

What Counts as Feminist Theory?

Pure Tolerance Revisited

(Published in *Feminist Theory* 1(3): 371-4)

It is clear from the editorial to the first issue of this journal that one of the chief virtues it espouses is tolerance. The editors refer to 'feminist theory in all its many and diverse forms', and they state their own disinclination to 'impose any form of theoretical orthodoxy nor any single definition of what counts as feminist theory'. (*Feminist Theory*, 2000: 5) Unfortunately for the success of what at first sight appears to be a laudable enterprise, there are some problems with it as it stands.

Tolerance is not an unmixed blessing. As Herbert Marcuse pointed out some time ago (1965, to be precise), there are limits to tolerance. Whether or not it is a virtue depends on what it is that is being tolerated. Tolerance can serve the forces of domination just as well as it can be used in the interests of justice, liberty and truth. It becomes repressive if what is being tolerated is some variety of ideological distortion or falsehood. Tolerance of the 'false words and wrong deeds which demonstrate that they contradict and counteract the possibilities of liberation' (Marcuse, 1965: 102), far from being a virtue, becomes something 'radically evil' (p.97). Indeed, Marcuse strongly recommended intolerance towards 'the protagonists of the repressive status quo' (p.99), towards 'what is not conducive to a free and rational society' (p.101), towards those 'policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which ... are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery' (p.96). Tolerance which fails to ask whose interests are being served by what is being tolerated, Marcuse called 'pure' or 'abstract'. This is the tolerance which refrains from taking sides, which grants equal validity to all points of view, to 'the Right and well as the Left, to movements of aggression as well as to movements of peace, to the party of hate as well as to that of humanity' (p.99). Pure tolerance is that which makes no judgements—except one: thou shalt not judge.

The decision not to make judgements itself rests on a judgement, i.e. that judging is wrong. And it is a judgement of a decidedly imperialistic sort because it covers all judgements without exception (except the one already mentioned—see below), thus leaving no room for discussion

or manoeuvre. Particular judgements—banned under the reign of pure tolerance—take into account the particular circumstances of each particular instance when the judgement is made. As a consequence, they are capable of refutation as circumstances change, as more evidence becomes available, as other arguments prevail or the previous ones no longer hold. It is this possibility of refutation and fallibility which is excluded by the regime of pure tolerance because only one judgement is tolerated—the one that says there shall be no judgement. This does, of course, entail the paradox of self-refutation. If there must be no judgement at all, then that also includes the judgement against judgement. This means that pure tolerance is in fact impossible. So particular judgements continue to be made, while the mask of pure tolerance is maintained by simply deleting the grounds on which the judgements rest.

But what does this have to do with us, feminist theorists? We are hardly likely to tolerate the Right-wing, or movements of aggression, or parties of hate. Well, no, as long as the Right-wing, the aggression or the hate are clearly marked as such. But sometimes they are not. However, that is not really the point, which is, rather, that pure tolerance is a sham. Judgements will always be made, and that is why it is so very important to be clear about the stand which is being taken in making them.

What stand the editors are taking on what counts as feminist theory is by no means clear. They have taken no notice of Bronwyn Winter's caveat in her paper in the 'Interchanges' section of the same volume. (Neither does Winter herself, since she says she's not going to define feminism on this occasion. But she does acknowledge the lack of definition as a problem). She points out that refusing to define feminism, 'far from enabling debate about what feminism ... actually is, ... operates the very "closure" that some of the non-definers fear: *it shuts down the very possibility of debate*'. (Winter, 2000: 106—her emphasis) It does this because it offers nothing to debate about, nothing at all. Variations on the theme of 'diversity' just will not do—this is that pure, abstract tolerance which provides no grounds for rejecting, or for that matter accepting, anything. It is, moreover, profoundly *intolerant*. What it will not tolerate is criticism because criticism requires judging some things as *unacceptable*, as wrong, or inadequate, or inappropriate, or meaningless, or insufficiently theorized, or sometimes just plain silly. (Who of us has not experienced those moments of embarrassment at something said or done which one hopes no one else remembers, or not so

vividly?) If everything is acceptable, there are no grounds for disagreeing with anything. So everything is acceptable—except criticism. But in fact the editors do not accept all submissions for publication in the journal. They reject the vast majority of them, up to 80 per cent if the standard practice of academic journals is any guide. So either the decision-making process is random, or they *are* imposing some kind of framework in deciding which contributions will be accepted and which rejected. If that framework involves rejecting anything critical (but critical of what?), it hardly bodes well for the advancement of feminist theory, at least as it appears in this journal.

