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Feminist theory

# Postmodernism and Feminism

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**The term postmodernism has entered into common currency with a rapidity that modernism, “after” which it is named, never achieved: it has a trendy contemporaneity but is little understood. Partly through its description of reality as a series of images, or “simulacra” in Baudrillard’s word, it has attained popular cultural status in the media, especially television, as well as modish respectability in the academy, across Europe and North America.**

# POSTMODERNISM

Whether the peoples of Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union find it such a useful term is another matter. For Baudrillard, one of the grand masters of postmodernism, the working class is “a silent majority” or even worse “dumb like beasts ... without consciousness”. [1] Such characterisations look rather ill-informed since the events of 1989, for whatever the outcome of the upheavals, there is no doubt that the working class played a considerable role in the overthrow of Stalinism.

Describing the new architecture, pioneered by Robert Venturi in the 1960s, which made play with historical references without much regard for stylistic coherence and delighted in ornament and surface, postmodernism has a reasonable coherence. Its critique of wornout and incorporated modernist types, summed up by Venturi’s parody of the Modernist credo “Less is more”: “Less is a bore”, against the undecorated utopian architecture of the 1920s which had sunk to readymade slums in the 1960s, had some credence, even if its own popularisation has meant little more than sticking a large pediment on top of a “60s tower block!

While Modernism, in all its manifestations, was associated with ideas of progress and confidence - the classic form of capitalism in its supremacy - postmodernism, by contrast is the cultural form - in architecture, film, TV, visual art - of late capitalism. It is no coincidence that the popularisation of postmodern architecture dates from the mid-1970s, for 1974 is the start of the long recession, and capitalism has been in one sort of crisis after another ever since. The styles of postmodernism - dislocation, rapid change, historical incoherence - reflect the deep ideological crisis of a society overripe for change but unable to do so. It is pessimistic because capitalism has nowhere to go, but the working class, without an adequate leadership, is unable to fulfill what Marx called their destiny.

There is no doubt about the existence of a postmodern cultural style, but its extension as a theory of society is much more of a problem. Whether in Jameson’s “Marxian” version of postmodernism as the culture of a schizophrenic society dominated by consumer capitalism or Lyotard’s view that it is a society that has rejected modernism, [2] the celebration of the image as an equal to any reality, the refutation of any theory which looks beyond the local and immediate to seek greater understandings of society on which to act, and in particular the refutation of the Marxist notions of the contradictions of capitalism and the motor force of the class struggle - all leave us without analytical tools with which to understand and then to fight.

Some of Jameson’s ideas are at first convincing and his prose seductive, but neither his theory nor his method are strictly Marxist. As has been pointed out by several critics [3] his analysis places culture as the dominant feature and he posits a homogenous society without opposition or contradiction. Mike Davis has shown that Jameson misuses Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* to underpin his thesis of an economic and cultural break in the “60s, heralding in the new era of postmodern culture. Mandel in fact deals with what he calls the “postwar wave of rapid growth”, and the ending of this long wave was the second slump of 1974-5, not some time in the 1960s.

Even Jameson's analysis of specific cultural products and their meaning is shown by Davis to be a misreading. In his account of the postmodern city Jameson enthusiastically describes the Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel with its "curiously unmarked ways-in ...a total space...a kind of miniature city", a public space for "a new and historically original kind of hyper-crowd.....it does not wish to be part of the city, but its equivalent and its replacement or substitute". [4] Its replacement perhaps, but only for those whose faces and credit ratings fit. While the Bonaventure may be "popular" as Jameson claims, it creates a public space only for the well off, explicitly excluding the masses of the surrounding city. Its "curiously unmarked ways-in" are a symptom of a siege mentality where buildings in the inner city provide a safe haven for those who only travel by car on freeways above the city, from one middle class area to another, never seeing the urban immigrant workers, the child labour, the "100,000 apparel homeworkers (who) toil within a few miles' radius of the Bonaventure". [5] This same social trend of city planning to exclude can be recognised in the design of shopping malls. Common in the United States and becoming more so here, they enable the better-off to shop in areas policed by security guards which exclude the undesirables: their only way of entering is after dark in a ram raid.

