

FROM IDENTITY POLITICS TO SOCIAL FEMINISM: A PLEA FOR THE NINETIES

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The Paradigm Wars of Feminist Theory

A decade ago a symposium took place at the Law School of the State University of New York at Buffalo as part of the James McCormick Mitchell Lecture Series. The participants were Carol J. Gilligan, Catharine A. MacKinnon, Ellen C. DuBois, Carrie J. Menkel-Meadow and others.¹ This symposium sent a sharp signal of the great clash of paradigms within contemporary feminist theory which was about to unfold in the coming years. I will use the term “paradigm” in non-technical fashion to refer to a coherent set of assumptions, some articulated and some not, which guide, influence, structure, or help “format” a vision of theory and of politics. Let me cite the following exchange between Carol Gilligan and Catharine MacKinnon. With reference to Gilligan’s work *In A Different Voice*,² Catharine MacKinnon says:

I am — it will shock you to hear — ambivalent about it. On the one hand, I feel excited by the strong and elegant sensitivity in the work. There is something deeply feminist here: the impulse to listen to women....On the other hand, what is infuriating about it (which is a very heavy thing to say about a book that is so cool and graceful and gentle in its emotional touch), and this is a political infuriation, is that it neglects the explanatory level. *Why* do women become these people, more than men, who represent *these* values?...For me, the answer is clear: the answer is the subordination of women....She has also found the voice of the victim — yes, women are a victimized group....What bothers me is identifying women with it. I’m not saying that Carol does this expressly in her book. But I am troubled by the possibility of women identifying with what is a positively valued feminist stereotype. It is the “feminine.”³

MacKinnon does not altogether reduce Gilligan’s version of an “ethics of care and responsibility,” which is claimed to characterize women’s moral voices, to an ethic of the victim, although subsequent commentators have done so.⁴ Yet she states clearly that given existing male patterns of male domination and female subordination, the values of care, responsiveness to the needs of others, the ability for empathy, and for taking the standpoint of the concrete other, which Gilligan claimed women were more likely to display than men, would rather hurt than help women. MacKinnon’s rejection of Gilligan’s ethic of care is an instrumentalist one; like many power theorists before her, she argues that the end, that is, ending the subordination of women, justifies the means, that is, using an ethic of power instead of being guided by an ethic of care and responsibility.

Gilligan: Your definition of power is his definition.

MacKinnon: This is because the society *is* that way, it operates on his definition, and I am trying to change it.

Gilligan: To have her definition come in?

MacKinnon: That would be a part of it, but more to have a definition that she would articulate that she cannot now, because his foot is on her throat.

Gilligan: She’s saying it.

Mackinnon: I know, but she is articulating the feminine. And you are calling it hers. That’s what I find infuriating.

Gilligan: No, I am saying she is articulating a set of values which are very positive.

MacKinnon: Right, and I am saying they are feminine. And calling them hers is infuriating to me because we have never had the power to develop what ours really would be.⁵

This dramatic exchange sharply articulated one type of *paradigm* clash within contemporary feminist theory,⁶ namely, whether women as social and political agents are the carriers of a different and distinctive set of values (let us leave aside the question of how these are acquired, formed, developed, etc.), which they should promote and fight for in the public sphere, or whether women should seek power and equality by mobilizing existing resources and institutions available in the society at large. Name this a paradigm clash between “difference” and “equality” feminism; or name it a clash between “moralism” and “realism,” or between “utopianism” and “Realpolitik.”

This exchange, which took place a decade ago, could be seen as a harbinger of developments to come. In the years to follow, not only would utopian feminism(s) clash with a militant radical feminism of power, but varieties of “power/gender” theories (built around Michel Foucault’s model of “knowledge/power”) would enter into shifting alliances as well as confrontations with psychoanalytic feminisms. As a participant to the Gilligan-MacKinnon exchange, Ellen C. DuBois observed, “there are by this time many feminisms. Women are no longer ignored in the political scene. *Au contraire*, the issues that the women’s movement has raised are at the very center of this historical moment.”⁷ Speaking these words in 1984, DuBois identified the crucial issues for United States women as being abortion and the prospects for electing a female vice president. Ten years later there are still many feminisms; women are no longer ignored in the political scene as much as they were at the beginning of the eighties, but it is not at all clear how/where/when/why the “Issues that the women’s movement has raised are at the very center of this historical moment.” After a decade of paradigm struggles, we are no longer sure that there is one movement; in fact, we know that there is not a single organization with the agenda of which a majority of women in this country would agree. More importantly, we no longer know what this historical moment is. As a consequence of postmodernist warnings against grand narratives, we have become skeptical about any tale of this or that historical moment, this or that historical sequence, or logic of development. In fact, we no longer know who “we” are. Postmodernist theorists tell us that this “we,” even if only invoked as a rhetorical gesture of public speech and writing, is politically suspect, in that it tries to create a seeming community of opinion and views where there is usually none. Relishing in diversity, basking in fragmentation, enjoying the play of differences and celebrating the opacity, fracturing, and heteronomy of it all — this is a dominant mood in much of contemporary feminist theory and practice.

