What Counts as Feminist Theory?

Abstract: This paper argues for a particular meaning of feminism, in terms of a political struggle against the social relations of male supremacy and for a human status for women outside male control. It starts by acknowledging there are conflicts over the meaning of feminism, but points out that these are not resolved by references to 'feminisms' in the plural. Neither, it goes on to argue, is feminism an 'identity politics'. Although feminism is centrally concerned with women, that concern is necessary because of the existence of social relations based on the principle that only men count as 'human'. In that sense, feminism is both social theory and critical theory. It is also radical feminism, and the paper mounts a defence of radical feminism against charges that it is 'essentialist', 'white and middle-class' and 'right-wing', while at the same time criticising the typology which defines radical feminism as simply one 'feminism' among many.

Conflicts Within Feminism

There are many things which might count as feminist theory, at least enough to provide occupation for many years to those of us who are interested in such matters. The question, though, implies another one: What does *not* count as feminist theory?

There exist very real and active conflicts around what is to count as feminism. To date, attempts to deal with those conflicts have not been satisfactory. One of those attempts is to refer to 'feminisms' (in the plural), as a way of including differing viewpoints under the umbrella of feminism. This tolerant attitude does not resolve the conflicts, however. Rather, it is a way of refusing to face them and argue them through. Tolerance becomes repressive (Marcuse, 1965) when refraining from taking sides means protecting those powerful vested interests feminism is sworn to oppose. Sometimes these are not just 'differences', but mutually exclusive stances which contradict each other.[1] There also exist numerous attempts to falsify, demean or trivialize feminism or render it insignificant, and some of those endeavours are presented as 'feminism' itself. More often, though, arguments and stances can be grounded in the best of feminist motives, only to slide off into something that does a disservice to feminist principles. These need to be disentangled and argued through, and not covered over with a polite respecting of 'differences', or worse, a silencing or distorting of protest.

'Identity Politics'

Another way of managing conflicts within feminism is by an implicit acceptance of anything said or done in the name of feminism by anyone who identifies as 'a feminist'. This is a supposition on my part, but it seems to me that sometimes the only reason something is being accepted as 'feminism' is because someone who says she is 'a feminist' has said it. But self-identification is not a sufficient guarantee of feminist theory or politics. Feminism is not an 'identity', despite numerous references to it as 'an identity politics'. One's own feminist commitment is an important part of how we see ourselves and our presence in the world in relation to others. But we also live in a world which is in many ways antagonistic to feminism, and that world also structures and gives meaning to our sense of who we are. In that sense feminism is a struggle within the self, between who we are as a result of living in a world which requires women's subordination to men, and who we are as a result of trying to live in accordance with feminist principles. The waging of that struggle will sometimes involve striving to be what we are not, or not yet. It will involve extricating oneself from meanings and values which feel as real as anything can feel (because they emanate from the dominant reality which masquerades as the only reality), but which can be seen to damage us once we take account of what feminism has exposed about that dominant reality. Seen in this way, feminism is a kind of *non*-identity, of what we are not yet, or not consistently, but are striving to become.

That said, though, it must also be said that characterizing feminism as 'an identity politics' is understandable in the light of what feminism has exposed about the situation of women. It is an assertion on the part of women of a human status in their own right, and as such, it is an important part of the feminist project. But unless it is accompanied by a recognition of what it is which *denies* a human status to women, that is, the social relations of male supremacy, and the ways in which we are implicated in that, it risks reproducing those very relations of domination, this time in the guise of 'feminism'. If domination is not named for what it is, it continues to operate nonetheless.

In the case of a concept like 'identity', the risk is that of abstract individualism, one of the chief ideological mechanisms for denying the existence of social domination. Abstract individualism can be found wherever individuals are presented as autonomous, discrete

entities, and 'society' is seen only as a coming together into 'groups' or 'community' of individuals already possessing attributes as aspects of the self. It is certainly the case that this is the way 'identity' feels. Desires, beliefs, feelings, emotions, behaviours, attitudes, self-esteem (or lack of it) certainly feel like intrinsic aspects of oneself. But 'internal' (to the individual) mental states and processes can also be the effects of social domination on the individual psyche. Domination—social relations which ensure that some will prosper at others' expense and which render people powerless in the face of humanly contrived institutions—operates not only by means of overt force and the coercion of people against their will. It also operates, and most efficiently, to the extent that the subordinated embrace it as their own meaning and value, and everyone acknowledges it as the only possible reality. Abstract individualism enables the stability of relations of ruling by presenting the effects of domination as something inherent in the individual,[2] and not the effect of domination at all because the social relations of ruling remain unacknowledged.