Postmodernism's towers, Davis argues, unlike such classic modernist towers as those by Mies van der Rohe, are symbols of the crisis of capitalism not its triumphant expansion; postmodernism the degeneration, the failure of the capitalist system, not its success. Indeed it has been argued, by Callinicos amongst others, that many of the features of postmodernism, celebrated as novel and creative are nothing but reworkings of modernist themes including the use of parody, double-coding or juxtaposition and montage. [6] This is not to argue that they are identical; postmodernism's refutation of the usefulness of history as a way of understanding an incoherent present; its demand that we celebrate this inability to recognise reality in its wholeness; its rejection of what Lyotard calls the "grands recits" - the grand narratives of Enlightenment philosophy - all these place it at odds with, against, Modernism's central and pervasive theme of progress and social change.

## The Roots of Postmodernism

The deconstructive theories of the poststructuralists Derrida and Foucault and the psychoanalytical work of Lacan are undoubtedly the forebears of postmodernism, but are not synonymous with it. Foucault's view that power pervades all aspects of everyday as well as public and political life, but has no centre, was an insight not lost on many feminists whose slogan "the personal is political" had said something similar. However as Terry Eagleton points out, if power is everywhere, if all our values and beliefs are bound up with it, what then of ideology and how is it possible to change anything?

Althusser's depiction of ideology, in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" essay, as an all-powerful force which subjugated the subject "interpellated" by it, left no space from which to combat it. This seamless view later led to a reaction which emphasised its opposite - the decentred and disseminated subject. Foucault rejects Althusser's concept of the unified subject but retains the impossibility of existence outside an all-pervasive ideology - or in Foucault's term discourse. [7] Derrida's work too is marked by a rejection of the unified subject. Casting doubt on classical notions of truth, reality, meaning and knowledge, he argues instead that reality is constructed by discourse, by our reading of texts, rather than ideas and texts reflecting an already existing reality. Without an anterior framework through which to test these ideas they become inviolate, invulnerable - and empty. As Eagleton says: "One advantage of the dogma that we are prisoners of our own discourse, unable to advance reasonably certain truth-claims because such claims are merely relative to our language, is that it allows you to drive a coach and horses through everybody else's beliefs while not saddling you with the inconvenience of having to adopt any yourself". [8]

Such ideas, part of a larger movement away from Marxism and philosophical materialism in the mid-1970s in France and later Britain, were the path to the disillusioned euphoria of today's postmodernism. Both are the result of the

same rejection by intellectuals of their earlier belief in the possibility of change, including revolutionary change. The failure of 1968 to fulfill its potential, followed by the slow but inevitable collapse of Stalinism, complicit with the political system the left had tried to change, led to a rejection of any coherent value system, a rejection of organised politics and finally a rejection of politics altogether. Many intellectuals were influenced by Stalinism and its overthrow in Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union has reinforced and speeded up their ideological collapse.

Not that their work is apolitical of course. In the decade of the 1980s when the right made gains in Britain and the US, and the attack on the Chirac Government by the combined weight of students and sections of the working class seemed small beer compared to the possibilities of 1968, moves away from theories of the class struggle fitted in nicely with the changed atmosphere. As Raymond Williams points out, the intellectual is involved in the commodity exchange of ideas, "heavily traded, in directly monetary forms, by ... intellectual agents and dealers", [9] and has a material interest in novel ideas even if they do explicitly contradict previously held beliefs. Trotsky, too, had a similar theory about the social and political role of intellectuals.

However the ideas of postmodernism have deeper intellectual roots still than disillusion and deconstructive theory. Most commentators and some of the protagonists themselves, most notably Foucault, have recognised the source of the themes of deconstruction and postmodernism in the ideas of Nietzsche. The decentred subject, the heterogeneity of reality, the ubiquity of power, Nietzsche's "will to power" as the determining factor in our conceptualisation of reality - all these find an echo in our latter-day nihilists.

