

# Feminism and Michel Foucault: A Continual Contestation



LUIS S. DAVID

ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY

PHILIPPINES

*"There are a certain number of women who exalt menstruation, maternity, etc. and who believe that one can find a basis there for a different sort of writing. I am absolutely against all this, since, in my opinion, it means to fall once more into a masculine trap .... there is no reason to fall into some wild narcissism and build on the basis of these givens a system which would be the culture and the life of women."*

– Simone de Beauvoir<sup>1</sup>

*"The real strength of the women's liberation movement is not that of having laid claim to the specificity of their sexuality and the rights pertaining to it, but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted under the apparatuses of sexuality."*

– Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>

As is well known, Foucault takes aspects of our selves that in Western culture have come to be taken as fixed, and demonstrates their constitution by shifting social forces, rather than by our stable, physical being. He shows, for instance, that as a result of the operations upon the human body of a microphysics of intricate corporeal supervision and surveillance, it is always already transformed, divided up, invested with particular capacities, trained to perform historically- and cultur-

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Jessica Benjamin and Lilly Rivlin in a 1979 interview, "The Beauvoir Challenge: A Crisis In Feminist Politics, Ms. (January 1980), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 220.

ally-specific kinds of tasks<sup>3</sup> —and impossible to display in its “natural” or “pre-social” state. Similarly, he shows that, quite the reverse of being an innate and innocent physical quality that must be affirmed against the manipulations of power, *sex is an enactment of power*, or at least of “power/knowledge/pleasure” systems that produce and circulate what truth claims about sex have come to be “naturalized” over time.<sup>4</sup>

While there are important theoretical affinities between such assertions and feminist denunciations of the “naturalization” of binary structures in which “man” is taken to be the measure, standard, and point of reference of all legitimated practice and discourse, and “woman” to be his opposite, double, negation, absence, or lack, there also are fundamental differences. Foucault, to begin with, does not explicitly consider how the normalizing operations of modern institutional regimes of surveillance and discipline contribute to the *production of gendered subjects*, relations between whom are often asymmetrical, whereas it is a major concern in much feminist writing. Indeed, following up on Foucault’s assertions that women since the late eighteenth century have been subjected to the interventions and control of medical, psychoanalytic and aesthetic experts limiting and regulating what it means to be a woman, Sandra Lee Bartky brings meticulous focus to bear upon the ways in which, quite the reverse of remaining gender neutral, modern disciplinary practices (of exercise and diet, of correct body language, of fashion and make-up, etc.), operate on the female body to order it, control it, and bring it to display a modality of embodiment (characterized mainly by a restricted and hesitant body movement and posture), that is specifically feminine. And in all this, she adds, “[we are not] dealing merely with sexual difference,” but with the “produc[tion of] a ‘practiced and subjected’ body, that is, a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed.”<sup>5</sup> Because women are configured in their bodily and psychic existence in ways that consolidate, institutionalize, and

---

<sup>3</sup> cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. 1, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (eds.), *Feminism and Foucault* (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1988), p. 71.

replicate “superior” male privilege and interests, whatever sort of an understanding and experience they are able to develop of their own desires, pleasures, bodies, and sexuality is never independent of male sexual responses, male fantasies about them, and the male interest in controlling them. They “[live their bodies] as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other.”<sup>6</sup> Bartky writes:

“[I]nsofar as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a ‘subjected and practiced,’ an inferiorised, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers.”<sup>7</sup>

Bartky’s assertion that, in a male-centered system of social inscription, discrimination is built into the very construction of women’s bodies, is made at least as articulately and as forcefully by another important voice in contemporary feminist politics and theory, Catherine MacKinnon. Women, MacKinnon argues, are “measured by a male standard for women, a standard that is not their own.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the very process of becoming a woman involves learning that women do not exist in their own right as women, but always and only at the behest and for the benefit of men. To identify as a woman is to identify “as a being ...

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72. Thus, Ti-Grace Atkinson writes: “Vaginal orgasm is an excellent illustration of the way men oppress and exploit women. It’s ironic that you insist men and women respond the same way in the one place no one can deny men and women are different — in their genitals .... Male orgasm is analogous to clitoral orgasm. Where, then, does the vaginal orgasm come from? People say it is learned. And by God you’d better learn it, lady, especially if you’re with a liberal man; you’d better learn to shuffle ....” (cf. Ti Grace Atkinson “Vaginal Orgasm as a Mass Hysterical Survival Response,” in *Amazon Odyssey*. [New York: Fulis Books, 1974] Anne Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” in *Radical Feminism*, Koedt *et al.*, eds., [New York: New York Times Book Co., 1973]).

<sup>7</sup> “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses On Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 76. While “not all men have equal access to male power,” power “is theirs by default unless consciously disavowed.” So even on the rare occasion when a woman appears to be exercising male power only by miming men. “She remains always a woman.” She can exercise power only by miming men (*Feminism Unmodified*, p. 52).

whose sexuality exists for someone else who is socially male."<sup>9</sup> MacKinnon contends this is the work of heterosexuality, for it is by learning to be heterosexual that women learn to be "feminine," "which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms."<sup>10</sup>

By identifying the power that oppresses women with monolithic and gender-based systems of exploitation and control, Bartky and MacKinnon present one of the most serious obstacles to a feminist meeting with Foucault, for whom power is always more fluid and reversible than it appears in a masculinist world, where women are oppressed simply because they are women.<sup>11</sup> For even while Foucault

---

<sup>9</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward A Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 118. She says, if, for example, "women value care, (it is) because men have valued (women) according to the care (they) give to (men)" (*Feminism Unmodified*, p. 39).