I do not celebrate this mood of reveling in difference and basking in fragmentation; nor am I nostalgic for a sense of lost unity in the women’s movement which itself rarely existed. A healthy plurality of visions and strategies about the meaning of women’s emancipation has always been an aspect of the various women’s movements.⁸ From their inception in the eighteenth century and particularly in the period of their articulation in mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, feminism and the women’s movements have always struggled with dilemmas of equality and difference; equality with males versus being different from them; preserving a women’s separate sphere versus becoming full members of existing society by giving up women’s traditional spaces. These tensions constitute what the women’s struggle is all about; what will change from period to period is the construction and contestation around these oppositions, but not the fact that women will always be aware of such oppositions, dichotomies and conflicts.⁹

Nonetheless, all is not well in the contemporary scene of plurality, heterogeneity and diversity. In particular, I see two major problems: (1) there has been a rapid shift of research paradigms in contemporary feminist theory from what is usually referred to as “standpoint feminism” to various “postmodernist” feminisms, but neither the presuppositions nor the consequences of this shift have been adequately analyzed. Micro-narratives of class/race/and gender have replaced macro-narratives of women’s subordination across cultures, societies, and historical periods. While much has been gained in this shift of research paradigms, much has also been lost: as the research paradigms in feminist theory have become more complex and concerned with the varieties of oppression which intersect with one another, the concept of the subject and the vision of agency underlying such research have become increasingly simplistic and empty from a normative standpoint. Feminist

theory is in danger of losing the forest for the trees, and of not being able to develop a voice vis à vis the difficult issues of conflicting identity claims.

(2) The politics of identity/difference which have dominated the eighties have begun to show ugly developments in the nineteen-nineties. The clash of multiple identities as well as of the allegiances which surround them have come out into the public; the continuous and inevitable fragmentation of identities has made it almost impossible to develop a common vision of radical transformation. These developments in theory and in politics are linked. The theoretical paradigm shift from standpoint feminism to postmodernism is related to political trends in identity/difference politics insofar as the articulation of a certain form of the politics of identity/difference was aided by and in turn influenced postmodernist critiques of standpoint feminism.

From Standpoint Feminism to Postmodernist Feminisms

I will use the term “standpoint feminism” to designate a type of feminist theory and research paradigm which shows the following characteristics:¹⁰ first is the claim that philosophical as well social-scientific theories of the past have been cognitively inadequate because they have been “gender blind,” that is, because they have failed to take into account the standpoint, the activities, and the experiences of women. Gender blindness, it is claimed, is not an accidental omission or oversight but affects the cognitive plausibility of theories. Second, to correct gender blindness, it is necessary to identify a set of experiences, activities, as well as patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting which can be characterized as “female.” Third, such experiences, activities, and the like are a consequence of women’s social position or of their position within the sexual division of labor. Whereas the male of the species has been active in the public sphere of production, politics, war, and science, women’s activities by and large and throughout history have been confined to the “domestic/reproductive” and “private” spheres. Fourth, the task of feminist theory is to make this sphere of activity and its consequences for human life at large visible, audible, and present at the level of theory. Feminist theory articulates the implicit, tacit, everyday, and non-theorized experiences, and activities of women and allows these to come to the level of consciousness. Fifth, by aiding the articulation of female experience, feminist theory not only engages in a critique of science and theory, but it also contributes to the process of transforming women’s consciousness by giving female activities and experiences public presence and legitimacy. Hence, a number of seminal works, mostly from the late nineteen-seventies, had the characteristic titles of *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*; *In A Different Voice*; *Public Man, Private Woman*.¹¹