Although there are elements in Nietzsche's work which prefigure modernism, [10] his pessimistic prognosis of future society as one of continuous domination and exploitation marks him off as the opponent of Marxist and socialist ideas of transformation. It is this, if nothing else which should warn us of postmodernism's reactionary character. For feminists especially, postmodernism's dependence on Nietzschean ideas rings immediate alarm bells. Nietzsche's misogyny is a central part of his theory and as Sabina Lovibond points out:

"Feminism occurs in Nietzsche's writing not only as the name of a contemporary political movement" to which he is opposed, "but also as a shorthand term for the mental impotence implicit (or so he believes) in the bondage of thought to regulative ideas such as truth, reality and goodness." [11]

The decentred subject, theories of discourse, ideas of difference, and the fragmentation of society, especially in versions stemming from Lacanian psychoanalysis and the work of French feminists Kristeva and Irigaray, along with essentialist theories owing more to radical feminism, found a central place in the theoretical writings of British feminists in the last decade. At the same time, socialist feminism was on the retreat. It is to an assessment of these ideas, their relation to a possible practice along with an explanation of why all this has happened, that I now want to turn.

## FEMINISM IN THE 1980s

Feminist theory in Britain and the United States in the 1980s was characterised by diversity and division and the women's movements by retreats; in both theory and activity socialist feminism, in its broadest sense, which had been very prominent in Britain in the 1970s, has been on the defensive. Secondly the decade marked an increasing separation between academic work and the development of theories and feminist activism or praxis, leading to an increase of theoretical positions untested by activity "in the real world", and activism without a body of developing theory and ideas to relate to. Thirdly the struggles of women, while not insignificant, became increasingly isolated one from another, in part because of the separation from theory mentioned above. These developments opened the door to the concepts of postmodernism which began to influence feminist ideas.

# Feminism and the Working Class

The rise of the women's movement has historically been linked to the rise in the class struggle, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The modern women's movement followed the upsurge of struggle all over the world in 1968. In the 1970s socialist feminism was an important strand of the movement in Britain, and several prominent feminists linked the fortunes of feminism to the fortunes of the class struggle. Writers such as Juliet Mitchell, Margaret Coulson, Leonora Lloyd all argued for this relationship. For many, a labour movement orientation in the alliances sought by the movement was essential in the fight for women's liberation. This strand went into decline in the late '70s, as a result of the recession from 1974 onwards and the move to monetarist politics with the election of Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the United States. Many former activists took up jobs in local government and higher education, reformist politics dominating their outlook. As gender and class became increasingly decoupled, so postmodernism's influence grew.

Although the objective political situation in the 1980s was very difficult, these changes were also brought about by the development of theories which have emphasised difference at the expense of unity. In some cases this has included a loosening of ties between the women's and labour movements in the name of the right to express difference, a very postmodern concept. In particular the Communist Party in Britain and especially the writing of Bea Campbell have cynically used demands of the oppressed to be heard in order to attack the "male" labour movement and turn sections of the organised oppressed away from alliances with it. This has been part of a strategy pursued by the CP throughout the 1980s, marked by increasingly right-wing politics, the rejection of the class struggle, the seeking of a system of alliances of the oppressed where class was given no determining position and the adoption of the slogan "New Times" to describe a society claimed by them to be dominated by "post-Fordist" production. They wholeheartedly adopted the ideas of postmodernism, giving space in their journal to writers such as Baudrillard. All this culminated in the demise of their ill-named journal *Marxism Today* and the folding up of the party itself.

During the same period cultural theory was increasingly presented as an adequate concept through which to analyse society. This is also characteristic of the work of many postmodern writers such as Jameson, Baudrillard and to a lesser extent Lyotard. In Britain the work of Stuart Hall at Birmingham University had a profound influence on what began as a Marxist project to study contemporary and especially working class culture. The shift from a more or less classical Marxist framework to a structuralist Marxism was influenced by Althusser's proposal that the economic was determining "only in the last instance...which never comes". [\[12\]](#) This allowed for a decoupling of the analysis of culture from the theory of the relations of production and the motor of the class struggle. Although the work produced in Birmingham and elsewhere continued to use Marxist terms such as class and mode of production, these were increasingly seen alongside other equally determining categories such as gender, race and later desire and pleasure.