If domination can penetrate the deepest recesses of our psyches and make us complicit with our own subordination, then we need to be wary about what we include in any 'identity' we might embrace. We need some way of sorting out which aspects of the self might be complicit with domination, and which aspects belong with the struggle to resist and extricate ourselves from it. Feminism, by identifying the social relations of male supremacy, enables this sorting out process. The concept of 'identity' is relevant only to the extent that each of us has to do the sorting out for ourselves, because the sorting out happens within the context of our own personal lives. This is the burden of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political', and of the feminist challenge to the public/private distinction. Feminism speaks publicly about what is most private and personal, theorizes about what is lived experientially, and generalizes about the detailed particulars of intimate relationships. That can feel like an intrusion. But it is as well to remember that we are already intruded upon—by those relations of ruling into which we were born and which captured us before we were aware of what was going on. We must allow feminism to intrude on our private lives if it is to reach those places where domination already resides.[3]

So feminism is not an 'identity' in any immediate and transparently obvious sense, although it can certainly have effects on how we see ourselves and our relations in the world, if we let

it. By the same token, and for much the same reasons, neither is it a matter of personal opinion in any sense which implies that anyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's. Feminism has its own logic, meaning and practice. Where opinions come into conflict they must be argued through with reference to feminism itself, not evaded through fear of offending or out of a misplaced sense of everyone's right to be heard. While this is a right which has deservedly been embraced by feminism, it goes along with a corresponding duty, that of keeping oneself informed, what Lorraine Code has called 'epistemic responsibility'. (Code, 1987) Opinions held in ignorance or defiance of what feminism is, cannot be granted the same status as genuinely feminist beliefs. While the upshot of any particular argument may be no more than an agreement to disagree, the fact of the disagreement needs to be acknowledged, and not covered up with a veneer of a false harmony.

What Is Feminism?

But the first task is to say what feminism *is*. Of course, 'what feminism is' is by and large dependent on the context within which the question arises and the purposes for which it is asked. (See, for example, the various discussions of what radical feminism means in *Trouble and Strife*, 1993) My own quest for clarification of the meaning of feminism started some years ago with my reading of a number of texts identified as feminist, which aroused in me a sense of unease and confusion that such positions were being presented as feminism.[4] Positions on sexuality such as these (which later came to be called 'libertarian') bore very little relation to what I understood to be feminist positions on sexuality. What was even more confusing was that these libertarian positions appeared to stand in stark contradiction to feminism. It seemed to me that they did no more than reiterate what feminism had already brought strongly into disrepute. How could these positions be argued in the name of feminism itself? This was the context within which I embarked on a self-imposed task of making explicit the meanings and values of the feminist project.

The first answer I found to the question of what feminism is, was that it was obviously in some sense concerned with women. Just as obviously, though, it was not only about women, since there are many discourses about women which are patently not feminist. One exemplary instance of such a discourse was Babette Francis' contribution to the book edited by Robyn Rowland, *Women Who Do and Women Who Don't Join the Women's Movement*.

Francis was a founder of the anti-feminist group 'Woman Who Want to be Women', a member of a number of 'pro-life' (i.e. anti-abortion) groups, and a committee member of the right-wing 'Council for a Free Australia'. She was opposed to 'abortion on demand, government-funded 24-hours-a-day crÍches, and propaganda for education based on the assumption that sex differences are entirely socially induced rather than innate'. She believed that Christianity had been instrumental in 'establishing the philosophical basis for the equality of women' and in 'enhanc[ing] women's status', and that 'the Catholic tradition in particular' had benefited women by upholding 'the principle that women should not have to subject their bodies to contraception, abortion and sterilization to achieve equality with men'. She was convinced that the principles she espoused were in women's best interests. She considered herself 'a feminist in the true sense of the word' in that she was 'a believer in equal rights for women', although she opposed the 'beliefs and methods' of 'women's liberationists'. (Rowland, ed., 1984: 130-1) It seemed to me that such a farrago of distortion could not be adequately identified as anti-feminist as long as feminism was defined only in terms of women, or even in terms of women's rights or women's equality with men, since the terminology could be so easily co-opted by right-wing discourse.

So while focusing on women is central to the feminist project, there needs to be some way of distinguishing feminism's focus on women from positions like the one outlined above. The answer I came up with was that feminism's concern for women is, in the most general sense, a concern to assert that women are human too, in the face of male supremacist social conditions which deny that by ensuring that only men count as 'human'[5] and by defining women's existence only in terms of subordination to men. Feminist campaigns for safe and legal means of abortion, contraception, publicly funded childcare, equal pay and work force participation, etc., were among the means directed towards ending women's subordination to men through such mechanisms as enforced pregnancy and childbirth and childcare, financial dependence, destitution, isolation in the private household and subjection to male violence. And the feminist insistence that differences between the sexes were socially constructed rather than natural, was an insistence that male supremacy was not inevitable. Feminism asserts that male domination exists, but that it is a social system of meanings and values and hence within the realm of human action and responsibility, and that it not only *can* be challenged, it *ought* to be.