To be sure, the paradigm shift to postmodernist feminisms which occurred by the middle of the eighties was influenced by French thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. As the impact of their theories, no matter how diverse and at times contradictory, was felt upon the core of study of the humanities in the United States, feminist theorists also discovered an attractive ally in these positions for their concerns. What is unique about the American feminist reception of French postmodernist thought, is that, rightly or wrongly, the interest in French theory coincided with a set of intense political and cultural struggles within the American women’s movement. Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser have captured this well in their article, “Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism”:

the practice of feminist politics in the 1980’s generated a new set of pressures which have worked against metanarratives. In recent years, poor and working-class women, women of color, and lesbians have finally won a wider hearing for their objections to feminist theories which fail to illuminate their lives and address their problems. They have exposed the earlier quasi-metanarratives, with their assumptions of universal female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women who dominated the beginnings of the second wave.... Thus, as the class, sexual, racial and ethnic awareness of the movement has altered, so has the preferred conception of theory. It has become clear that quasi-metanarratives hamper rather than promote sisterhood, since they elide differences among women and among the forms of sexism to which different women are differentially subject.¹²

Fraser and Nicholson have put their finger on some fundamental changes in the theoretical landscape of North American feminism, namely the coincidence of postmodernist sensibilities with the politics of identity/difference. But this coincidence is neither obvious, nor self-explanatory, nor, as I shall argue below, always salutary.

Throughout the nineteen-eighties the theoretical message of the French “masters of suspicion” was at the center of a *political critique* by lesbian women, women of color, Third World women of the hegemony of white, western European or North American, heterosexual women in the movement.¹³ This political critique was accompanied by a *philosophical shift* from Marxist and psychoanalytic paradigms to Foucauldian types of discourse analysis and Derridean practices of textual deconstruction. In terms of *social research* models, there was a shift from analyzing women’s position in the sexual division of labor and the world of work in general to the analyses of identity-constitution and construction, problems of collective self- and other-representation, issues of cultural contestation and hegemony.

No concept reveals the nature of this paradigm shift more explicitly than the one that is central to feminist theory, namely “gender.” Competing theoretical attempts to define “gender” also indicate what has been gained and what has been lost in this theoretical sea-change. The historian Joan Kelly Gadol provides a clear statement of the assumptions of early standpoint feminism in her article on “The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women’s History.”

In short, women have to be defined as women. We are the social opposite, not of a class, a caste, or of a majority, since we are a majority, but of a sex: men. We are a sex, and categorization by gender no longer implies a mothering role and subordination to men, except as a social role and relation recognized as such, as socially constructed and socially imposed.”¹⁴

Kelly Gadol makes a clear distinction between gender and sex; whereas sex is given, “we as a women are the opposite sex of an equally non-problematic one, namely men,” according to her, gender is socially constructed and contested. Mothering, for example, would be a socially constructed gender role for most women, in most periods of history, and in the majority of known human societies.

Postmodernist and/or poststructuralist feminist theory challenges precisely this dichotomy between sex and gender, along with the logic of binary oppositions it creates. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* gives a trenchant critique of the epistemic assumptions underlying such previous forms of feminist theory. Butler writes: “Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or a ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts.”¹⁵ For Butler the myth of the already sexed body is the epistemological equivalent of the myth of the given: just as the given can only be identified by way of a discursive framework which first allows us to name it, so too it is the culturally available codes of gender that “sexualize” a body and that construct the directionality of that body’s sexual desire. Writing from within the experiences of lesbian women in the women’s movement, Butler’s sharp critique of the distinction between sex and gender allows her to focus on how oppressive and debilitating compulsory heterosexual logic has been for some women and men. The view that not only gender but also sexuality is socially constructed allows one to enter the terrain of political contestation around issues like sexuality and sexual identity which were hitherto considered to lie outside politics. If I may bring this shift in views and sensibilities to a formula: whereas standpoint feminism was obsessed with the mother and mothering, poststructuralist feminism is obsessed with sexuality and the drag queen. With this shift, however, emerge the theoretical as well as political problems of identity/difference politics.