Both within socialist feminist circles and among those developing cultural theory and analysis, Marxism was slowly rejected in favour of a looser framework, often influenced by structuralism and post structuralism. In both arenas the rightward lurches of the Communist Party had an important effect.

## Feminist Campaigns in the 1980s

However, this is not the whole story. At certain points in the 1980s and around particular issues women have organised together in ways which underlined Marxist theories of the relation between the worker's movement and the oppressed and underscored the autonomous character of the women's movement. Such a moment in Britain was during the Miner's Strike of 1984-5, where women from the mining communities started organising in women's groups to support and sometimes lead the struggle, extending it to include other oppressed groups such as black people, lesbians and gay men and to recognise other struggles such as that for Irish self-determination and the peace movement, especially the women at Greenham. Women who had radicalised in the 1970s during the height of

the women's movement joined them and the ideas generated, despite being sometimes hijacked by Stalinism, reinforced, in practice, the necessary alliance between the working class and the oppressed.

Attacks on the right to choose whether, when, how and with whom to have children also brought together broad alliances of women both in the United States and to a lesser extent in Britain. Very large demonstrations in the US fought the attempt to rescind the Roe v Wade ruling, and smaller but no less effective physical defences of abortion clinics against attacks by right-to-lifers continued through the '80s. In Britain existing divisions within the women's movement and the tactic of the anti-abortion lobby of tying the abortion issue to legislation on embryology, which included an attack on the rights of lesbian mothers, produced confusion and two campaigns instead of a single united one.

Another issue in which the divisions in the movement were apparent both in Britain and in the US was pornography and the question of censorship. In the US the opposition to censorship was led by civil libertarians. In Britain a radical feminist approach to the issue was on the offensive. There were attempts to legislate against its public sale. This was led by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon in the US and by Claire Short, a Labour MP, in Britain. The whole debate put socialist feminists on the defensive, indeed some socialist feminists had been influenced by the changed political and cultural atmosphere, with postmodernism rampant and their arguments against censorship were muted by this. Activities were dominated by radical feminist-type actions, such as disrupting cinema showings or picketing shops selling pornographic magazines. Some feminists in the Labour Party bowed under the onslaught of moralism and tried to censor certain films by using local government legislation.

The reality of state censorship was brought home to many women both by the Rushdie affair and by the British Government's successful attempt to legislate against lesbians and gay men. This attack, which produced the large and highly visible Section 28 campaign, with lesbians centrally involved, clarified the censorship debate, showing how feminists could not depend on the state to determine what sexual material was available for it would use such laws for reactionary ends.

Although making quite an impressive list of activities, the socialist feminist current became a minority and there has been no unifying set of ideas nor any organised movement to give a sense of coherence to the women's movement. While in the 1970s issues such as working women, the role of women in the family, abortion and reproductive rights, the right to work, the right to child care seemed appropriate for all women, in the 1980s women who felt excluded from some if not all these demands - black women, lesbians, single women, women with disabilities - have made themselves heard. Of course, this was a good thing. But coinciding with the low level of the class struggle (apart from the 1984-5 Miners' strike), the retreat of the left and the women's movement with it, especially in the second half of the 1980s, these differing interests and demands have been part of increasing diversity and division, rather than a broadening of the unified movement.