<sup>10</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State," *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture and Society*, 8:4, p. 53. MacKinnon's perspective on heterosexuality as a beachhead of male dominance and power and linchpin of gender oppression, is shared by other feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich (cf. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience," *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture and Society*, 5 (1980), 631-660), and Monique Wittig (cf. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Feminist discourse has at times manifested a tendency to fetishize women's oppression by men, as exemplified by Robin Morgan's claim that the "sisterhood" of women across class, race, and national boundaries stems, not from biological commonalities, but from the commonality of suffering (e.g. rape, battery, labor, and childbirth) which they are made to endure by a universal patriarchy (cf. *Sisterhood Is Global*. [New York: Anchor Books, 1984]). Such hyper-inflated representations of women as degraded and passive objects of monolithic systems of male domination, some warn, only end up contributing to the internalization by women of new images of female helplessness and thralldom — no differently from slaves who oftentimes see themselves as the master sees them. Women who elevate the new victimary mythology to the rank of inevitable and obsessive topic of discussion, asserts Jean Bethke Elhstain, come dangerously close to "embrac(ing) the terms of their own degradation" (Jean Bethke Elhstain, "Feminist Discourse and its Discontents: Language, Power, and Meaning," in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, ed. by Nannerl A. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara Gelpi [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981], p. 136). Also, in this connection, Judith Walkowitz contends that defining women's sexuality in "quiescent" terms not only places a contradiction at the heart of any campaign to empower women but also makes the production of an active, female sexual agency impossible (cf. "Male Vice and Feminist Virtue," in V. Beechey and J. Donald (eds.), *Subjectivity and Social Relations* [Polity Press, 1985], p. 175).

would concede the point that concentrations and hierarchies of power with "wide-ranging effects of cleavage" run throughout the social body,<sup>12</sup> he would also hasten to remind us that the grip in which such hierarchies of power hold individuals is not so much controlling, exploitative, repressive, or static, as it is constantly "shift[ing] about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds."<sup>13</sup> Power, for Foucault, is not a zero-sum commodity which, if men have it, women necessarily do not. This would be consistent with the observation that modern technologies of self-surveillance and self-control do not simply take power away from women, but actually develop competencies in them that increase their economic independence and political distinction in spheres where, previously, they might merely have been trapped in socially prescribed (and socially inferior) feminine roles. Women today are subject to fewer controls by men, by their families, or by one-dimensional cultural representations of them.<sup>14</sup> They have the ability to speak capably in their own behalf; They act creatively and decisively

---

<sup>12</sup> *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, p. 96. Indeed, despite Foucault's reluctance to depict a given subgroup in society as statically and irreversibly holding power over another, he points out that because men as a group have always possessed greater power than women, an understanding of who women are in modern society is impossible without a grasp of their oppression by men. He comments: "The relations of power are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and the margin of liberty extremely limited. To take an example, very paradigmatic, to be sure: in the traditional conjugal relation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we cannot say that there was only male power: the woman herself could do a lot of things: be unfaithful to him, extract money from him, refuse him sexually. *She was, however, subject to a state of domination in the measure where all that was finally no more than a certain number of tricks which never brought about a reversal of the situation.*" (James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, eds., *The Final Foucault* p. 12 FinFouc, 12, my emphasis). Foucault recognizes, in other words, that while, formally speaking, no one player in a game of power "possesses" power or exercises it exclusively, because all of the players are positioned in a field that, is never undifferentiated or open, but structured, rather, by economic and political hierarchies, there are those among them who will end up wielding greater power than others

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Of course, varying degrees of dissent, resistance, and struggle, despite the oppressive constraints that were brought to bear against them, have always existed among women in different historical and cultural contexts. Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, in her study of "The New York Female Moral Reform Society" in its nineteenth-century set

within social constraints; They impose order upon their own lives in numerous and variable ways. And no differently from men, they are "caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers."<sup>15</sup> To paint women as passive, exploited, and oppressed "victims" of sexism, therefore, would be to gloss over the fact that they, too, act "collaboratively" to promote practices whose bottom line characteristics are that they are divisive, exclusionary, and oppressive.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the depiction of female sexuality as constructed and constrained by a regime of heterosexuality understood to operate as a

---

ting, provides a compelling illustration of the ability of the women of that time and local context to create a woman-centered base from which they could set out to undermine the very system that constricted them. The Reform Society was a group set up by Christian women in the mid-nineteenth century to tackle the problem of urban prostitution (which meant agitating for the closure of the city's brothels), but more especially, of the double standard and the male sexual license which it condoned. So as much as they were highly orthodox, conforming to roles of female behavior prescribed by the dominant male ideologies of evangelical Protestantism and the Cult of True Womanhood, they were also prepared to re-present the problem of urban prostitution in terms of the fallen daughters who needed rescuing from an unbounded and destructive male lust. This ran counter, of course, to the dominant Victorian view of prostitutes as fallen women who posed a threat to social stability. By reclaiming prostitutes as daughters, and naming them victims of a system which legitimized an exploitative male desire, the women of the Reform Society usurped the male prerogative of naming and defining a social problem. What is more, the Society argued that organization, knowledge and determination should replace feminine dependence, docility and silence (cf. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "Writing History: Language, Class, and Gender," in Teresa de Laurentis (ed.), *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, p. 201. While some men do, in fact, luxuriate in the power and control they exercise over women, the assumption that power and oppression are thoroughly "male" leaves little conceptual or political space for theorizing the complex situation of men who experience themselves as implicated in practices and institutions which they (as individuals) did not create, which they do not wish to control, and which they may even feel tyrannized by. Just as there have been women who have played strong and active roles in social history, there have been men who have supported women in their liberatory struggles. Men, too, have suffered oppression. They, too, have been degraded, objectified, discriminated against, humiliated, sexually harassed, raped. They, too, are frightened, vulnerable, emotionally dependent, anxious to give pleasure, and oppressed by the rigid canons of masculinity.