Feminist theory, then, is essentially social theory (Eisenstein, 1984: xiii), since it is inspired by the need to struggle against those social conditions which require women's subordination to men. There was, therefore, never any real need for a 'sex/gender' distinction. Feminism 'always already' (as the Althusserians used to say) treated sex as a social phenomenon, as constituted by norms and mores, beliefs and practices detrimental to women. By separating 'sex' out from 'gender', the distinction undermined that feminist insight. By confining the social to 'gender', it placed 'sex' somewhere outside it. It is hardly surprising, then, that 'gender' has developed as a very slippery concept which can be used for any purpose, including anti-feminist ones. Because it has no meaning (except as a grammatical term), it can take on any meaning, only one of which (and not the most common one) refers to the social relations of male supremacy. And having usurped the position of *the* subject matter of feminism, it has served as a euphemism bowdlerizing the feminist message. What feminism uncovered about the social relations between the sexes and the social arrangements of sexuality is more starkly named as 'sex'. That is the term under which we already know and understand the problem and its intransigence. There is no new thing called 'gender'. (For a fuller discussion, see: Thompson, 1989; Thompson, 1991; Thompson, 2001)

Feminism is also *critical* theory,[6] in the sense that it is not morally and politically neutral. On the contrary, it is founded on a standpoint of commitment to the interests of the oppressed and subordinated, and hence of opposition to social relations of ruling. Its concern with 'society as it is' says 'this ought not to be so' insofar as social reality conforms with the dictates of domination. It is an exposure of social domination *as* domination, with the aim of challenging injustice, exploitation, subordination and the degrading conditions to which domination condemns large segments of the population. It starts from the interests of women because women are the most immediate victims of male supremacy, and because the harms done to women are too little recognized as domination's systematic effects and the most vociferously disputed when they are publicly exposed. But from the beginning it stands in opposition to the dehumanizing social conditions of all forms of domination, that is, of social relations which operate in the interests of the powerful and violate the human rights and dignity of others. Opposition to every kind of domination is central to the feminist project, not only because all forms of domination harm women, but also because no form of domination has been adequately accounted for unless its male supremacist aspects have also been exposed.

This feminist stance of opposition to all forms of domination is most clearly expressed in the early radical feminist argument to the effect that women's oppression is the earliest and primary form of oppression. (For examples of this early argument, see: Thompson, 2001). This argument appears to have vanished from the feminist repertoire, and as a consequence its implications have not been drawn out, nor the problems with it discussed. As far as the problems are concerned, there are two. The first is the attempt to locate women's oppression as the first form of oppression in history (or rather, prehistory). The problem with this is that the surviving records are scanty and not at all clear about what can be said about women's status from the few traces which remain. Neither is it clear how relevant prehistorical times are to the present. (For an insightful example of this kind of history, though, see: Lerner, 1986).

The second problem involves couching the issue in terms of 'women's oppression' rather than, in the first place, in terms of opposition to male domination. The phrase 'women's oppression' does not immediately identify the problem which is at issue. The problem is not women themselves, but those ways of structuring social reality to maintain women's subordination to men, that is, male supremacy. What is at issue is not in the first place forms of oppression, but forms of domination. Domination certainly has oppressive effects. But focusing on the oppressions without first acknowledging the systematic social arrangements of domination, tends to divert attention away from those social arrangements. What remains then is simply a set of categories of the oppressed, whose oppression risks being seen as emanating from their own intrinsic characteristics, rather than from the institutions, practices, meanings and values of social domination.

So the early radical feminist argument about political priorities needs rewording in terms of 'male domination' rather than 'women's oppression'. Once the primary focus of attention is shifted from oppression to domination, that argument becomes one about the priority of male domination. It is this argument which has received very little, if any, attention. Instead, the focus on women's oppression rather than male domination has tended to focus attention on hierarchies of oppression among women. The best known of these is that which centres around the concepts of 'Western, white and middle-class women' versus 'women of colour', 'indigenous women' and 'Third World women'. It is undoubtedly the case that some women

are more (and some less) privileged than other women, and that needs to be acknowledged along with the extent to which women are complicit in maintaining and reproducing these hierarchies. But it must also be acknowledged that these hierarchies originate in social structures of power and privilege which cannot be reduced to the attributes of individuals (although we are all morally and politically responsible for our own positioning in relation to these structures, a responsibility which also includes the possibility of recognizing where we are not responsible because of the coercive nature of relations of ruling). And among forms of social domination—usually designated as race, class and sex (or 'gender')—it is male domination which constitutes the subject matter of feminism.