Lastly the 1980s were marked by the challenge of black women to the white-dominated women's movement. Black feminists pointed out that on many issues their experiences differed from white women. These included the family, the workplace, welfare rights, men, motherhood, abortion, sexuality and, centrally, the state. Although black women had been organising together since at least 1973, including in several important strikes, and the first black women's conference in Britain was held in 1979, it was in the 1980s that their voice was at last heard. Black women were organised in caucuses within the Labour Movement, in campaigns against deportation, against religious fundamentalism, against racism and in many other ways. Central to the debate between black and white feminists has been the relation between race, gender and class and the relative weight of each. For example black women explained that sometimes they have to put aside a fight against sexism to fight with black men against racism; at other times the struggle against male domination is paramount. This, along with black women's understanding of the racist state, led a significant proportion of black women to socialist conclusions and put black women's organisation at the forefront of anti-imperialist struggles such as the campaigns against war in the Gulf.

# Essentialism Reinforces Radical Feminism

In the US, where radical feminist theories and the bourgeois women's movement, seeking integration for women into the male establishment, have been much stronger than in Britain, theories of essential femininity have been especially influential and broad based. The work of Mary Daly, whose books include *Gyn/Ecology* and *Pure Lust*, attacks men for all the cruelty and violence ever perpetrated against women since the beginning of time. She proposes a voyage, which only women can undertake, out of the "cockocratic sadostate" [13] to an ideal women's space. This journey is to be one achieved by language! A reclamation of words like "witch", "crone", "spinster" from male definitions will empower women and enable them to reach an affinity with nature and leave patriarchy behind. But not all women are invited in - least of all those feminists who seek change from the system. This nonsense, both racist and elitist in its conceptions, to say nothing of being anti-materialist, has had some impact on separatist groups, for example some of the women at Greenham adopted such thinking.

However, positions which valorise mothering, emphasise the mother-daughter relationship and celebrate "female values", have been more influential. The theories of Nancy Chodorow on mothering, Jean-Bethke Elshtain on women and peace, Susie Orbach and Louise Eichenbaum part of the growing feminist therapy movement in Britain, the current research into mother-daughter relationships amongst cultural theorists - all, in their different ways and in different measure are symptomatic of a growing tendency to attack male-domination by claiming validity for what are seen as feminine characteristics and values, despite the fact that these characteristics result from oppression. In practice this leads to attempts to ameliorate women's lives within the framework of patriarchy and capitalism, without analysing the root causes of oppression and finding ways to tackle them.

While these ideas may not be essentialist in all their manifestations, nonetheless their argument that characteristics produced from an oppressed position - be it caring attitudes, non-aggression, or worse passivity and selflessness - as behaviour that should be celebrated and used as an example to men, evades the real issues. Firstly it ignores the class nature of the oppression of women. How much easier to be caring and peace-loving from the safety and protection of a large house in a middle class suburb than in a small flat in a working class housing estate with all the attendant its difficulties. For working class women the first issue is to earn enough money to keep afloat, obtain housing and food; only third or fourth down the list is the question of bringing up your male children to be gentle! Secondly it ignores the role of the family as a site of oppression, both for the woman and for the children. No-one is opposed to making families less oppressive while for the moment there is no other form to replace them - but, and it is a big but, the family remains the site of women's oppression in bourgeois society. To use Engels' pointed description:

*"The modern family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of women ... Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat."* [14]

Although Engels' predictions of the rapid disintegration of the proletarian family were wrong, and the experience of living in the family today is a much more contradictory one than that described by Engels - we defend the black family from attack by the racist state for example - nonetheless his insights remain central to a discussion of women's liberation.

In addition the family is one of the central places where bourgeois ideology is reproduced. Such claims may be unfashionable today, when we are asked to accept that everything is part of a discourse, including ideology, but it is clear at least to young people, if not to women, that the family is the site of sexual repression and the reproduction of heterosexual sexuality, even though this reproduction may sometimes be unsuccessful!

These ideas relating class and the role of the family and a discussion of Engels' work on the subject, were common currency in the 1970s but have been evacuated from the terms of debate amongst mainstream feminist theorists

since. The ways in which women in the mining communities experienced the family during the strike of 1984-5 have been largely untheorised. Not only did their public role in the struggle raise all sorts of ideological contradictions for those women but they found the form of the family a useless one from which to fight. In response they organised collective cooking, feeding and childcare, finding this not just a way of overcoming the practical problems of caring for their family, but also a way of developing a sense of solidarity and comradeship essential for the maintenance of the strike.