<sup>16</sup> Consider the female executive who struggles with a discriminatory corporate attitude based on the fact that she is a woman but then forgets that she has earned a place for herself in a system premised on the unabashed exploitation of low-paid workers. Consider as well the willingness on the part of some women to participate in such

social system of male domination and control, dichotomizes and hierarchizes human sexualities.<sup>17</sup> This is what MacKinnon means when she writes, "[s]imply being a woman has a meaning that decisively defines all women socially."<sup>18</sup> The problem with her position is that it paves the way for the conflation of *women's distinctive experience as women* with such quiescent, domestic, and self-effacing qualities as "person-centeredness," and a nurturing, emotional eroticism, and men's, with the insistent and aggressive drive to produce, achieve, succeed, and control.<sup>19</sup> Men, according to this division, will be task-oriented, women, oriented toward feelings and relationships; men, suited for paid work and public life, women, for family work and home life; men, inhabited by an aggressive drive for autonomy and self-assertion, women, by the need to care for others. But if men and women are essentially and fun-

---

cultural practices as beauty contests, even if they know that they will be represented as sexual enticements and rewards for men. For more on this, see Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, "Men's Appropriation of Desire," in *Up Against Foucault*, especially pp. 251-254.

<sup>17</sup> The most serious difficulty that the idea of an original and true, if repressed and invisible, female sexuality poses for a Foucaultian feminism is its theoretical affinity with the notion of sexuality as a "liberatory" force. Female sexuality, according to this thinking, will come to maturity and achieve full autonomy once women have succeeded in wresting from male hands effective control of the social structures that shape their lives — that is, after the feminist revolution. From a Foucaultian standpoint, this is simply untenable. For regardless of its form, "male," "female," or other, sexuality is a fictive device, a product of prevailing social conceptions, laws, dominant medical views, psychoanalytic practices, which lay down and regulate what and how sexuality — sexual desires, practices, relationships — can be, and can be thought and talked about. Thus, quite the reverse of bringing about woman's "liberation" through the elimination of male power and a male-controlled sexuality, the "rediscovery" of a natural and authentic "female sexuality" can have the effect of increasing the scope and depth of disciplinary forces in woman's life, especially as new classes of "experts" emerge bearing newer, ever more "correct" answers to the riddle of woman — more so as such answers will tend to subsume difference and possibility under the conceptual and strategic grasp of a unitary female sexuality; close the irreducible plurality of women's practices, experiences, desires, and projects around certain privileged meanings; naturalize the truth of women and of their sex in categorical terms; and all in all, subject bodies and psyches yet again to ever-complexifying meshes of surveillance and control.

<sup>18</sup> *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> cf. Lillian Rubin, *Intimate Strangers: Men and Women Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

damentally different creatures, then was “patriarchy” not correct all along to have posited hierarchical roles for men and women?<sup>20</sup> “Woman once again is reduced to her body .... rather than figuring as a culturally shaped, culturally complex, evolving, rational, engaged, and noisy opposition”<sup>21</sup>?



In face of what it sees as the dominantly masculinist culture’s habitual devaluation of whatever is seen as “female,” feminist scholarship has, in recent years, sought not only to highlight and celebrate the commonalities that women share, but also to present their unique capacities — their “different voice,” “different muse,” “different psychology,” “different experience” of love, work, family, hope — as viable objects of knowledge in domains where women’s contributions had previously been left out. Because it is impossible, in the brief span of this work, to attend to every aspect of the multi-faceted effort within feminist writing to rehabilitate and re-valorize elements — the “emotional,” “particular,” “irrational,” “domestic,” etc. — of women’s experiences hitherto viewed by the wider culture as in one way or another defective or deficient, I bring focus to bear on two: (1) Nancy Hartsock’s and Dorothy Smith’s project of establishing the relevance and legitimacy of women’s exper-

---

<sup>20</sup> What is “patriarchy,” after all, if not the tendency to view men and women not only as different but as opposite, that is, as embodying fixed and dichotomous traits defined in terms of each another: what one is, the other is not. It could be argued that in choosing to accept the predominant view of women as *a priori* warm, supportive, nurturing, life giving, and full of creativity, and of men as *a priori* corrupt and obsessed with death, one precisely buys right back into the male-dictated dichotomies that feminists should try to avoid. For woman’s constitution as man’s Other — as passive rather than active, emotional rather than rational, secondary rather than primary — serves merely to solidify male domination. What is more, exaggerating women’s difference from men, serves not only to exacerbate male fears of being viewed as feminine, but also to enforce conformity by males to masculine stereotypes — a development that can sometimes have the effect of encouraging men to treat women as a deviant out-group that it is permissible somehow to devalue and subject to abuse (as is evidenced by the rising incidence of male physical and sexual abuse of females).

<sup>21</sup> Kate Soper, quoted by Susan Bordo in “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism,” in Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart (eds.), *Theorizing Feminism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 13.



riences or “standpoint” for the organization of sociological (and, broadly speaking, academic) discourse, and (2) Carol Gilligan’s allegations of sex differences in ethical reasoning and concomitant attempt to counterpoise a feminist “ethics of care” to a masculinist “ethics of justice.” I explore these two themes not only because they are enormously important to feminist theory,<sup>22</sup> but also because they bring to surface certain problem areas in the debate concerning the possibility of a Foucaultian feminism.

### *Women’s Standpoint Theory*

The publication in 1983 of Nancy Hartsock’s highly influential book *Money, Sex, and Power: Towards a Feminist Historical Materialism*<sup>23</sup> marked the emergence of a major feminist-Marxist endeavor to understand the function of the gendered standpoint in mainstream theories of power. A key element in this work is Harstock’s idea that approaches to defining and understanding power vary according to gender: whereas men think of power virtually always in terms of *power over some object*, that is, as the exercise of constraint over someone or something, women define and understand power in terms of the *power to do something*, that is, as the exercise of a positive, enabling force. The trouble with the male understanding and exercise of power, according to Hartsock, is that it is based in the patently false assumption that we live in a world of free and equal individuals interacting on the basis of self-interest. Such a view, that only self interest is capable of providing the motivé force for human beings to do whatever it is that they do, “impoverish[es] the theoretical understanding of community and present[s] a deeply misleading account of reality.”