It is opposition to male domination which defines the feminist enterprise and marks it off from other standpoints, and hence supplies feminism with its political priorities. As a consequence, it brings a new light to bear on those other great loci of domination, race and class, by asking the question: To what extent are racism and capitalist class domination also forms of male domination? How is that grand structuring principle of male domination—that only men count as 'human'—implicated in those other great exclusions from human status, rights and dignity, those based on racial and ethnic categorization and on lack of access to material resources? It is this kind of question which has as yet received little attention within feminist theory. (For some attempts to address this question in the context of 'race', see: Thompson, 2001; Winter, 1994; Winter, 1997; Winter, 2001).

Radical Feminism

What counts as feminist theory, then, is that theory which unequivocally challenges the social problem of male supremacy. In this sense, feminist theory is radical feminist theory. It is radical feminism, with its stubborn insistence on exposing the systematic pervasiveness of male violence against women and the central part played by sexuality in maintaining men's domination over women, which has been most consistent and persistent in the struggle against male supremacy. And it has been roundly trashed for its pains. There exists an extensive literature within the feminist publishing industry purporting to demonstrate the inadequacies, falsehoods and absurdities of the radical feminist standpoint. So pervasive is this stance that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of citations.[7] It consists largely of off-hand, dismissive references to radical feminism's supposed 'essentialism', 'biologism',

'false universalism', and complicity with right-wing moralism (to identify the most frequently alleged of the claims).[8] These assertions are presented as so self-evident as to be beyond dispute. It is as though there used to be a debate but it's over now[9] and everyone is currently in complete agreement that radical feminism is at best outmoded, or worse, an embarrassing mistake which must be thoroughly repudiated.

But there never was any debate. Radical feminism's 'essentialism' (etc.) was instantly widely accepted, despite a number of serious problems with this kind of criticism. Among those problems are a certain incoherence in the basic terms used, the misrepresentation and distortion of radical feminism on which the criticisms rely, and most importantly, the denial of male supremacy which the criticisms entail. (For detailed accounts of the these problems, see: Thompson, 1991; Thompson, 2001). But it has been extraordinarily difficult to get any counter-arguments onto the public agenda. Histories of feminism tend to caricature and marginalize radical feminism (Cameron, 1993).[10] Conferences and anthologies, especially on sexuality (or 'sexualities', in the plural), tend to exclude the radical feminist perspective altogether (Jackson, 1997/8; Richardson, 1996b).[11] This is not a conspiracy to exclude radical feminists from 'certain academic and publishing cliques', as Debbie Cameron has remarked. Neither is it absolute since, as Cameron points out, 'some women at the radical end of the spectrum do write feminism's history (e.g. Sheila Jeffreys)'. Her view is that the events are still too raw in the 'personal memories' of the participants, and that it will take a younger, more detached generation to do the Women's Liberation Movement justice. She also points out, however, that the scantiness of written resources may be a large part of the problem, in which case radical feminists need to bear this in mind in order to 'leave our mark on history'. (Cameron, 1993)

I suspect, however, that the problem lies deeper. It is true that there is no conspiracy in any sense which implies conscious deliberation and overt collusion on anyone's part. There are no meetings held or committees formed to discuss the issues, make decisions, implement policy and state explicitly that radical feminism is beyond the pale and radical feminists unwelcome. There is no need for it. Male domination is the 'default option' of our society, that is, what happens automatically unless care is taken to change it. Antagonism to radical feminism is already well-entrenched in the dominant norms and mores of our culture. It is

ensured by the practical common sense of the social relations of ruling of male domination (to adapt an insight of Antonio Gramsci's). By identifying the enemy and exposing the social mechanisms and effects of male supremacy, radical feminism transgresses a major requirement of the social order—it breaks the silence which keeps male power in operation as the dominant social reality. There is no need for any organized collaboration against radical feminism—it already exists in the systematic requirement that domination not be named as domination. What radical feminism exposes about ourselves and our society is so disturbing, so discomforting and distressing, that it is hardly surprising it is so frequently ignored or misrepresented.