## Essentialism and Psychoanalysis and Feminism

Juliet Mitchell, in her book *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), was the first to look at the work of Freud and its importance for women, at the same time introducing some of the ideas of the French psychoanalyst Lacan to an English-speaking, feminist audience, in particular the theory of the mirror stage and the role of the symbolic father. The book had an immediate and powerful impact. In feminist work on sexuality, on ideology and on film, [15] the psychic construction of sexuality began to be incorporated alongside and sometimes instead of Marxist and socialist theories.

However, it was the work of Lacan, rather than Freud, that came to prominence, and not only amongst feminist writers and theorists. For his work was also central to the influential essay by Althusser "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus", published in English in 1971, in *Lenin and Philosophy* which also included the "Freud and Lacan" essay.

For feminists the Lacanian theory of the construction of subjectivity and sexuality which rejected any biological influence was immediately attractive. At the same time, as Lynn Segal says, it set itself against any social conditioning theory which suggested the possibility of a whole, stable subject. [16] Instead Lacanian feminists argued that the sexual identity of the subject, constructed during the mirror stage of the child's life, and acquired at the same time as language, is fragile, precarious and unstable. The child takes its place in the family while simultaneously accepting sexual difference, exclusion and absence. Identity is no longer the imaginary wholeness experienced in the dyad with the mother, misrecognised in the mirror, but is part of the symbolic order of difference. For Lacan, the symbolic signifier of the phallus, whose status in society ensures male domination, also ensures that "femininity is nothing but difference from masculinity" [17].

The apparent inevitability of this negative entry of women into symbolic order and language which determines the secondary position of women in society, has led to claims that woman is reduced to "silence", having no language with which to express herself. Lynn Segal correctly identifies this as "psychic essentialism" which replaces that other essentialism based on women's biology. [18]

In France Lacanian theory has been critically developed, if that is the right word, by female psychoanalysts - the most prominent being Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Kristeva seeks a female language through which woman can express herself, basing her work on the Freudian theory of the Oedepal phase, and also the Lacanian theory that the completion of this process leaves women in a secondary position. Instead of the imaginary, pre-oedepal period, she opposes what she calls the "semiotic" to the symbolic male order. Just as Freud shows how puns and slips of the tongue are eruptions from the unconscious into everyday language, so Kristeva places the "semiotic" in language but as a residue of the pre-Oedepal phase. It is entwined with language but "other" and is characterised by its disruptive, meaningless, fragmented quality: not an alternative to the symbolic order but happening within it and transgressing its limits. [19] Relating as it does to the pre-Oedepal it is therefore close to the mother, feminine, but genderless. A short quote suggests the implications of these ideas:

*"The belief that "one is a woman" is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that "one is a man". I say "almost" because there are still many goals which women can achieve: freedom of abortion and contraception, day-care centres for children, equality on the job, etc. Therefore, we must use "we are women" as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot "be"; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say "that's not it" and "that's still not it". In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies."* [Julia Kristeva: "Woman can never be defined", in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron: *New French Feminisms*, p. 137, Brighton, 1981.]

Despite Kristeva's ritualistic references to feminist demands for child care etc, (a radical commitment to political activity which by the mid- 1980s she had rejected) there is no connection between her theory of women's oppression and organising for change. The disruption of all existing language and by extension meanings, institutions, political practices is not necessarily revolutionary; it is also open to use by right-wing irrationalism. Just as Futurist and Dada experiments with the renewal of meaning in the early years of the century had both left and right-wing political motives, so the subject who is "unmade" is open to change in either direction. Eagleton points out that Brecht's project of dismantling given identities was not an end in itself but only the first stage in the remaking of new ones, part of the process of making class consciousness, of uniting art and political action. [20]

If anything Irigaray's work is even closer to biological essentialism. She bases her arguments on the fundamental physical differences between female and male sexuality. She shows how female sexuality is always judged inferior to that of the male - seen as "lacking" "atrophied" - woman suffers "penis envy"; she is Freud's "dark continent", her sexual life "obscure", "what does a woman want?" in Freud's notorious phrase.

