuality to a 'body' and its desires which exist prior to 'the social'. This enables her to avoid addressing the ways in which sexual desire is 'socially constructed' in accordance with male supremacist relations of ruling. (For an account of the male supremacist meanings and values involved in those phenomena so dear to the hearts of the 'sex radicals'—transsexualism, transvestism, fetishism, paedophilia and prostitution, see: Thompson, 1991: 178-84) But she fails to save sexual libertarianism for the 'social constructionist' cause. By excluding what she does not want to see as political, i.e. sexual desire, from 'the social', she has excluded the very point at issue. If sexual desire is not 'socially constructed', there is nothing to

debate, which is, of course, exactly the point of the sexual libertarian position. The terminology of 'social construction' is, in any case, inadequate for feminist politics unless 'the social' in question is identified as male domination. Simply counterposing 'the social' with the 'natural' or 'biological', and accepting the former while rejecting the latter, says nothing about the relations of power which maintain women's subordination to men. It says nothing about how arguments from 'nature' maintain relations of ruling by excluding certain crucial questions from the realm of debate.

But individualism within a feminist context is not confined to sexual libertarianism where social relations of ruling remain unacknowledged. It is also to be found wherever 'women' are separated out from the social relations of male supremacy, and the latter are seen only as coercive forces impinging on already constituted individuals. Audre Lorde's famous article, 'The Uses of the Erotic', exemplifies the common feminist practice of portraying women as inherently immune to the social realities of male domination. It reads as though women were already possessed of a life force separated out from the social environment of male supremacy. For example, she says,

> The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane … When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only, rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within our selves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.
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> In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other

> supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial. (Lorde, 1978)

But domination is not experienced only as 'external and alien'. While male domination certainly requires self-negation, self-effacement and self-denial on the part of women, those demands do not emanate from 'outside ourselves', but very much from within. They can manifest as our own deepest feelings. And those feelings are not always negative ones like suffering, despair and numbness, but also pleasure, desire, and, yes, the erotic. Lorde does make a distinction between what she sees as the erotic as a source of power for women, and what she calls 'its opposite, the pornographic'. The latter she quite rightly sees as a male imposition on women. 'The erotic', she says, 'has often been misnamed by men and used against women'. But the the eroticisation of domination is not confined to pornography. It operates in other ways as well. It appears as romantic love, for example, as a woman's own conviction that a sexual relationship with a man is the only form of intimacy available to her and the only way to live her life. These feelings are not felt as an imposition from outside the self, but as arising from the deepest levels of one's own psyche. They are experienced as 'motivated and empowered from within', even though they offer women no more than a subordinated access to male power. Reliance on feelings alone is not sufficient in and of itself to resist the dehumanising effects of domination. We also need to know how our very selves are constituted within relations of ruling, how social relations of ruling permeate the self. We need to be able to distinguish between those feelings which simply embed us more firmly in the status quo, and those which arise out of our resistance to it. But this is just what Lorde has left out of her account.

This account is highly problematic for feminist politics. It overestimates women's power to resist because it underestimates male domination, and not only its pervasiveness, but also its sheer brutal power. To the extent that Lorde is saying no more than that women can resist male supremacist relations of ruling, she is perfectly correct. But because she mislocates the ground of that resistance, she misperceives the nature of the struggle. It is not helpful to suggest to women that they rely on something like 'a well of replenishing and provocative force' within themselves when there is no such thing, or at least, not in the unproblematic way Lorde portrays it. It is particularly unhelpful in cases where women have experienced

the cruellest forms of male power. It has the unfortunate implication that women who have been raped, battered, or sexually abused in childhood, for example, or who are struggling to survive in desperate poverty, are somehow responsible for their plight. It implies that they failed to protect themselves because they failed to access their own 'deeply female and spiritual resource', because they 'have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge'. The shocking truth about domination is that it works. It does degrade, humiliate, hurt and corrupt. In the face of male supremacy's worst effects (short of death), the most we can expect of ourselves is to continue struggling against dehumanisation. The necessary resources arise out of the struggle itself, and not from 'internal knowledge and needs' existing prior to our awareness of what we are struggling against.