The Dilemmas of Identity/Difference in Theory and Politics

The principal consequence of viewing gender as well as sexuality as socially constructed is the fluidity this introduces to categories of identity.¹⁶ Identities, personal as well as collective, are seen

as “social constructions” with no basis of givenness in nature, anatomy, or some other anthropological essence. Such social construction, most identity/difference theorists also add, is to be understood as a process of social, cultural and political struggle for hegemony among social groups vying with one another for the imposition or dominance of certain identity definitions over others. For example, what does “we the people” mean in the celebrated opening of the Declaration of Independence? In the first place, it means the propertied, white male head of households of the Colonies. Women who are disenfranchised, the African-American slave population who will be considered three-fifth persons by the Constitution as well as the Native American Indians are phantom-like presences lying outside the invocation of the collective we. The identity of every “we” depends on a power structure; collectivities constitute themselves not only by excluding, but also by oppressing others, over and against whom they define themselves. In this sense the identity of every “we” contains the results of collective struggles for power among groups, cultures, genders, and social classes. A “we,” a collective subject is formed by the sedimentation of such past struggles for hegemony.¹⁷

While the perspective opened by this thesis concerning the social construction of collective identities for social and historical studies is extremely fruitful and significant,¹⁸ the difficulties of identity/difference politics as well as of the theoretical research paradigms favored by such politics ultimately derive from what I would like to call “the fungibility¹⁹ of identity.” In the contemporary theoretical literature on identity, one term dominates, namely “construction.” Identities are constructed by the clash and conflict of groups, classes, and conflicts. Yet “construction,” sometimes also referred to as “constitution,” is a curious term to designate a process which is supposed to occur behind the back of subjects and without their willful participation and agency. In Foucauldian language, it is supposed to be knowledge/power matrices that “constitute” or “construct” us. Unlike the subject of traditional humanist discourse, in this model, the subject does not exist as a locus of agency. According to Judith Butler:

The question of locating “agency” is usually associated with the viability of the “subject,” where the “subject” is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates. Or, if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural imbeddedness. On such a model, “culture” and “discourse *mire* the subject, but do not constitute that subject.²⁰

Against the view that the subject is merely “mired” by discourse, Butler defends the stronger position that the subject is “constituted by discourse although not determined by it.” A great deal hides behind this distinction. Contemporary feminist theory is bordering on incoherence if it cannot clarify a consistent and intelligible view of agency and subjectivity. Distinctions between “constitution” and “determination,” “constituting” versus “miring” do not clarify the hard question as to what views of agency and subjectivity²¹ are possible within the framework of a radically constructivist theory. If these agents retain capacities for resistance, resignification, or for “subverting gender codes,” in Butler’s language, from where do these derive? What are the sources of spontaneity, creativity and resistance in agents? In the transition from standpoint feminism to poststructuralist feminisms, we have lost the female subject. Like a script in search of an author, contemporary feminist theory has nearly effaced its own possibility.²² *Either the thesis of the radical social construction of identities is too hyperbolic and hides more than it reveals, or another theory of subjectivity, one that can explain the sources of human creativity as well as victimization, agency as well as passivity, is necessary.*

This problematic status of the category of the subject is also evidenced in the way in which “race/gender/class” are strung together as determinants of identity which should guide empirical research paradigms. The question as to what understanding of the self one must presuppose to conceptualize the confluence of these identities is rarely, if ever, raised. Are these identities additive? Are they like layers of clothing that social actors can wear and remove? How are they experienced by a single individual who is herself a concrete totality uniting all of these into a single life-history? Categories of race, gender, and class are analytical distinctions at the level of theory; in any piece of

social-historical-cultural research we have to show how they come together as aspects of identities of specific individuals. When we do such research, what kinds of models of life stories or narratives must we develop? Within the contemporary theoretical scene of fragmentation and multiplicity, the question of the unity of the self is hardly raised. This issue is not merely of theoretical interest; for very often these identities exist in conflict with one another. The normative demands upon the individual of race/gender/and class identities as well as of other self-constitutive dimensions may be conflictual, in fact, they may be irreconcilable. Unless feminist theory is able to develop a concept of normative agency robust enough to say something significant vis à vis such clashes, and which principles individuals should adopt to choose among them, it loses its theoretical bite and becomes a mindless empiricist celebration of all pluralities. The question of the subject is central for contemporary feminist theory and practice, and here is where I think that the influence of contemporary French theory upon the politics of identity/difference shows its severe limitations.