Irigaray replies that woman cannot answer, cannot express herself through male logic; her sexuality is diffuse, plural, the result of the continuous autoeroticism made possible by female anatomy:

*"A woman "touches herself" constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually."* [21]

Thus male-dominated sexuality has little pleasure for woman; she does not find the gaze erotic, but responds to touch:

*"Woman finds pleasure more in touch than in sight and her entrance into a dominant scopical economy signifies, once again, her relegation to passivity: she will be the beautiful object."* [22]

Woman can experience erotic pleasure in a multitude of ways:

*"...woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere...her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle.."* [23]

The aim for women is to seek out this "incalculable pleasure", [24] although no contemporary theory can explain how! The nearest Irigaray comes to a programme is at the end of the essay "This sex which is not one" where she advocates lesbian love (without actually saying so!) and economic independence as indispensable steps - but:

*"If their goal is to reverse the existing order - even if that were possible - history would simply repeat itself and return to phallogocritism, where neither women's sex, their imaginary, nor their language can exist."* [25]

The problems with these theories are twofold. First their essentialism offers no way forward for women wanting to change things now. Kristeva's "semiotic", a more fluid, open, rhythmic, pre-Oedipal language is not so far removed from the notion that women are silent, unable to speak the language of men and without one of their own, except at the margins. This leaves women unable to engage, for example, in the development of theory - "a male practice". Irigaray is explicit that we can't change anything, that it should not be our target; instead we should seek to find a language to speak of our sex. So an exploration of the work of these authors leaves the reader without a way forward - other than more discourse. And that is where the second problem occurs. For these discourses without political practice generate more discourse without political practice ad infinitum. As such it has less and less to do with the ordinary lives of women.

In some cases these ideas have produced interesting discussions of texts, including visual texts, but woman as the "other" comes perilously close to traditional and oppressive ways of depicting women, in mythology, literature, film etc. Woman as closer to Nature, on the borderline between sanity and madness, unknowable. Freud's "dark continent" [26] of adult female sexuality is of course an imperialist reference to that late nineteenth century "Other" par excellence - Africa. Within the colonialist language of that period Africa is dark, moist and unknown; amenable to penetration, using force if necessary. Unconscious but still sexist and racist metaphorical language betrays Freud in much of his later work, when the revolutionary implications of his uncovering of the unconscious and sexuality had been watered down.

Nor is Lacan immune from this oppressive approach to women. David Macey points out that Lacan's early work is linked to Surrealism. [27] In the 1930s he was associated with the Breton circle and a close friend of Dali. Macey makes out a convincing case to show that Lacan's theories are developed in part from the Surrealist's ideas on female sexuality. Their celebration of madness because of its proximity to the surreality of the unconscious; their correlation of women with Nature - beautiful flower or death-dealing praying mantis; their incorporation of woman into their very being ("she is engulfed in my shadow." writes Eluard) [28] all but excluded the possibility of female artistic creativity and conformed to traditional and oppressive representations of women.

Most centrally, Breton's notion of "convulsive beauty", exemplified for Breton in the killers Violette Nozieres and the Papin sisters, who were elevated to the status of Surrealist heroines, influenced Lacan's work and he published "Motifs du crime paranoiaque: le crime des soeurs Papin" in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1933.

The acceptance of Lacan's work, or versions of it "feminised" by Kristeva or Irigaray by many feminists has been a real problem. Not only is it theoreticist, despite their rejection of theory as "male", and also opaque and elitist, but along with the other writers on difference such as Derrida and Foucault, it has produced a situation where women can claim to be incapable of speaking for anyone other than themselves, an acceptance of a place in the ghetto being the next best thing on offer. Nor does it relate to any organised political practice - other than the production of more theory!