If male domination is the social environment of all of us, there is no attribute of individuals existing prior to that environment, beyond it or outside it, to which we can appeal to aid us in the struggle. Any opposition to domination occurs within the same system which generates both the domination and the resistance to it. Opposing pornography or sadomasochism, for example, does not happen from a position outside the social relations eroticising domination and subordination. No one opposes eroticised domination from a position of immunity to its effects. Whether those effects are experienced as moral objection, as desire or as fear, or all at the same time, they are felt as part of the self. Refusing to comply with domination always involves an element of struggling with the self. Because domination operates through the inculcation of meanings and values, as well as though overt coercion, it affects the consciousness of individuals, not only their concrete life situations. Even in the case of forcible impositions and violations of basic human rights, those forced and violated must struggle against seeing themselves in the dehumanising ways in which domination defines them, as 'deserving' of their fate, or 'responsible' for the evils they are subjected to, or 'unworthy' of human dignity. But the struggle cannot even begin if we place our faith in an 'internal' power which has somehow remained unaffected by the relations of ruling within which we are embroiled. Certainly male supremacy can be challenged and opposed. But what is needed for that opposition arises, not from a 'power within', but from a knowledge of how domination operates and a committed belief that opposition is possible and necessary. And sometimes even our best is not enough, and that must be acknowledged too. Faced with

outright brutality, unashamed coercion and blatant degradation, all we can do is survive despite the helplessness, and try again another time despite the defeats.

Lorde's account is not unique. Rather, it is only one example of the common practice within feminist thought of asserting women's humanity without taking into account the ways in which male supremacist relations of ruling dehumanise women. But focusing on an inherent 'power' in women unlocated in any social formation says very little about women, either about how women are perceived in male supremacist terms, or about the ways in which women retrieve a sense of dignity and self-worth despite the worst male supremacy can do. For example, in her paper, 'The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood', Patricia Hill Collins attempts to 'reconceptualize sexuality with an eye toward empowering African-American women'. (Collins, 1990: 86) But although she argues that 'Black feminist analyses of sexual politics must go beyond chronicling how sexuality has been used to oppress', in fact her own paper is largely concerned with apparatuses of sexual domination—pornography, prostitution, rape and sexual violence. These are certainly crucial ways in which male domination operates, and knowing that is important if women are to develop any ability to oppose them. But this is not what Collins means. Instead, her way of 'empowering' African-American women is to assure them that they have access to 'the erotic' in Lorde's sense. 'Lorde's notion is one of power as energy', she says, 'as something people possess which must be annexed in order for larger systems of oppression to operate' (p.88). But although Collins' account inadvertently clarifies what is wrong with Lorde's thesis, it reproduces the problem rather than resolving it. It separates out 'power as domination on the social structural level' from a 'basic power of the erotic on the personal level' (p.88), and hence fails to take account of the fact that the 'social structural level' is also the 'personal level' in the sense that relations of ruling permeate the self.

This omission is not accidental. The separation between 'the social' and 'the individual' occurs a number of times in Collins' text. At one point she says: 'Each individual becomes a powerful conduit for social relations of domination whereby individual anxieties, fears, and doubts about sexuality can be annexed by larger systems of oppression' (p.87). What this sentence is saying is that 'individual anxieties, fears, and doubts' precede their 'annexation by larger systems of oppression'—the 'anxieties, fears, and doubts' exist as individual

attributes first, and then they are annexed by 'larger systems'. At another point she refers to 'a hierarchy of any kind [which] invades interpersonal relationships among individuals and the actual consciousness of individuals themselves' (p.87). Once again, the 'interpersonal relationships' and the 'consciousness of individuals' are already in place before they are 'invaded' by a 'hierarchy'. The individualism of this kind of formulation is not just the result of careless expression. There is a substantive political issue at stake. It is thoroughly misleading about the nature and extent of the 'empowerment' available to women. It says that women, their sexuality and their personal relationships are already separated out from the 'larger systems', and that all women have to do to 'empower' themselves is to get in touch with what is already there. Since neither politics nor everyday life operates that way, this is an exercise in futility. Women are not 'empowered' by unrealistic assurances which fail to take account of the actualities of domination.