The Politics of Identity/Difference Within the American Welfare State

To understand the specifically United States form of the politics of “identity/difference” which was to characterize the nineteen-eighties, it is important to note some of the peculiarities and complexities of the relation of new social movements to the weak welfare state in this country.²³ The American welfare state, unlike its European counterparts, had to contend with a multi-national, multi-ethnic and racially divided polity. Throughout the early seventies, the American polity was faced with the dual challenge of redistributing public goods like health, education, welfare, housing, and transportation on the one hand, and of carrying out a Civil Rights agenda for the elimination of discrimination based on race, gender, ethnic, religious and linguistic identities on the other. The most contested issues of the seventies like busing, school desegregation, public housing, and an end to discriminatory employment practices combined issues of redistribution with the realization of the Civil Rights agenda.

While the new politics of “post-materialist values” (Roland Inglehart) was a phenomenon observed in most capitalist welfare-states, the coming together of struggles over redistribution with Civil Rights issues was uniquely American.²⁴ The contemporary women’s movement in the United States is an heir to this double legacy; in fact, it may be the only social movement in this country which has succeeded in uniting these agendas into a more or less coherent platform. North American women, perhaps more so than their counterparts in the rest of the world, use the legal, economic and social means and channels of argumentation and struggle, created by the combination of the redistributionist state and the Civil Rights agenda, to further their goals.²⁵ From the struggle for “equal wages for equal work,” to the struggle to end sexual harassment and discrimination in the work place, North American women employ both Civil Rights-type egalitarian arguments and welfare-statist redistributionist conceptions to further their cause.²⁶ In so doing, the contemporary women’s movement enters the arena of politics as a client of the welfare state, demanding from the state and its agencies the fair and equitable distribution of certain public goods to women as a group. The logic of such demands and struggles thus pits women against other groups, like African-Americans, Mexican and other Spanish-speaking Americans, gay groups, and Lesbian groups who pursue separatist political strategies and demands, Native Americans, differently-abled Americans, and elderly Americans, all of whom are raising similar demands for special compensation from the state, very often, around the same set of goods, like jobs, educational opportunities, housing, and health care benefits.

The contemporary politics of identity/difference emerges out of this multiplicity of trends, movements, organizations and issues. Perhaps no other incident captured the historical and political difficulties of the current situation than the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill controversy. The controversy over Judge Thomas’s confirmation to the United States Supreme Court pitted race against gender, Black men against Black women, white feminists against Black community activists in an endless multiplicity of identities and positionings. For the first time, the traumatic aspects of the endless multiplication of identities with their competing allegiances came to the fore. Reneging

on their decade of struggle against discrimination in the work-place and sexual harassment, some feminist theorists, Catharine MacKinnon among them, rushed to the defense of race as a more central category of identity, and seemed to take to heart Justice Thomas's warning that here was the "lynching of a Black man" by the white media.

Undoubtedly, this remains a complex, multi-faceted and difficult case in recent political memory. However, it is revealing because so many moments of identity/difference politics come to such a prominent clash around it.²⁷ For many women in the movement, it was not news that sexist and misogynous practices were neither race nor class specific; but faced with the possibility of being seen as opposing the appointment of a Black judge to the U.S. Supreme Court, many feminists caved in. Instead of addressing the question raised by Anita Hill, that is, what kind of behavior constituted sexual harassment in the workplace, it was asked which was more important to her: being a successful Black professional feminist? a Black Diva? or a soul sister? The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill confrontation was a paradigmatic episode which highlighted the fungibility of identity categories - which are you — a Black woman professional feminist or a Black sister?

It is this peculiar constellation of events in recent American political history that combine redistributionism with identity/difference politics. This combination colors the contemporary struggles over gays in the military, the recognition of same-sex marriages, and homosexual households (domestic partnerships), the inclusion of partners with AIDS in health insurance and other benefits. The agenda of the politics of identity/difference on the one hand, welfare-state redistributionism, and the legacy of Civil Rights and Affirmative Action policies on the other come together in our current political theory and practice in conflictual and difficult ways.