---

<sup>22</sup> Against what Hartsock characterizes as Foucault’s failure to take the systematic nature of gender oppression into account, they provide “an account of the world which treats of (women’s) perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of the real world” (Nancy Hartsock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory For Women?” in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*. [New York: Routledge, p. 168]).

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985).

Theorization of the community in the form of a market results in the conclusion that the human community can only be fragile, instrumental and ultimately false, composed of persons with no intrinsic connection with each other."<sup>24</sup>

What is most problematic about such exchange theories of power, however, is that under the weight of the epistemological assumption that it is only by means of dominating another that one succeeds in making any sort of a significant connection with him, explanatory devices other than power (e.g. inequities of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality), simply "disappear from view."

Women, on the other hand, argues Hartsock, stress those aspects of power "related to energy, capacity and potential." It is this "discovery" that motivates her work on "a separate and distinct women's tradition of theorizing power,"<sup>25</sup> or, if you will, on a "women's standpoint" defined and understood in terms of "the variety [of women's] connectednesses and continuities both with other persons and with the natural world."<sup>26</sup> Such a "women's standpoint," she hopes, will expose the partiality and perversity of those "negative, masculine forms of eros" that underwrite "the reality of rape, sexual murder, and pornography."<sup>27</sup> Underpinning her argument, of course, is the Marxist contention that only an epistemology that is rooted in production (that is, in the actual, sensuous activity and experience of laborers and workers), as opposed to one that is rooted in commodity exchange (that is, in the abstraction of use value in the service of exchange), is capable of distinguishing reality from false appearances. She writes:

"Women's lives, like men's, are structured by social relations which manifest the experience of the dominant gender and class. The ability to go beneath the surface of appearances to reveal the real but concealed social relations requires both theoretical and political activity. Feminist theorists must demand that feminist theorizing be grounded in women's material activity, and must as well be

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 151.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 242.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 210.

part of the political struggle necessary to develop areas of social life modeled on this activity."<sup>28</sup>

In a book entitled, *The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*,<sup>29</sup> Dorothy Smith, like Nancy Hartsock, links the abstractness of social science, that is, its development into a discourse of "texts and documents," to the historical reality of its organization and colonization by ruling-class men.<sup>30</sup> Drawing upon Marx's contention that in class society, "mental production becomes the privilege of the class that dominates the means of production and appropriates the means of mental production,"<sup>31</sup> Smith argues that in the measure that ruling class men possess and exercise power in society, they produce professional or institutionalized discourses that reflect only their own experience of managing, organizing, administering, and otherwise controlling power. Indeed, for Smith, the abstractness of sociological discourse can be traced back to its complicity with such a masculinist "mode of ruling," in which there is "a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms."

"It is an extralocal mode of ruling. Its characteristic modes of consciousness are objectified and impersonal; its relations are governed by organizational logics and exigencies. We are not ruled by powers that are essentially implicated in particularized ties of kinship, family, and household and anchored in relationships to particular patches of ground. We are ruled by forms of organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents, and constituted externally .... The practice of ruling involves the ongoing representation

---

<sup>28</sup> Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Grounds for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in S. Harding and M. Hintikka, *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*. London: D. Reidel, 1983), p. 304. To be fair, Hartsock recognizes the limitations of Marx's thinking. She admits that "on the specific question of the ways power is gendered .... Marxian theory can be of little direct help" (cf. *Money, Sex, and Power*, p. 118, 116, 118, 145).

<sup>29</sup> Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3, 56.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

of the local actualities of our worlds in the standardized and general forms of knowledge that enter them into the relations of ruling."<sup>32</sup>

One of the effects of the complicity of social scientific inquiry with this "mode of ruling" is the development, within sociological discourse, of a "line of fault" between "the world as it is known directly in experience" and "the ideas and images fabricated externally to that everyday world and provided as a means to think and image it."<sup>33</sup> This explains why women seldom, if ever, find their lives, their work, their experiences, mirrored in the images and ideas deployed by sociology to describe them, let alone in sociology's dominant conceptual schemes. But if the experiences of women are excluded from the production of such images and ideas, it is because nothing is more alien to the abstractness of social scientific inquiry than the corporeality of their activity in caring for bodies (of men, babies, children, old people, the sick, their own bodies) and in maintaining the local spaces (home and workplace) where such bodies exist. Yet, argues Smith, were it not for such activities, and for the women who underwrite them, male theorists would be unable to accomplish the work that makes it possible for them to soar to their accustomed heights of abstraction. She writes:

"To a very large extent the direct work of liberating men into abstraction .... has been and is the work of women. The place of women, then, in relation to this mode of action is where the work is done to facilitate men's occupation of the conceptual mode of action. Women keep house, bear and care for children, look after men when they are sick, and in general provide for the logistics of bodily existence. But this marriage aspect of women's work is only one side of a more general relation. Women work in and around the professional and managerial scene in analogous ways. They do those things that give concrete form to the conceptual activities. They do the clerical work, giving material form to the words or thoughts of the boss. They do the routine work, the interviewing for the survey, the nursing, the secretarial work."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

But because "from the standpoint of ruling, the actual practices, the labor and the organization of labor which makes the existence of a ruling class and their ruling possible are invisible,"<sup>35</sup> the more successfully women perform their work, the more invisible it becomes to those who rule.