## Difference Versus Unity

This emphasis on difference - both between women and men and between women themselves - has raised the diverse experiences of women over and above the need to analyse the material, social and ideological oppressions which unite women. Worse it makes impossible any notion of unity between the oppressed and the working class. It is as though the liberation part of the women's liberation movement has been completely removed and forgotten. Rejecting the necessity of an alliance with the working class to fight for change, and of course unable to come up with an alternative strategy, feminist theory in Britain has, with a few honourable exceptions, retreated into the ghetto.

Recently at a feminist conference dominated by post-structuralist and postmodernist pessimism, an academic from Moscow University was the only speaker to talk of the need to link together feminism with Marxism - a common enough project here in the 1970s. She spoke of the way the CPSU and Stalin had suppressed history, presenting Alexandra Kollontai as a "good party comrade who had later become a diplomat". Her feminism, her Bolshevik history, her demands on the young revolution that women's issues could not wait but must be immediately addressed, her views on sexuality - all this women in the Soviet Union had been denied and were just rediscovering. And along with it they were rediscovering the work of Lenin on the oppressed minorities. She made the point that you could counterpose Lenin with Stalin both on the rights to self determination and the rights of women. It was like a breath of fresh air. For women in Eastern Europe and the newly emerging states of the ex-Soviet Union, the pessimistic retreat into theory for its own sake and the celebration of women's role in the family so characteristic of contemporary Western feminism will be of no use.

Nor will the recent attempts to "put feminism behind us" by calling the 1990s "Post Feminist" fool many women. Perhaps the false consumer bubble of the 1980s convinced some better-off women that they had achieved equality, but in the 1990s women are going to have to continue the fight at home, at work, in private and in public. Let's hope some of the feminist intellectuals lost in postmodern theories of difference will come and join us.

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[1] Quoted in: Warren Montag: "What is at stake in the Debate on Postmodernism?", in: E. Ann Kaplan, *Postmodernism and its Discontents*, p.101, London, 1988.

[2] "After Auschwitz and Stalinism it is certain that no-one can maintain that the hopes which were bound up with modernity have been fulfilled. To be sure they have not been forgotten, but rather destroyed." Quoted in: Peter Dews: "From Post-Structuralism to Postmodernity", in: *ICA Documents 4*, p.15, London, 1986.

[3] Critics include: Mike Davis, "Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism", reprinted in Kaplan; Alex Callinicos: "Drawing the Line", *International Socialist*, 53, Winter, 1991

[4] Frederic Jameson: "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", reprinted in Kaplan, p.22.

[5] Davis, p.83. 1988

[6] Alex Callinicos: *Against Postmodernism*, Ch.1 "The Jargon of Postmodernity", Cambridge, 1989.

[7] Terry Eagleton: *Ideology*, p.7-8, London, 1991.

[8] Terry Eagleton: *Literary Theory*, p.144, Oxford, 1983.

[9] Quoted in: Michael Newman: "Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourses of the Visual Arts", *ICA Documents*, 4, P.49.

[10] Foucault also writes on modernism such as his essay on Magritte's "This is not a pipe".

[11] Sabina Lovibond: "Feminism and Postmodernism", *New Left Review* 178, p.18, London, November-December 1989.

[12] Louis Althusser: "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus, in *Lenin and Philosophy*, London, 1971.

[13] Quoted in: Lynn Segal: *Is the Future Female?*, p.18, London, 1987.

[14] Engels: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p.85, China, 1978.

[15] For example Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn, London, 1975.

[16] Lynn Segal, p.122, 1987.

[17] Ibid, p.122.

[18] Ibid, p.132.

[19] Terry Eagleton: p.189, 1983.

[20] Eagleton, p.191-2, 1983.

[21] Luce Irigaray: "This sex which is not one", in Marks and de Courtivron, p.100, 1981.

[22] Ibid, p.101.

[23] Ibid. p.103.

[24] Ibid. p.105.

[25] Ibid. p.106

[26] Quoted in David Macey: *Lacan in Contexts*, p.178, London, 1988.

[27] Ibid, especially Ch.3.

[28] Quoted in: Whitney Chadwick: *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, p.25, London, 1985.