I said above that the dilemmas of identity/difference politics derived from the fungibility of identity categories. Recent political controversies, including the Thomas-Hill controversy, show very well what is at stake in drawing and redrawing the lines between identity/difference. At stake are not only cultural issues of self and other-identifications but very complex issues of redistribution and state-policy as well.²⁸ To be sure, some sought to delegitimize Anita Hill as a Black woman precisely because of some normative definition of a Black female as "one who stands by her man"; only those who are like us deserve our solidarity would be the motto here. Others reasoned that if Judge Thomas was not appointed then and there, the Bush administration would not have to nominate another Black person for some time to come, on the grounds that it had tried to do so and failed in good faith. They preferred the existence of a Black Supreme Court Judge, even if he may have been potentially guilty of sexual harassment, to the existence of none. The assumption that legally defined minorities had to compete for scarce resources was itself not questioned as a principle governing public and political action.

One sees the convergence of theoretical trends with established political options created by the North American welfare state: contemporary feminist theory proceeds from a view of the subject as a fungible construct constituted by the clash and conflict of competing identities, while the contemporary politics of the redistributionist welfare state encourage the competition among divergent groups, some of whom share overlapping membership, for a set of scarce resources. Just as the view of the subject in contemporary feminist theory borders on incoherence, so too, this model of redistributionism coupled with identity/difference politics ends in group particularisms, often with antagonistic consequences. In most major American cities, from New York to Los Angeles, urban Blacks have been pitted against Hassidic Jews, North Koreans against Blacks and Spanish-speaking residents, and so on. The balkanization of urban America has started some time ago, and is continuing unimpeded. We desperately need a new politics of civility and solidarity, robust enough in its vision to unite those social forces torn now by fragmentation and factionalism. In this task some of the supposedly discredited and old-fashioned ideals of ethical and utopian feminism have a great role to play.

All participation in the public/political sphere presupposes some common goods, some sense of shared vision in the name of which we can act. Groups engaged in identity/difference politics are suspicious that behind appeals to commonality lurk the repression and the denial of “difference.” But we have to ask: the “difference” of whom from whom, and in the name of what? Creative political action does not mean repeating the injustices and divisions of the past. Creative politics expands the field of political contestation as well as reactivating the principles and values in the name of which such contestation takes place.²⁹ The recent debate around gays in the military is a case in point: despite the unhappy and confused compromise which the Clinton Administration had to reach about this issue, what made the Chiefs of Staff accept this compromise begrudgingly, was the logic and power of anti-discrimination claims within the public sphere of the American polity. The military as one of the last bastions of a closed community of group solidarity continuously sets up distinction between them and us; those who are like us and those who are different. Just as Black GIs in the Second World War established the irrelevance of their race as a salient category for determining their suitability to serve in the military and thus challenged the logic of exclusion, so too, a person’s sexual lifestyle would have to be considered irrelevant to the public performance of his or her task. Now, this compromise is unstable, precisely because it turns on distinctions as between “private sexual activity,” and “public demeanour” which will be extremely difficult to sustain in certain contexts. The motto, applied to gay and Lesbian soldiers, “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” basically means, “Erase your identity, who you are, and I will tolerate being with you.” The really difficult political and moral step would be to move from the logic of redistributionism to the ethics of solidarity with those who are different. One should not only argue that gay people should not be discriminated against in the military, which itself is one of the fundamental redistributionist agencies in this society, providing opportunity, income, and advancement to certain social classes above others; the issue would be to question the very definition of what constitutes “us” versus “them.” Why, in fact, is the military homophobic? Is there a link between a certain form of male sexuality and the virtues considered essential for being in the military? Must military discipline rest on a suppression of erotic behavior? Are eros and militarism compatible? These are extremely difficult and subtle questions, but they can only be discussed against the background of mutual respect and solidarity among beings whose fragile identities always need the sustenance and support of a civic polity.

This is the vision of a social feminism which accepts that the furthering of one’s capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within the confines of a solidaristic community which sustains one’s identity through mutual recognition. As opposed to the postmodernist vision of the fragmentary subject, I proceed from the assumption that the human subject is a fragile, needy, and dependent creature whose capacity to develop a coherent life-story out of the competing claims upon its identity must be cherished and protected; as distinct from the language of eternal contestation, conflict, and haggling over scarce resources, I would like to remind us that the primary virtue in politics is the creation of an enlarged mentality. To quote Hannah Arendt:

The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. And this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgment knows how to transcend its individual limitations, cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence of others “in whose place” it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all.³⁰