To this, Smith counterposes a "women's standpoint," one that exists "outside the ruling class and in that class whose part in the overall division of labor is to produce the conditions of its own ruling and the existence of a ruling class."<sup>36</sup> For only from such a standpoint will those activities emerge into view that are underwritten by women, but which, precisely for that reason, men have such trouble seeing as part of a distinctively human culture and history.<sup>37</sup> While Smith recognizes that other standpoints exist besides that of women, that have similarly been denied a stake in the ruling discourses (e.g. women and men of color, native peoples, homosexual women and men), and whose inclusion would only serve to enrich discussion, she nonetheless holds that "the standpoint of women is distinctive and has distinctive implications for the practice of sociology."<sup>38</sup> It is distinctive in the measure that it focuses inquiry on the world that can be observed, spoken of, and returned to, to check up on the accuracy of an account,<sup>39</sup> thereby committing the researcher "to an exploration, description, and analysis of .... a complex of relations, conceived in the abstract but from the entry point of some particular person or persons whose everyday world of working is organized thereby."<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the ruling class men who organize social scientific inquiry view women's activity as not real human activity — that is, self-chosen and consciously willed — but only as natural activity, an instinctual labor of love.

<sup>38</sup> *The Everyday World As Problematic*, p. 107.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160. Experience taken by itself, however, is not enough. Smith is not interested in reproducing the subject's actual experience, that is, in "substituting the analysis, the perspective and views of subjects, for the investigation by the sociologist" (*Ibid.*). Although inquiry must begin with the everyday world of people's actual activities, she recognizes that these activities will nonetheless be organized extra-locally. She writes: "The end product is not of course intended to be private .... Rather the approach .... offers something comparable to consciousness raising. Perhaps indeed it is a form of it, aiming to find the objective correlates of what had seemed

### *Feminist Ethics of Care*

Feminists argue that the present conception of the ethical, being a "male" one, is really not very hospitable to women's specific concerns. They therefore attempt to develop an alternative system of ethics that eschews the notions of rights or formal reasoning which, in their view, privilege a male point of view. Against liberal individualist values, they defend a set of values based on the experience of women as women, specifically their exercise of motherhood and care-giving within the private realm of the family. The publication in 1982 of Carol Gilligan's book, *In A Different Voice*, marked a major effort in this direction.<sup>41</sup> Gilligan's specific target was Lawrence Kohlberg's psychology of moral development, which understands moral development to be something that plays itself out through a graduated set of developmental stages, with each stage corresponding to a different and increasingly abstract level of moral reasoning. The further along the developmental stages a person gets, the more apt the more he or she is to reason by reference to abstract and universal principles, rather than to the consequences of their actions on specific persons and communities. Kohlberg quite explicitly makes this point in a definition which he gives of the sixth (and highest) stage:

"Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are

---

a private experience of oppression. Like consciousness raising it is also to be shared" (*Ibid*, p. 154). For this reason Smith finally turns to empirical social science. That is, she finally turns to a professional or institutionalized knowledge, the location of which, if local, somehow also is extralocal, beyond what even women see from the standpoint of their everyday life. As Smith puts it: "Though women are indeed the expert practitioners of their everyday world, the notion of the everyday world as problematic assumes that disclosure of the extralocal determinations of our experience does not lie within the scope of everyday practices. We can see only so much without specialized investigation, and the latter should be the sociologists' special business" (*Ibid*, p. 161).

<sup>41</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University press, 1982).

universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons."<sup>42</sup>

In Gilligan's view, Kohlber's account of the nature of adult moral reasoning roots in a gender bias which can be traced back to his persistent reliance on research perspectives derived from the study of male subjects. She argues that by "implicitly adopting male life as the norm," Kohlberg means "to fashion women out of masculine cloth,"<sup>43</sup> and in that way to efface and devalue women's moral thinking, and make it "fall (right) through the sieve."<sup>44</sup>

"[Thus, t]he very traits that have traditionally defined the 'goodness' of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development. The infusion of feeling into their judgments keeps them from developing a more independent and abstract ethical conception in which concern for others derives from principles of justice rather than from compassion and care"<sup>45</sup>

In view of this, Gilligan feels it is important to expand the criteria for moral development so as to accommodate that which marks women off as unique, but not inferior,<sup>46</sup> as bearers, in other words, of a morally "different voice." What makes this "voice" "different"<sup>47</sup> is its expression, not of a masculinist "ethic of justice or fairness," grounded in the categorical imperative and a respect for an abstract moral law, but rather

---

<sup>42</sup> L. Kohlberg, "The Future of Liberalism as the Dominant Ideology of the West," in R. Wilson and G. Schocher, eds., *Moral Development and Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 59.

<sup>43</sup> *In A Different Voice*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>45</sup> Carol Gilligan, "Concepts of the Self and of Morality," *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (1977), p.484.

<sup>46</sup> *In A Different Voice* pp. 2-23.

<sup>47</sup> The implication of saying that the (feminine) "voice" differs fundamentally from (masculine) "vision" seems to be that women tend to associate knowing more with speaking and listening than with seeing. Whereas (masculine) vision lends itself to stages, steps, positions, and levels, marking differences with fixed boundaries, voice establishes connections across space, (feminine) voice is voice is less positional and more interactive, relating two *subjects*, speaker and listener, as opposed to a subject and object, seer and seen.

of "an ethics of care," grounded in love, friendship, and the recognition of needs.<sup>48</sup> For whereas the typical man will tend to focus moral discussion around such abstract issues as justice, fairness, rules, and rights, the typical woman will tend to focus it around the daily experiences, wants, needs, interests, and aspirations and moral dilemmas of real people in their everyday lives. Gilligan identifies three fundamental characteristics that differentiate the "ethic of care" from the "ethic of fairness." First, it stems from a vital sense of personal embeddedness within a web of ongoing relationships (understood by Gilligan to encompass all human beings and not only one's circle of acquaintances). Given their greater ability than men to sustain a variety of such relationships as well as their greater inclination to attain genuine reciprocity within such relationships, women are less inclined than men to reduce morality to a matter of obedience to abstract laws or principles. Because, for them, morality is a matter of responding affectively toward the individuals with whom they stand in these relationships, they tend to be better prepared than men to change the rules or to forsake some of their rights if they can thereby save a faltering, but extremely meaningful, human relationship. Secondly, the ethic of care is neither formal nor abstract, but is tied to concrete circumstances. Thirdly, the ethic of care is best expressed not as a set of principles but as the "activity of care." That is, morality, for the typical woman, expresses itself in activity directed at concrete, specific persons who need to be loved, cared for, shown compassion. "The blind willingness to sacrifice people to truth ... has always been the danger of an ethics abstracted from life"<sup>49</sup> She writes:

"In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. This conception of morality as

---

<sup>48</sup> Gilligan's point is a subtle one. On the one hand, she wants to say her argument goes no further than the claim that the moral domain must be extended to include care and responsibility, concern and connection with other people. On the other hand, she also notes that the focus on care and concern for others "is characteristically a female phenomenon in the advantaged populations that have been studied" (Carol Gilligan, "Reply," *Signs*, Vol. 11, p. 330).

<sup>49</sup> *In A Different Voice*, p. 104.



concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules.”<sup>50</sup>

If Gilligan is right, that is, if women’s “different voice” of care, responsibility, concern, and connection, is essential to adult moral reasoning, then what traditionally has been regarded as women’s defective and deficient moral judgment will come forth as a sign of their strength, and theorizing about morality would need to give some place to it.<sup>51</sup>



Under the impact of Hartsock’s, Smith’s, Gilligan’s and other assertions concerning the possession by women of competencies and knowledges<sup>52</sup> that particularize them and distinguish them from men, women’s lives and experiences, as well as their social and cultural positions, once devalued as mere housewifery, are at long last being conceived in terms entirely different from those provided by men, and female behavior, once denigrated as waffling and indecisive, is increasingly being valued as complex, constructive, and humane. It is, however, their assumptions concerning women’s unique (and often the impression is given, superior) consciousness of social reality, and their

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> It ought to be mentioned that Gilligan draws heavily upon Nancy Chodorow’s argument that as a consequence of their pre-Oedipal upbringing by women, women tend to cultivate a concept of themselves as “connected” to others, whereas men see themselves as autonomous and separate from others. For a brief statement of this argument, see *Appendix*, at the end of this essay.

<sup>52</sup> Such “knowledges” exemplify, in a sense, the insurrection of what Foucault has termed “subjugated knowledges” He writes: “By subjugated knowledges I mean the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematization .... naive knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity .... *It is through the reemergence of these low-ranking knowledges* .... particular, local, regional knowledges .... which owe their force only to the harshness with which they are opposed by everything surrounding them .... *that criticism performs its work*” (*Power/Knowledge*, 81-82, my emphasis).

ability to see, interpret, and experience the world in ways common to themselves as women but distinct from men, that poses the principal obstacle to a feminist meeting with Foucault. For if there is anything Foucault rejects out of hand, it is the notion that anyone or any group has a special consciousness of, and ability to gain access to, and interpret "truth" or "reality". For whatever the truth value of the discourses concerning women's "lives," "experiences," or "concerns," they still would need to have been accreted at the same time that the particular power/knowledge systems enframing them would need to have been deployed.<sup>53</sup> Whether women's minds and psyches operate as Hartsock, Smith, and Gilligan say that they do, is, on this level, immaterial. What is material is a correct understanding of the intertwining between the emergence of this knowledge and the exercise of *this* power.<sup>54</sup> Foucault writes:

"It is a double process, then: an epistemological 'thaw' through a refinement of power relations; a multiplication of the effects of

---

<sup>53</sup> On the subject of a liberatory feminist standpoint offering a "truer" science of empirical reality than a traditional masculinist one, Robin Morgan, in *Sisterhood is Global*, sounds a similar note: "Our emphasis is on the individual voice of a woman speaking not as an official representative of her country, but rather *as a truth-teller, with an emphasis on reality as opposed to rhetoric*" (p. xvi, my emphasis). Morgan quite simply assumes that woman's experience of suffering and victimization has prepared her to enter into a special relationship with "the real" or "the true."

<sup>54</sup> This is something which early radical feminist groups understood, which used the idea of "women's perspective" in the context of political organization and consciousness raising groups. To be fair, Smith's (and Hartsock's) decision to take the everyday world of women's actual activities as their point of departure is deeply rooted in early feminist notions of personal politics. Smith writes: "It is the individual's working knowledge of her everyday world that provides the beginning of the inquiry. The end product is not, of course, intended to be private [but] ... like consciousness raising it is also to be shared" (*The Everyday World*, p. 154). But as feminist discourse has become increasingly drawn into what Barbara Christian calls the "race for theory" (Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1988), pp. 67-69), the practical politics that was an obvious feature of the original notion of "standpoint" has been displaced by what Fraser and Nicholson describe as "an overly grandiose and totalizing conception of theory" (Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism," in Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 35).

power through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge.”<sup>55</sup>

Foucault would also take issue with the variant Gilligan and Smith appear to be developing, of the argument, as old as Western civilization itself, that it is possible to attribute fixed, cross-cultural characteristics to masculine and feminine identities. Gilligan, we have seen, equates autonomy, discontinuity, and aloneness with domination and maleness, and relation, intimacy, and care, with “mothering” and femaleness.<sup>56</sup> As for Dorothy Smith, she writes:

“[While] we began with our experiences as women, we were always returning to ourselves and to each other as *subjects in our bodies* ... *the sexed body* was always the *common ground* in relation to which we could find ourselves with each other *as women*.”<sup>57</sup>

Gilligan and Smith thus reintroduce into the discussion about woman the very thing Foucault would consider to be problematic, namely, the idea of femininity, “woman’s culture,” “woman’s standpoint,” etc., as a fixed, self-explanatory, universal category of analysis.<sup>58</sup> In other words, where men find their greatest fulfillment in the public sector, by minding politics and cultivating reason, women realize themselves best in domesticity, by caring for their families and nurturing the deepest and most resonant affective relationships within them. Yet, as

---

<sup>55</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, p. 224.