Defending Radical Feminism

There have appeared a number of defences of radical feminism.[12] All challenge the accusation of 'essentialism' and insist that it is inaccurate, demonstrating the point over and over again in their own work. As Stevi Jackson has commented:

> It is indeed odd that a perspective dedicated to challenging and changing both male and female sexuality, and to transforming radically our ideas about what is erotic, should be seen as biologically determinist ... What is the case is that radical feminists have problematized desire and pleasure and have suggested they might be reconstituted. (Jackson, 1996: 24)

But these defences go only part of the way towards redressing the imbalance because they tend to concede too much. They agree, for example, that there are some radical feminist writings which are 'essentialist'. Diane Richardson suggests that Mary Daly and Kathleen Barry 'have alluded to an essential female/male sexuality' (Richardson, 1993: 82). Sylvia Walby also finds in radical feminist writings some tendencies towards 'essentialism, frequently of a biological sort', notably in Shulamith Firestone's work, although she regards these criticisms as largely 'unduly exaggerated' and 'misplaced'. (Walby, 1990: 68, 121) Stevi Jackson refers to 'the diversity of opinion among radical feminists', as part of her objection to the caricature of radical feminism as 'essentialist' and 'anti-sex', thus implying that there are some radical feminists who *are*, just not all of them. (She also quite rightly points out that 'opposition to specific sexual practices' does not equate with 'an anti-erotic

stance'). (Jackson, 1996a: 24) Everybody, whether radical feminist or not, appears to agree that Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* is 'essentialist', although as Sylvia Walby has pointed out, Firestone's argument did allow for the possibility of historical change in the situation of women, both by way of changes in technology and through political struggle. (Walby, 1990: 65-8)[13]

Essentialism

But to allow that there might be some aspects of radical feminism which *are* 'essentialist' is to allow too much. In the first place, those writings which are usually cited as evidence of (possible) 'essentialism' can be read another way. They can be read on the level of what Sylvia Walby refers to as 'discourse analysis' (Walby, 1990: 100-3), that is, as an account of meanings and values, as an exposure of the language, culture and beliefs which maintain women's subjection to men as social reality per se. Indeed, not only *can* they be read that way, that is the *only* way to read radical feminist writings. Whatever mistakes in linguistic expression the writers might have made (and I am not prepared to concede that they made any at all), their aim is to expose the sordid reality of male domination by unveiling its more extreme effects as systematic and purposive. Exposing the reality of domination is the first step in undermining it, since it operates most efficiently to the extent that it remains unquestioned. That radical feminist aim appears clearly and distinctly in the writings, apart from the fact that it is usually stated explicitly anyway. So obvious is the radical feminist aim of challenging male supremacy, that assertions to the contrary—that radical feminists see 'gender' (the usual euphemistic substitute for naming the enemy) as fixed, unchanging or eternal—can only be made in bad faith.

But what's wrong with 'essentialism' anyway? It is supposedly connected to the belief that social relations are unchangeable because they are based in biology. But in the light of what radical feminists actually say, such a charge is unfounded. And in the light of the purpose for which they say it—to expose domination as domination in order to challenge and oppose it—the charge is absurd. So many words have been adamantly pronounced and arguments triumphantly brought forth, on what has every appearance of being a mere peccadillo. In the face of the very real problems feminism has uncovered, what is the harm in something which is at most nothing but an infelicity of language use? Who benefits from the enormous

amount of time, energy, print and paper devoted to denouncing 'essentialism'? Certainly not those interested in greater understanding of the feminist enterprise, since the debate has hardly been noted for its clarity or its integrity.

This has not gone unremarked. Naomi Schor, for example, refers to the accusation of 'essentialism' as 'the prime idiom of intellectual terrorism and the privileged instrument of political orthodoxy', endowed with 'the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion'. (Schor, 1989: 40) Schor does not identify radical feminism as the prime target of attack. Her purpose is to defend the work of Luce Irigaray against the charge of 'essentialism', along with the position of women's studies in the university.

Teresa de Lauretis does not explicitly defend radical feminism either, but she too finds the charge of 'essentialism' suspect. She admits to having 'use[d] the term, initially, as a serious critical concept' (although to my knowledge she tended to be circumspect and tentative in her usage—de Lauretis, 1986). She has now, she says, 'grown impatient with this word—essentialism—time and again repeated with its reductive ring, its self-righteous tone of superiority, its contempt for "them"—those guilty of it' (de Lauretis, 1989: 3). She also suggests that there is nothing wrong with 'essence' anyway, since it can be interpreted as a definitional question (she uses the term 'nominal'), as a question about what marks feminism off from anything else: 'For there is, undeniably, an essential difference between a feminist and a non-feminist understanding ... That difference is essential in that it is constitutive of ... feminism' (pp.3-4). In that case, accusations of 'essentialism' are groundless. She suspects, though, that all the fretting about 'essentialism' conceals a deeper reluctance. 'I would now suggest', she says,

> that what motivates the suspicion or the outright construction, on the part of Anglo-American feminists, of a fantom feminist essentialism, may be less the risk of essentialism itself than the further risk which that entails: the risk of challenging directly the social-symbolic institution of heterosexuality. (de Lauretis, 1989: 3, 32)

In other words the 'essentialism' accusation serves a purpose, and that purpose is to deflect attention away from uncovering the social structures of power. De Lauretis calls those

structures 'heterosexuality' whereas I would prefer the term 'male domination', but the point remains. The 'essentialism' accusation is a diversionary tactic serving to divert attention from the real issues (Thompson, 1989; Thompson, 1991). Feminism doesn't need any more accusations of 'essentialism'. Whether hurled or repudiated, it's a barrier to getting on with the real business of challenging male supremacy.