As we move into the global economic and political uncertainties of the nineties, it will be essential to exercise such an enlarged mentality both in the domestic and the international arena. We must be ready to ask some fundamental questions again: is it obvious that the group-identity based system of social and economic redistributionism is preferable to a model of universalist social justice which indexes certain income levels rather than racial, gender, ethnic identity as the relevant criteria for receiving certain kinds of social benefits? Would not a guaranteed annual income for the poor have saved many a welfare mother from the humiliating examination by state officials of her sexual

practices and work habits? Could it have been more plausible to treat city neighborhoods as fictive collective unities to which one distributed certain benefits, like health, education, and housing collectively, rather than singling out the various groupings in the cities, thus inadvertently contributing to the antagonism and competition raging in so many of America's cities? Identity/difference politics whether in the essentialist version defended by MacKinnon or in the constructivist version defended by Butler,³¹ has not opened up the space for this kind of new questioning: the first kind of paradigm in feminist theory fails us by dogmatically freezing women's identity in the role of the victim; the second paradigm fails us by undermining the normative principles around which identity-transcending group solidarities would have to be formed. The time has come to move beyond identity politics, in the Hegelian sense of moving beyond — *Aufheben* — that is, by learning its lessons, rejecting its excesses, and moving to a new synthesis of collective solidarities with plurally constituted identities.

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1. See "Feminist Discourse, Moral Values, and the Law — A Conversation," *Buffalo Law Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 11-87. All references in parentheses are to this text.
2. Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).
3. *Ibid.*, 74.
4. See Claudia Card, "Women's Voices and Ethical Ideals: Must We Mean What We Say?" *Ethics* 99, no. 1 (October 1988): 125-36.
5. *Ibid.*, 74-75.
6. To characterize the differences in theoretical paradigms underlying Gilligan's and MacKinnon's feminisms is more difficult than defining the differences in their political approaches. At a certain level, MacKinnon's views of gender constitution bear affinity to poststructuralist views that regard gender as a socially and culturally constructed identity in the formation of which power plays a crucial role. MacKinnon claims that when we ask "What is the gender question a question of?" there are two possible answers (22f). The first is the approach that says that the gender question is a question of difference; the second is the approach that says that gender difference is a consequence of power and of political hierarchy. She summarizes: "The position that gender is first a political hierarchy of power is, in my opinion, a feminist position"(22).

Gilligan disagrees: "Basically, I am in disagreement with Kitty MacKinnon. Trying to make gender fit the inequality model is the most traditional way to deal with gender, and it will not work. Gender is not exactly like social class. It is not simply a matter of dominance and subordination. There is no way to envision gender disappearing as one envisions, in utopian visions of society, class disappearing or race becoming a difference that makes no difference."(76) Gilligan does not say why she considers gender difference to be more intractable and basic than racial differences; we can surmise, however, that for her as a psychologist, influenced by feminist psychoanalytic theory, whereas a non-racist society is conceivable, a society without gender differentiation between the male and the female of the species is inconceivable. For MacKinnon, the construction of gender as difference, however, is a matter of power and hierarchy. Who is different from whom? Who defines what is the norm, and what that single one is from which all others are supposed to differ? While finding Gilligan's position on gender constitution too vague, I would also criticize MacKinnon's views for falling into the same traps regarding identity questions as do the postmodernist constructivists. See section three of this paper for a critique of this view.