The problem lies in the assumption that 'individuals' exist somewhere other than social relations of ruling. Whether this assumption operates by ignoring 'the social' altogether, or whether it operates by separating 'individuals' out from social domination and locating the latter in an environment 'external' to the 'individual', it is counter-productive for a feminist politics concerned to see the world clearly so that women can know what needs to be done, what can be done, and why the impossible is not feasible yet. If, in contrast, we refrain from separating 'individuals' of any kind (even if they are 'women') out from 'the social' (even if it is oppressive and male supremacist), if instead we recognise that relations of ruling present themselves under the guise of legitimacy, as right and proper, normal and ordinary, we will not be tempted to rely on an illusory 'power within'.

And indeed, in the body of her text, Collins herself does not do so. Despite her initial appeal to 'the erotic as a source of power in women' (p.88), what she actually discusses are the effects on women of some of male supremacy's more brutal aspects. For example, she tells the story of a certain 'Sarah Bartmann', whom she describes as 'the so-called Hottentot Venus', who was exhibited as a freak to titillate nineteenth-century European audiences with her steatopygia (i.e. protruding buttocks, a physical characteristic of her people). As Collins quite rightly points out, this is pornographic, 'a chilling example of [the] objectification of the Black female body', and an illustration of 'overarching structures of political

domination and economic exploitation' (pp.90-1). But although Collins' account tells us what happened to the woman, it says nothing about any 'source of erotic power' she might have had. It says nothing at all about the woman herself. It does not even tell us her name, which could not possibly have been the European 'Sarah Bartmann', but a name in her own language with meanings which situated her within her own culture and among her own people. Neither does it tell us what she thought and felt about the way she was treated, nor how she reacted, nor how she managed to retain some human dignity despite the degrading treatment she received. Of course, this information is unlikely to be available—'Sarah Bartmann' would not have been allowed to leave any trace of her own voice on the historical record. But that is the very point—stories like this one illustrate, not 'a source of power in women', but the horror of domination. It is here that the source of power lies, not as a property 'within' each individual, but in seeing relations of ruling for what they really are, stripping domination of its mask of legitimacy and normality, and exposing its inhumanity and degradation.

It is true that such a project requires qualities like courage, tenacity, integrity and strength of purpose, qualities which have meaning only in terms of the individual. (It makes no sense to talk of the 'courage' of social structures, for example). But they are not qualities which an individual already possesses and then brings with her to her social encounters. They do not pre-exist social interactions, they are elicited (or not) as the occasion arises. That this is so is evidenced by the way in which the above-mentioned qualities vary in meaning according to their context. What is valued as courage in a feminist context is belittled as 'stridency' or 'political correctness' in the malestream. The tenacity of feminists struggling to expose pornography as a social evil is trivialised as 'prudishness', 'wowserism' and 'anti-sex'. The integrity of feminists who persist in naming the enemy despite the consequences for their personal lives is never awarded the accolades of public esteem; instead it is either ignored or treated with ostracism, ridicule and vituperation. Moreover, although the knowledge required to expose domination as domination can only exist as individual consciousness (once again, it makes no sense to talk of social structures 'knowing' anything), as knowledge it is not an individual property, but available to all.

Or rather, it ought to be available to all. To the extent that feminist knowledge is not readily available, the reason is not that it belongs to some individuals and not to others, but

rather that, by bringing into question relations of ruling which monopolise the media of public communication, feminist knowledge is denied access to the public arena. Certainly, feminists are individuals defending the human rights of women as individuals, and violations of women's human rights are experienced by women as part of their daily lives which they live as individuals in relation to other individuals. But domination is a social reality which cannot be accounted for solely with reference to individuals, either as the oppressed or as self-motivated resisters.