The editors tell us that what counts as feminist theory are 'positions ... and ... affiliations which exist among feminists' (p.5). But this cannot be right, because the stance of pure tolerance debar any *critical* positions which exist among feminists. It also begs the question, and in a most unfortunate way. Defining 'feminism' as 'what exists among feminists' simply shifts the question to: who (or what) is a feminist? What is unfortunate about this shift is that it once again closes off debate, for reasons which (as far as I have been able to make out) revolve around the idea that no one has the right to tell anyone else whether or not she is a feminist. But in the first place, defining feminism is not a matter of telling others what they can or cannot do or be. Rather, it is a constant striving on the part of anyone and everyone after clarity about the logic and meaning of feminist theory and practice. This ought to involve debate, disagreement and dissension, but in practice it does not. Why it should be seen as telling others they are not feminists is an interesting question. Part of the answer might be that being clear about what feminism is, also means being clear also about what feminism is *not*. And that threatens to expose a great many of the things which have been said in the name of 'feminism' as not feminist at all, or even as anti-feminist. But why, it might be asked, can these issues not be argued through? Why is there no genuine tolerance, the kind that allows us to agree to disagree, but which also brings the disagreements out into the open? Can it be that, once we are clear about feminism, certain positions become indefensible as feminist theory, i.e. unarguable in terms which make feminist sense once we know what feminism means? Anyone who wants to argue *that* should not be surprised if she is accused of dogmatism and arrogance, and finds herself silenced. But is that what we want for feminist theory—a tolerance of the anodyne, the timid, the senseless and the counterproductive, and an intolerance of anything which challenges what I have seen

referred to in this context as 'the academic mainstream'? Is that what we want to count as feminist theory?

In the second place, defining feminism is not a matter of right but of duty. A feminist politics places us all under an obligation to say what we mean and mean what we say. In other words, the answer to the question raised by Sara Ahmed in another of the contributions to the 'Interchanges' section of the first issue—'Whose Counting?'—is: it belongs to all of us. Ahmed meant her question to be derogatory. She was scornfully dismissive of the idea of anyone picking and choosing between theories, of rejecting some as 'impostors' and throwing them out. But that is exactly what we must do if we are to take control of what counts as feminism. As Winter pointed out, others, and not friendly others either, will occupy the whole of the definitional space if we don't do it for ourselves. And it is happening anyway. There is already a selection process going on. What is so worrying about it is the lack of accountability due to the absence of any clear statement about what counts as feminism. How do the editors know they've got it right if they don't know what feminism is?

The first issue of *Feminist Theory* has not been a good start. Apart from the lacunae in the Editorial, two of the three contributors to the 'Interchanges' debate on what counts as feminist theory refused to say. Ahmed found the very question laughable. Winter, in contrast, regarded it as vital for feminist theory-making, but postponed answering it till a later date. The third contributor, Elizabeth Ermath, did answer the question. She defined feminism in terms of women respecting each other, and characterized feminist theory as subversive of patriarchy and 'women's issues' as issues of importance to everyone. No one who knows anything of feminism could disagree with that. But it raises more questions than it answers. Why, for example, is it necessary to say that women ought to treat each other with respect? Do we not do so already? If not, why not? What does it mean to treat women with respect, and what does disrespecting women involve? What is this patriarchy we need to subvert? How do we subvert it and how do we recognize it in the first place? I am not suggesting that Ermath should have addressed these questions. I am simply suggesting that there's still a lot of work to be done. And it will not be done as long as we continue to cling to a false veneer of pure tolerance, while exercising intolerance by covertly suppressing debate and disagreement in the name of 'diversity'.

References

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