Race and Class

As well as this concession to the 'essentialism' accusation, these defences of radical feminism too hastily concede that radical feminism has not dealt adequately with race and class. They remind us that no other type of feminism has either, and, as Debbie Cameron points out, 'there's little support for the idea that 1970s feminists were not aware of race and class' (Cameron, 1993: 12). But there is no acknowledgement of that early radical feminist argument I mentioned above. It had its problems but it was a starting point for theorizing all forms of domination (or rather 'oppression', which was the preferred terminology). At the very least it would mean staying within the feminist paradigm. It is feminism's peculiar genius to have discovered the social system of male supremacy (if 'discovered' in the right word to apply to something that is already so familiar and well-known, although not under that name), just as Marxism and the political left have exposed capitalism as a system of social domination rather than simply economics or the production and circulation of commodities (MacKinnon, 1989), and anti-racist movements have uncovered the systematic nature of racist dehumanization (once again, if 'uncovered' is the right word for what is a daily occurrence). To bring to bear on race and class the insight that male domination is the primary form of domination might throw new light on these other loci of domination, and in such a way as to uncover common themes of dehumanization. But unless this early argument is acknowledged, what radical feminism has had to say about race and class has not been acknowledged either.

The Typology

Another concession made to the attacks on radical feminism is an implicit acceptance that there are different forms of feminism and that radical feminism is just one type of feminism among many. But there are no different types of feminism. (Still less are there different types of 'feminists', since feminism is not an individual attribute or a personal opinion—See

the above discussion of 'identity politics'). As Catharine MacKinnon has said, 'Radical feminism is feminism' (MacKinnon, 1989: 117). It is 'feminism unmodified' or 'feminism in its own voice' (MacKinnon, 1987: 16). To the extent that differing 'feminisms'—radical, socialist, Marxist, liberal, postmodernist, eco-, lesbian, Black, etc., etc.—partake of it, they *are* that feminism. So although I myself refer to 'radical feminism', that is not because it is one feminism among many, but because that regrettable typology of 'feminisms' continues to set the terms of the debate. While there are good reasons for using for feminist purposes insights gained in malestream contexts—sociology, philosophy, Marxism, for example—that is not always what the modified 'feminisms' do. Rather, as the 'essentialism' example makes abundantly clear, the prevailing tendency is to use the modifying discourse to scold feminism. This is not to say that everything said in the name of radical feminism by self-identified radical feminists is beyond dispute. It simply means that any criticism must be adequate, appropriate, intelligible and sincere. Given the frequency with which radical feminism is misrepresented, it must be said that, on these criteria, much of the criticism fails.

The Alleged Right-Wing Connection

One of the more peculiar accusations to be levelled against radical feminism is that it is in collusion with the right-wing. The charge is commonly levelled in the context of feminist campaigns against pornography. An early example of this kind of charge is a review by Ellen Willis of Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence* and Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Willis, 1981).[14] Willis started her review with the generalization that the arguments of 'some feminist activists' and of the 'new right' were 'uncomfortably similar' because both connected pornography with male sexual violence. She suggested that this might be because 'feminists have been affected by the conservative climate and are unconsciously moving with the cultural tide'. But even as the supposed connection was set up, differences appeared. Willis said that 'anti-porn feminists see pornography as a brutal exercise of predatory male sexuality, a form of violence against women (and an incitement to such violence)', and that 'the right also associates pornography with violence and with rampant male lust broken loose from the saving constraints of God and Family'; and again: 'The Andrea Dworkins rail against male vice; the George Gilders come forward to offer God and Family as the remedy'. The first difference which springs

immediately to view is that no feminists appeal to 'God and Family'. Another difference is that feminists explicitly name *male* sexuality as the problem, whereas the right-wing deletes male agency (Willis' reference to 'male lust' in the context of right-wing discourse notwithstanding).