In order to oppose male domination, feminists must be able to recognise it as domination. What this suggests for feminist practice is the need for a heightened awareness around any use of ideas about individuals, and a more explicit formulation of what is at stake than is usually the case in published versions of feminism. This would involve not so much an account of what an individual 'is', but rather a constant awareness of what it means to be human, both what it ought to mean, i.e. an ethical commitment to the kind of world we want to live in, and what it too often unfortunately does mean under conditions of domination. (Postmodernism's deliberate repudiation of any concept of the human through its commitment to 'anti-humanism' is one way in which it sabotages feminist politics—See: Thompson, 1996b) It would involve taking as a basic premise the idea that the individual is social all the way through, and abandoning any notion of individuals possessing any intrinsic attributes whatsoever. It would involve taking seriously the basic feminist insight that the social is male supremacist unless that reality is challenged by being exposed for what it is—relations of ruling masquerading as 'community', symbolic violence as 'legitimacy', exploitation as 'economic rationality', oppression as 'nature'. If feminism is seen in the first place as the challenge to male supremacist relations of ruling, as opposing a social reality structured around the ideological belief that only men are 'human', the first step has been taken in avoiding individualism, since 'the social' is the starting point of the analysis. As well, if male domination is seen as a social system of meanings and values which operates most efficiently through the consent of those it oppresses, and which can be eroded by refusals to acquiesce, 'the individual' is emptied of any essential attributes, and becomes instead the ethical locus of rights and responsibilities. Since feminism's defence of the interests of women is an ethical stance, it is less a concern about what women 'are', than it is a struggle for a meaningful existence where women are human too. This struggle is

motivated, not by any particular qualities women might have (or not have, as the case may be), but by the fact that women's human rights are violated and our human agency eroded within a social order which already defines 'women' as less than, or not at all, human. From such a standpoint, feminism can continue to expose the harms done to women, while insisting on the human rights, dignity, agency, even the very existence, of women, without attributing any particular properties to 'women' (or 'men' either, since feminism's object of analysis is not 'women and men', but the social system of male domination). The alluring promise which individualism seems to hold for those denied their own place in the sun can be resisted by remembering that it is an illusion perpetrated to maintain that denial.

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Women's Studies International Forum

(Added January 2004): This response from WSIF was, I suppose, only to be expected. The 'previous correspondence' mentioned by the editor in her covering letter concerned a version of my paper, 'What Does It Mean to Call Feminism White and Middle-Class?' I had submitted it to the organisers of the Australian Women's Studies Association Conference to be held in Perth, Western Australia, in November 1996, and it was rejected on the grounds that it had already been given elsewhere. The correspondence can be found in the Racism section of the website. Once again there's the facile 'old-fashioned' charge—my argument has been 'overtaken by more recent developments in feminist theory'.

(The notes were added between July 2003 and January 2004).

Women's Studies International Forum
Women's Studies
Division of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education
Murdoch University
WA
10 June 1999

Dear Denise,

I must apologise for the dreadful delay in getting back to you about the article you submitted to WSIF entitled 'The Trouble with Individualism'. We had great difficulties securing reviewers for it and, given our previous correspondence I have been very reluctant to act on less than two reviews.

Nonetheless, the delay is such that I am forced to take the advice of the one reader's report that we have been able to secure and my own judgment of the paper.

Regrettably, I will not be accepting it for publication without a substantial revision. While I agree with your one reader that there are some interesting points embedded within this discussion, I also agree with her that the material which frames the discussion is not really of interest to a journal audience. Much of the argument is pursued in relation to texts which are historically significant, but so overtaken by more recent developments in feminist theory that it is unclear why we should revisit them to the exclusion of

more current theories. Indeed, as I read your discussions of Vance, Lorde, Collins etc it seems to me more in keeping with the historical literature analysis which prefigures some other argument of more contemporary interest in a book perhaps (?).

Your reader is of the view that the contemporary, contextualising material (references to Biddulph, Arndt Stratton etc are too local to be meaningful for an international readership, and suggested an Australian feminist journal might be more appropriate. Perversely, I do not see this as an insurmountable problem (it simply needs elaborating) and would quite like to see an extended critical analysis of Biddulph, in particular. Your line of argument here strikes me as very promising, but it would need extending beyond the *Sydney Morning Herald* article into his other published texts.

So, pissed off as you are likely to get with me, in its present form this is not of interest to WSIF, but it could be refigured to focus on the contemporary material.