<sup>56</sup> The primary research on which Gilligan’s book, *In A Different Voice*, rests, is a study of twenty nine women — and only women — confronting a decision about abortion, and, therefore, about “mothering” or the refusal of it. Describing the model of female development she offers in response to Kohlberg’s, Gilligan writes: “(It) signals a new understanding of the connection between self and others which is articulated by the concept of responsibility. The elaboration of this concept of responsibility and its *fusion with a maternal morality* that seeks to ensure care for the dependent and unequal characterizes the ... perspective ... (whereby) the good is equated with caring for others” (p. 74).

<sup>57</sup> “Sociology From Women’s Experience,” p. 89.

<sup>58</sup> Citing an extensive body of empirical studies, Carol Travis notes that “research in recent years casts considerable doubt on the notion that men and women differ appreciably in their moral reasoning, or that women have a permanently different voice because of their early closeness to their mothers ... When subsequent research directly compared men’s and women’s reasoning about moral dilemmas, Gilligan’s ideas have

genealogical analysis would be able to show, it is under the weight, precisely, of such notions, that women's domestic and reproductive "enslavement,"<sup>59</sup> their implication in forms of social organization that exploit and devalue them, transpire. Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek afford us a glimpse into this complexity when they propose that rationality as a male quality, and relatedness as a female quality, have a lot less to do with gendered bodies and women's free and deliberate espousal of a sexual romanticism based on intimate bonding, nurturance, and fidelity, than they have to do with pressing socio-political issues such as women's unique vulnerability to violence, unwanted pregnancies, social stigma. They write:

"Men's propensity to reason from principles might stem from the fact that principles were formulated to promote their interests; women's concern with relationships can be understood as a need to please others that arises from lack of power. Typically, those in power advocate rules, discipline, control, and rationality while

---

rarely been supported. In study after study, men and women use both care-based reasoning ... and justice-based reasoning. In study after study, researchers report no average differences in the kind of moral reasoning that men and women apply ... results confirm Gilligan's argument that people make moral decisions not only according to abstract principles of justice but also according to principles of compassion ... Two other psychologists in the field of moral development, Anne Colby and William Damon, likewise found little scientific support for Gilligan's claims. "While her portrayal of general, sex-linked life-orientations is intuitively appealing," they concluded, "the research evidence at this point does not support such a generalized distinction" (Carol Travis, *The Mismeasure of Woman* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), pp. 83-86).

<sup>59</sup> Some feminists have argued that the family is not and has never been a particularly safe place for women and children; that most of the violence perpetrated against them occurs within the family, as does sexual abuse. For instance, see Vikki Bell, *Interrogating Incest: Foucault, Feminism, and the Law* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Linda Singer, *Erotic Welfare* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Conversely, women, as mothers, can foster relationships with their children that are as oppressive as any other social relation. Or they could act in nurturing roles even as they socialize young children as parents or educators to believe that might makes right. Abundant evidence exists, for instance, of the commitment to fascism on the part of housewives' organizations in Weimar and Nazi Germany; of the German feminist movement's abandonment of Jewish members to their fate; of the support for Nazi eugenics by the organization of German Women Doctors which quickly moved to expel its own Jewish members (cf. R. Bridenthal *et al* (eds.), *When Biology Became Destiny: Women In Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review, 1984).

those without power espouse relatedness and compassion. Thus, in husband-wife conflicts, husbands call on rules and logic, whereas wives call on caring. But, when women are in the dominant position, as in parent-child conflicts, they emphasize rules while their children appeal for sympathy and understanding and relatedness or for exceptions based on special circumstances. This suggests that rationality and relatedness are not gender-linked traits, but rather stances evoked by one's position in a social hierarchy."<sup>60</sup>

Similarly detrimental to the prospect of a Foucaultian feminism is the reduction, by the single-minded focus on a woman's culture of self-sacrifice, nurturance, service, affection, and love, of an otherwise very

---

<sup>60</sup> Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek, "Gender and the Meaning of Difference," in Anne C. Herrmann and Abigail J. Stewart, *Theorizing Feminism* (Boulder, Colorado: West Press, Inc., 1994), p. 59. See also: R.T. Hare-Mustin and J. Marecek, "Autonomy and Gender: Some Questions for Therapists," *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 23, 205-12. Others note that the idea of woman as an emotional nurturer is historically specific. Jean Grimshaw, for one, contends such an idea was foreign to the ancient Greeks (cf. Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 63). Charles Taylor demonstrates that the accent in philosophical writing on relations is not unique to the feminist preserve. Indeed, prior to the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, European men conceived of the universe as "a great chain of being," connected rather than atomistic, necessarily related to humanity, in contradistinction to being "a neutral domain of facts, of contingently related elements, the tracing of whose correlations will enable greater and greater manipulation and control of the world" (Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 134).

<sup>61</sup> Jean Grimshaw calls attention to the complexity of the relationship between male experience and female experience when she writes: "The experience .... of being a man or a woman inflects much if not all of people's lives .... But even if one is always a man or a woman, one is never just a man or a woman. One is young or old, sick or healthy, married or unmarried, a parent or not a parent, employed or unemployed, middle class or working class, rich or poor, black or white, and so forth. Gender, of course, inflects one's experience of these things, so the experience of any one of them may well be radically different according to whether one is a man or a woman. *But it may also be radically different according to whether one is, say, black or white or working class or middle class.* The relationship between male and female experience is a very complex one. Thus there may in some respects be more similarities between the experience of factory labor for example, or of poverty and unemployment — than between a working-class woman and a middle-class woman — and experiences of domestic labor and childcare, of the constraints and requirements that one be 'attractive,' or 'feminine,' for example" (*Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*, pp. 84-85, my emphasis).