7. James McCormick Symposium, 69.
8. For a recent collection which displays these aspects of the movement, see *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge Press, 1990).
9. See Ann Snitow, "A Gender Diary," in: *Conflicts In Feminism*, op. cit., 9-44.
10. The term, as far as I can tell, was introduced into feminist theory by Nancy Hartsock who analyzed the possibility of building a feminist theory along the lines suggested by Georg Lukacs in his *History and Class Consciousness*. For Marxist theory, see Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984).
11. *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1987); Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, op. cit.; Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Women* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).
12. Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser, "Social Criticism without Philosophy," in *Feminism and Postmodernism*, ed., Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.
13. I thank Barbara Houston and Marilyn Frye for conversations which helped me see that there were also many other women who were raising this kind of political objection within the women's movement but whose theoretical commitments lay very far from postmodernism. Nonetheless, the tendencies which I depict here also existed, although they may not have been as dominant as I initially thought.
14. Joan Kelly Gadol, "The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," in *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 6.
15. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 7.
16. Judith Butler's conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, 142-149, spells these issues out provocatively.
17. For a further elaboration of the political and theoretical implications of questioning identity, see my "Democracy and Difference: The Metapolitics of Lyotard and Derrida," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (January 1994): 1-23.
18. For some recent examples of the utilization of these insights in the context of post-colonial studies, cf. Gyan Prakash, "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography," in *Social Text* 10, nos. 2 and 3 (1992): 8-18; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," in *Destabilizing Theory*, ed., Michelle Barret and Anne Phillips (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992), 74-92.
19. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "fungible" as "taking the place" and "fulfilling the office of" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982 compact edition), 606. Identity categories are thus in principle replaceable, substitutable through others.
20. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1, 3.
21. In addition to my reflections on this issue in "Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism," op. cit., see "Subjectivity, Historiography and Politics: Reflections on the 'Feminism/Postmodernism' Exchange," in Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, *An Exchange on Feminism and Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1994), forthcoming. This exchange has appeared in German as, Benhabib, Butler, Cornell and Fraser, *Der Streit um Differenz* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1993).
22. Linda Alcoff drew attention to some of the difficulties of contemporary feminist theory with her early article, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, no. 31 (Spring 1988): 405-436.
23. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), Daniel Bell already spoke of the "entitlement" revolution and the clash of competing groups as being an inevitable product of welfare state capitalism. In presenting this development as if it were the consequence of false cultural and moral ideals, however, he neglected to address issues of distributive and compensatory justice which the welfare state also had to resolve when confronted with the claims of hitherto oppressed and socially disadvantaged groups. E.J. Dionne, Jr. in *The War Against Public Life: Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: S & S Trade, 1991) discusses these issues as they affected the fate of the Democratic Party in the last twenty years.
24. Cf. Mary Feinsod Katzenstein and Carol McClurg Mueller, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Western Europe: Consciousness Political Opportunity and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1987).

25. See Joyce Gelb, *Feminism and Politics: A Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). I would like to thank Theda Skocpol for bringing to my attention the sources cited in this and the preceding footnote.
26. For a critical discussion of how some of these issues affect feminist theory and politics, see Nancy Fraser, "Women, Welfare, and the Politics of Need Interpretation," and "Struggle Over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late Capitalist Political Culture," in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (London: Polity Press, 1989).
27. For a trenchant analysis of some of the cultural and political "positionings" involved, see Nancy Fraser, "Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas," *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1992): 595-612, and the collection edited by Toni Morrison, *Race-ing Justice En-gendering Power* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992).
28. A lot more attention needs to be paid in feminist theory and practice to the way in which the welfare state, while not creating the identities of social groups, definitely encourages their formation along certain kinds of identity-related grievances while precluding their development along other lines. A brief look at the United States northern neighbour, Canada for example, shows that Canadian governments have been more social democratic in the distribution of economic and social benefits; there, cultural identity issues and in particular linguistic identity occupy a more prominent position than other forms of identity politics. By contrast, initiatives to make Spanish the official second language of the United States, as placed before the Connecticut state legislature several years ago, were rapidly defeated, and did not arouse particular support or even attention from social movement groups and activists except those directly concerned. Let us ask the hypothetical question: is linguistic identity any less fundamental to who one is than gender, race, or sexual orientation? Why are some identities publicly recognized and acknowledged as legitimate criteria for being counted as a member of an oppressed group, or as a "disadvantaged minority" in the official vocabulary of the welfare state? What is the role of the state in encouraging identity politics, and in this process, what other options of social struggle and group solidarities are being precluded?
29. See Frank Michelman's concept of "jurisgenerative" politics in, "Law's Republic," *Yale Law Review* (1988).
30. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture," in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 220-21.
31. I thank Nick Burbules's comments for leading me to clarify this distinction between two kinds of identity/difference politics. It was never my intention to even imply that MacKinnon and Butler proceeded from similar conceptions of identity. In fact, one of the most admirable aspects of Butler's book *Gender Trouble* is precisely the critique of essentializing identity politics. (For an elaboration of this point see the collectively authored volume, Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions* (New York: Routledge Press, December 1994). Nonetheless, this critique of essentialism, is not enough, for it paints with too broad a brush: not all search for commonality aims at the suppression of difference; not all solidarities must be based on hidden exclusionary agendas. Certainly we should not stop criticizing and questioning false commonalities and suspect solidarities. But without such commonality and solidarity, emancipatory politics, precisely for groups of oppressed minorities who must convince other-thinking and acting-majorities that their cause is just and worthy of support, is impossible. Politics must always combine interests with ideals.