Yours

[…]

Australian and Asian Regional Editor

WSIF Reader's report on 'The Trouble with Individualism …'

Given WSIF's international audience, it is not clear that the extended discussion of Biddulph's *Sydney Morning Herald* article will be of interest to non-Australian readers (ditto with the brief reference to Stratton's film review). If the author wishes to maintain the Biddulph section, this article might be better submitted to a more explicitly Australian journal. I am also not convinced that the author makes a strong enough case for sexist conceptions of individualism being at the crux of Biddulph's views since, on the author's own account, Biddulph does refer to various environmental (p.1), cultural factors (p.3) and gender relations influencing boys' behaviour. At the least, the author needs to greatly expand her arguments regarding male sexual desire in already constituted individuals on page 4, and Biddulph's views on this, to substantiate her argument better. She also needs to make it clear that Biddulph's views are a form of individualistic essentialism rather than essentialist views about a social group (i.e. the sexuality of men in general).[1] In short, there may be better examples than Biddulph for her to use. Her case against individualism is stronger in the analysis of the feminist sexual libertarians—as one would expect given libertarianism's long associations with arguments about the rights of the individual. However, the author's arguments could also do with some clarification here. the author's own position about social construction of the body[2] and desire, counterposed to her interpretation of Vance's, Lorde's

and Collin's views, touches on a range of very complex arguments in feminist theory around desire, the body, essentialism and 'social construction' but without alluding sufficiently to the wider feminist literature. The author also needs to make a better case for selecting these authors and needs to be a bit more cautious in her statements regarding how much one can extrapolate from a critical analysis of their views in regard to wider problems in feminist theory. Why didn't the author, for example, engage with a feminist theorist such as Butler? The author does make some very significant points about the political implications of essentialist conceptions of desire but opposing feminist viewpoints could be ones that come from different traditions than 'social construction' e.g. ones that analyse the cultural or the discursive. Also, do essentialist conceptions of desire necessarily have to be individualist and vice versa? The relationship between individualism and essentialism could be teased out more.[3] There is also the issue of whether 'social construction' of desire can be reduced to 'male domination'. Not only are the forms of desire related to male domination discussed very fleetingly (with little reference to other literature) but one is left wondering where issues such as racially constructed desire or heterosexual desire would fit here. For example, where do racial constructions of desire fit in the author's discussion of the 'Hottentot Venus'? Can constructions of heterosexual desire be reduced to male domination?[4] Her comments in the conclusion also raise the issue of whether the emphasis on individualism in much feminist theory is due to the influence of liberal individualism.

Unfortunately, I can't recommend publication of this piece in its present form which is a great pity since the argument about the political implications of seeing desire in an essentialist, pre-social, form is an important one e.g. that it bypasses the possibility of feminists critiquing particular forms of desire. The article would need very substantial reworking (and to be refereed again) before if could be published.

Notes

1. It would seem our incomprehension is mutual—I haven't the faintest idea what this sentence means.

2. I don't have a 'position' on the 'social construction of the body'. I don't think that phrase makes any sense. What would it mean to say 'the body' was 'socially constructed'? Instead, I talked in the paper about 'regard[ing] bodies as "social", that is, as meaningful and value-laden phenomena'. I was talking about the meanings bodies are allocated, and I gave a couple of examples—'hatred and suppression of the maternal body, for example, or glorification of penis-possession as symbol of the only permitted "human" status'. The problem with the form of libertarianism espoused by this reader (well, one of them) is that it appeals to the body as a guarantor of certain sorts of meaning—desire, pleasure, gratification—rather than seeing that the way the body is experienced is a consequence of social arrangements which require that bodies be experienced in this way.

3. Oh for heavens sake, why? For those who think this is a meaningful question, I do 'tease it out more', in *Radical Feminism Today*, where I agree that what I call 'individualism' could be called 'essentialism', but that I won't do so because the term has become politically bankrupt as a result of its use to vilify radical feminism (p.46).

4. 'Reduced' is a very handy word—it obviates the need to think. It's also an odd choice of word in this context. Whether or not one believes in the existence of male domination, it is surely much grander than heterosexual desire, and hence not a matter of 'reduction' at all. Presumably this question is asking whether all heterosexual desire is male supremacist.