complex and contradictory set of social relations, to simple, unified, and undifferentiated wholes.<sup>61</sup> For even as feminists understand that unitary assumptions about female identity must be broken down if the many facets of "difference" (gender, race, class, etc.) are ever to be dealt with squarely,<sup>62</sup> they worry that such deconstructive maneuvering could diminish, and even bring about the loss, of feminism's political force; that the failure to assert the category "woman" could mean the dissipation of any authority for their statements. They are suspicious of the fact that just when they are finally breaking their silence, rejecting their object status within dominant discourses, and constructing oppositional political subjectivities and visions that they can call their own, they are being told that sexual difference, sexual identity, and sexuality itself are fictions, and that the perpetuation of such categories would only further enhance the workings of power. They argue that the rejection of emancipatory theories, the decision not to envision alternative orders, and the refusal to privilege any one discourse above another, deprive women of the basis for making any claims against a sexist society.<sup>63</sup> Because these happen to be features of Foucault's analysis, as effective as his work has been for getting them to think through the con-

---

<sup>62</sup> Teresa De Laurentis, for example, writes: "Woman is a totality of qualities, properties, and attributes that feminists define, envisage, or enact for themselves .... and possibly also wish for other women. This is more a project, then, than a description of existent reality; it is an admittedly feminist project of 're-vision,' where the specifications feminist and re-vision already signal its historical location, even as the (re)vision projects itself outward geographically and temporally (universally) to recover the past and to claim the future. This may be utopian, idealist, perhaps misguided or wishful thinking, it may be a project one does not want to be a part of, but it is not essentialist as is the belief in a God-given or otherwise immutable nature of woman" (Teresa De Laurentis, "The Essence of the Triangle, or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously," in Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (eds.), *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 3).

<sup>63</sup> This fear is expressed by Kate Soper, who writes: "Feminism, like any other politics, has always implied a banding together, a movement based on the solidarity and sisterhood of women, who are linked by perhaps very little else than their sameness and 'common cause' as women. If this sameness itself is challenged on the ground that there is no 'presence' of womanhood, nothing that the term 'woman' immediately expresses, and nothing instantiated concretely except particular women in particular situations, then the idea of a political community built around women — the central aspiration of the early feminist movement — collapses" ("Feminism, Humanism, and Postmodernism," pp. 11-17).

tingency of power relations, they hesitate to swim into his ken. Given the centrality in Foucault's work of a local micropolitics of resistance, as opposed to the identification of global structures of domination, they accuse him of "mak[ing] the question of women's oppression obsolete."<sup>64</sup> Nancy Hartsock, for instance, argues that the lack of a sense of social structures in Foucault's model of power, his suspicion of thought based on stable entities and unambiguous power relations, is both an inadequacy in his theory and an indication of the danger which his work poses to feminism, insofar as it leaves feminism without the resources it needs to identify patterns — in contradistinction to mere coincidences — of repeated domination and discrimination affecting women. Indeed, she alleges that Foucault's ascending analysis of power leads him to victim-blaming, by highlighting the participation of female agents in their own oppression. "Systematically unequal power relations," she tells us, "ultimately vanish from his work."

"His stress on heterogeneity and the specificity of each situation leads him to lose track of social structures and instead to focus on how individuals experience and exercise power. Individuals, he argues, 'are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power' .... With this move Foucault has made it very difficult to locate domination, including domination in gender relations."<sup>65</sup>

Feminists, therefore, generally do not make haste to abandon the category "woman." For however much it makes sense to question its history and its use, they are convinced that it remains a real and politically powerful category. Women must, politically speaking, continue to speak as and for women. Surely that is the way in which representational politics operates, particularly in societies where lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics. Denise Riley points out, in this vein, that while generalizations about gender can obscure and exclude, "because of its drive toward a political massing

---

<sup>64</sup> Biddy Martin, "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault," *New German Critique*, Vol. 27 (1982), p. 17.

<sup>65</sup> "Foucault On Power: A Theory For Women?" p. 168-169. The quote from Foucault is taken from *Power/Knowledge*, p. 169.

together of women, feminism can never wholeheartedly dismantle (the category of) 'women's experience.'"

"Does all of this mean, then, that the better programme for feminism now would be — to minimize "women"? To cope with the oscillations by so downplaying the category that insisting on either differences or identities would become equally untenable? My own suggestions grind to a halt here, on a territory of pragmatism. I'd argue that it is compatible to suggest that "women" don't exist — while maintaining a politics of "as if they existed" — since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did. So that official suppositions and conservative popular convictions will need to be countered constantly by redefinitions of "women." Such challenges to "how women are" can throw sand in the eyes of the founding categorizations and attributions, ideally disorientating them.

"Sometimes it will be a soundly explosive tactic to deny, in the face of some thoughtless depiction, that there are any "women." But at other times, the entrenchment of sexed thought may be too deep for this strategy to be understood and effective. So feminism must be agile enough to say, "Now we will be 'women' — but now we will be persons, not these 'women.' And, in practice, what sounds like rigid opposition — between a philosophical correctness about the indeterminacy of the term, and a strategical willingness to clap one's feminist hand over one's theoretical mouth and just get on with 'women' where necessary — will loosen."

"That 'women' is indeterminate and impossible is no cause for lament. It is what makes feminism .... What (the fragilities and peculiarities of the category) demand is a willingness, at times, to shred this "women" to bits — to develop speed, foxiness, versatility. The temporalities of 'women' are like the missing middle term of Aristotelian logic; while it's impossible to thoroughly be a woman, it is also impossible never to be one. On such shifting sands, feminism must stand and sway. Its situation in respect of the sexed categories recalls Merleau-Ponty's description of another powerful presence: 'There is no outstripping of sexuality any more than

---

<sup>66</sup> Denise Riley, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of "Woman" In History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.-100, 112-113. Gayatri Spivak makes the same point when she writes: "I think it is absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism .... but strategically we cannot. Even as