As it turns out, however, when Willis comes to discuss the two books under review, she supplies no argument or evidence from the texts themselves in support of her initial generalization, except the fact that the authors confine their focus of attention to pornography, at least in Griffin's case: it is her 'singling out [of pornography] for condemnation' which 'betrays an unwitting conservative bias'. In Dworkin's case, Willis appears to be objecting partly to her writing style—'a book-length sermon ... somewhere between poetry and rant'—and partly to her failure to say anything good about sexual relations between the sexes—'A world view that defines male sexuality as pornography as rape leaves no room for mutual heterosexual desire, let alone love'. The first objection is neither here nor there. I disagree with Willis' assessment of Dworkin's writing style (and I'm not alone in that), but we're both entitled to our opinion. As far as the second objection is concerned, it is not Dworkin's text which 'defines male sexuality as pornography as rape', but the texts which Dworkin quite clearly condemns, the texts and mentality of pornography itself. But in any case, Dworkin's text is the very antithesis of right-wing discourse because she exposes what the conservative mind wants to hide—the woman-hating at the heart of male supremacy.

It would seem, then, that the supposed connection between the feminist critique of pornography and the right-wing is nothing but a personal opinion based on a simplistic syllogism: feminist anti-pornography is against pornography, the right-wing is against pornography, therefore the feminist anti-pornography campaign is right-wing. But despite the lack of any substance, the charge is as deeply embedded in the canon as the 'essentialism' one is. To give just two examples: 'Ellen Willis noted', says Hester Eisenstein, 'that the feminist "preoccupation with pornography" converged with the "pro-family fundamentalism" of the New Right' (Eisenstein, 1984: 129). Thus is Willis' unconsidered opinion reproduced as though it were fact. And Seyla Benhabib can refer, without explanation or qualification, to 'a strange and unholy alliance' between 'Andrea Dworkin

and Jerry Falwell' (Benhabib, 1992: 99). The comment is parenthetical, intended to illustrate her argument about the lack of moral consensus around pornography. But although Benhabib herself is explicitly arguing for a continued openness to moral debate around this issue, she has already closed it off with this callous coupling of the two names. The casualness with which it is done is brutal. It is also grossly unjust and manifestly false, given Dworkin's sustained and unwavering critique of right-wing politics (throughout all her work, but see especially: Dworkin, 1983). Benhabib does not tell us where she got the idea that Andrea Dworkin had entered into an alliance with Jerry Falwell, but she certainly didn't get it from Dworkin's own writings.

In Conclusion

To return to the questions with which this paper began, of what counts as feminist theory and what does not. Who decides which is which? Ideally we all do. Making decisions about what counts as feminism and what does not is an urgent responsibility for anyone engaged on the feminist project. I say 'urgent' because, in practice, these decisions are already being made, and all too frequently to the detriment of genuine feminist insights. And I say 'responsibility' rather than 'right' in this context of saying what feminism does and does not mean, because too often the project of defining feminism is silenced with variations on the theme of 'You have no right'. The 'right' referred to here is supposedly the 'right' to define who is and is not a 'feminist'. But putting it in these terms individualizes the question and paralyzes political debate by interpreting feminism as nothing but a matter of personal opinion. Since we are all entitled to our own opinions (under the feminist principle of allowing women to make up their own minds), to couch the issue in terms of someone deciding who counts as 'a feminist' and imposing that decision on others, seems like a violation of that feminist principle. But that interpretation ignores the fact that women (or anyone else for that matter) cannot make up their own minds unless they are presented with alternatives. To ban the project of defining feminism is to close down debate and diminish the number of alternatives. Hence, it is not helpful to couch the issue of what feminism means in terms of who is and is not 'a feminist' (although one is sorely tempted in the case of those darlings of the malestream media, of whom Camille Paglia has been presented as 'a feminist' at least three times in as many months in the daily newspapers in Sydney). Neither is it helpful to accuse radical feminism (or, more usually, particular named radical

feminists) of imposing something on others. It is not radical feminism, after all, which dominates the media and publishing industries, but postmodernism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, queer theory, or something which is called 'feminism' but which closely resembles phallocratic reality itself. If there is any imposition going on, radical feminism is hardly in a position to be doing it.

The answers I suggest to the questions with which I began should be clear from what I have said above. What counts as feminist theory is radical feminism, under whatever guise it presents itself and however it is designated. It is that feminism which clearly challenges the social relations of male domination. By placing women at the centre of its political project, it struggles to redress the wrongs done to women under social conditions which require that only men count as 'human'. What does not count as feminist theory is anything which undermines that challenge and that struggle.

Notes

1. Stances in relation to pornography are a case in point. It is not possible both to condemn pornography as an expression of the worst excesses of male supremacist ideology (the radical feminist position), and to take either a morally neutral stance by defining it as just words and pictures, or an approving stance by defining it as free speech or a private prerogative of the desiring individual (the libertarian position).

2. As Sheila Jeffreys has reminded me, this used to be called 'the man in our heads'. This phenomenon can manifest itself in all sorts of ways, not only as self-hatred, depression and low self-esteem, but also through embracing, rather than struggling against, forms of pleasure and desire which harm and degrade.

3. For an extended discussion of what is involved here, see Catharine MacKinnon's account of 'consciousness raising' in: MacKinnon, 1989.

4. The texts were purporting to present feminist positions on sexuality. (They included: *Heresies*, 1981; Vance, ed., 1984; Snitow at el., eds, 1984; *Feminist Review*, ed., 1987.) They are discussed in Thompson, 1991. My book was printed privately since no feminist publisher I approached was interested in publishing it. For arguments on sexuality similar to my own, see: Coveney et al., 1984; Jeffreys, 1990; Reti, ed., 1993.

5. There is a wealth of feminist material exposing that central structuring principle of the

social relations of male domination, that only men count as 'human'. To mention just a few: Okin, 1979; Lloyd, 1984; Pateman, 1988; Pateman, 1989; Nye, 1989; Le Doeuff, 1991.

6. In the sense elucidated by the Frankfurt School—Horkheimer, 1972 (especially 'Traditional and Critical Theory'); Marcuse, 1988 (especially 'Philosophy and Critical Theory')—and implied by Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach—'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it'. See also Catharine McKinnon's discussion of 'Method and Politics' in McKinnon, 1989.

7. The following are some representative examples: Echols, 1983; Echols, 1984; Eisenstein, 1984; Segal, 1987; Weedon, 1987; Alcoff, 1988; Tong, 1989.

8. The writers attacked in these terms are among the most important of the 'second wave' generation of feminist theorists. They include: Kate Millet, Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Adrienne Rich, Shulamith Firestone, Sheila Jeffreys, Susan Brownmiller, Susan Griffin. Dale Spender, Robin Morgan.

9. I am indebted to Chris Brickell for this insight.

10. Diane Richardson mentions the omission of radical feminism from two books on 'British feminism'. The 1998 volume, *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, has a brief, two-paragaph entry under 'Radical Feminism', which does scant justice to the influence of radical feminism in Australia (Caine, ed., 1998). Jean Curthoys commented in her review of this book that, 'despite the editor's assertion that there are many voices, only one is heard', and that one is post-colonial/postmodern feminism. She concluded that the book is not for anyone who might have 'a dangerous curiosity about what has been written out of history' (Curthoys, 1998).

11. Stevi Jackson makes this point about an anthology of papers from a 1995 conference in London, *New Sexual Agendas*, edited by Lynne Segal. Radical feminism was also conspicuous by its absence at the conferences organized by the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra in 1993, on the theme of 'Sexualities and Culture'. A protest about the exclusion of radical feminism, with 27 signatories, was ignored by the conference organizers.

12. Rowland and Klein, 1990; Walby, 1990; Thompson, 1991; Thompson, 2001; Cameron, 1993; Bell and Klein, eds, 1996—Section Two: Radical Feminists Under Attack; Richardson, 1996a; Jackson, 1992; Jackson, 1995; Jackson, 1996a; Jackson 1996b; Jackson, 1997/8.

13. Criticism of Firestone's book has been relentless. I do not exempt myself from this charge

(see: Thompson, 1991: 67-79), although my criticism was not that her argument was 'essentialist'. Rather, I argued that her account remained too closely tied into the sexual liberation framework of the male 'New Left' of the 1960s, and that by locating the cause of women's oppression in biological reproduction, she placed insufficient emphasis on the social conditions of male supremacy. I also allowed that her book had many valuable things to say in the radical feminist cause. One can only wonder what effect the tirade of attacks might have had on Firestone herself. Certainly, she has not to date published another book, and if what Phyllis Chesler says is any indication, she has hardly flourished: 'Shulamith Firestone, author of The Dialectics (sic) of Sex and a welfare recipient, had to battle, hard, to hang onto her rent-controlled apartment in between "visits" to Belleview in the late 1980s'. (Chesler, 1994: 70)

14. In an earlier paper, Willis tells a story about 'a participant in WAP's [Women Against Pornography] march on Times Square' who 'told a reporter': '"I'm anti-abortion, but this [anti-pornography] is something I can get into"'. Willis commented: 'Despite the insistence of WAP organizers that they support sexual freedom, their line appeals to the anti-sexual emotions that feed the backlash [against abortion]' (Willis, 1979: 88). But this hardly constitutes evidence for WAP's collusion with the right-wing, given the source of the anecdote.

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