Unequal and Different


Gisela Kaplan has undertaken a mammoth and necessary task: to introduce the women's movements of western Europe (to 1988) to the 'English-language circuit'. Her starting premise—that feminist analyses have been dominated by the experiences of English-speaking countries, in particular America and Britain—is doubtless correct. The insights which can come from comparative studies which range beyond these borders is undeniable.

One of the chief constraints on such analyses is the language barrier. Here, Kaplan brings an enviable grasp of seven of the major languages of the countries she surveys. This gave her access to the large volume of feminist writing and government policy documents necessary for such an undertaking.

Kaplan concluded that the experiences of western European feminists fitted most readily into commonly used territorial divisions. Hence, the book has sections on 'Progressivism in Scandinavia', 'Conservatism in the Germanic Countries', 'Creative Traditionalism in France and the Netherlands', and 'Revolution and radicalism in southern Europe'. At the same time, she endeavours to do justice to the varied experiences of each national movement within these groupings.

She offers wonderful potted histories of each country. Not only are we given essential historical and cultural details, but there are also summaries of each government's equality initiatives and the history of feminist organisations and feminist activities in each country. The four thematic sections conclude with explanations of the particular model which provide thoughtful insights into "the patterns of action between protest movements, society at large, and the government of the day". As examples, we are made aware of the importance of the formal commitment of Scandinavian governments to gender equality, the way in which governments in France and the Netherlands take dissent seriously, and the fact that Italian feminists have been able to tap into a lively leftist political culture.

Unfortunately—and it is here that I felt a great disappointment with this book—there is an odd lack of fit between the book's case-studies and its theoretical overviews. Worse still, many readers will be put off by the superficial treatment of complex feminist theory in parts of the book. Often the reader is left floundering both as to the author's position on the issues raised and her intention in raising them.

At the very outset, Kaplan mentions the way in which feminists have challenged some of the fundamental organising concepts of traditional political theory: the 'public', the 'private', the 'social'. But she never tells us why this is relevant to her study and often, to my mind at least, falls into conventional usage herself. She certainly seems intent throughout the text on emphasising the importance of 'political' engagement and is overtly critical of "self-advocacy", getting bogged down in one's own critique, and "forfeiting the public space" which feminists have claimed.

This might be acceptable if Kaplan could demonstrate that the two modes of operation are as distinct as her analysis implies, and that 'success' is more closely aligned with one than the other. Unfortunately, she doesn't offer any means of assessing feminist 'victories' other than the acceptance by governments of a range of equality legislation. Though she asserts at the outset that she will inquire into the effects these reforms have on the everyday life of women, she doesn't do so and perhaps could not have done so within the constraints of the project. This leaves many unanswered questions about her understanding of the 'political' and of 'political change'.

When Kaplan takes up the much-debated dichotomy between concerns of equality and difference she leaves readers similarly uncertain about the relevance of these comments to her case-studies. She claims that feminists take one of three approaches to equality. The first she calls 'transformative', and one can only wonder why she fixed on this word given her description of its content—"Implicit in this argument is the view that women need not spend much time in questioning 'the system'". This, we are told, is closely aligned with a justice claim. And both of these are clearly marked off from something called "the special value perspective".

Kaplan acknowledges that the three commonly labelled feminist strands—liberal, radical and socialist—had adherents in western Europe. She even sounds sympathetic at times to a socialist feminist analysis, highlighting again and again that reforms which leave underlying structures intact will ultimately fail. And yet this perspective is omitted in the theoretical overview. Moreover, despite the occasional passing reference to patriarchy, the role of men as subverters of feminist claims receives very little attention. There is also an odd tension in the book between the insistence that "the suppleness of the economic structure" can accommodate any changes and the endorsement of a strategy of concentrating feminist energies on "the public and the political arena".

As to the "special value perspective", it is clear here and elsewhere in the text that Kaplan is deeply concerned by anything that smacks of 'essentialism'—which is to say, the belief that women display a range of virtues such as nurturance because of their essential nature. While I am sympathetic to this concern, she does little justice to the theoretical debates which surround this topic. In fact, she is downright insulting in aligning essentialist feminist analyses with fascism. She claims here that countries
which have experienced fascism, including Italy, will have little truck with this dubious claim, ignoring the well-developed and challenging work of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice, Indiana University Press, 1987). Kaplan admits that the 'special values' approach may have been useful in the necessary development of women's new identity, and she rates this development as one of the major successes of the women's movements. But nowhere does she tease out how different feminist approaches may have influenced and assisted one another.

One final irritating aspect of the theoretical overview is Kaplan's suggestion that there is a fundamental ideological conflict within feminism over attitudes towards privacy and politics. She argues that in the abortion campaign feminists were making a 'deregulatory' move, demanding that governments step back from the areas of contraception and childbirth because of their 'intimate' nature. Then, she claims, they contradicted themselves by inviting the state to regulate domestic violence disputes.

The point here is that feminists were challenging those who labelled these areas of life 'private' and 'public' according to their own agendas. The feminist claim that 'the personal is political' was meant to highlight how all such designations are inherently political and to assert women's equal right to engage in the politicking. If, in the process, they used particular discourses such as that of privacy, surely this says more about the limited strategic alternatives available to feminists than about their ideological consistency or otherwise.

These points are disturbing because one of Kaplan's chief contributions is precisely her sensitivity to the way in which feminists have to manoeuvre within the contradictions of the system they are attempting to influence. Unfortunately, this insight is not evident in the theoretical sections of the text.

In offering some starting hypotheses, presumably to guide us through the detailed narratives to follow, Kaplan usefully dismisses simplistic equations about progressiveness on women's issues; for example, correlations between religion, or the wealth and size of a particular country. However, she then goes on to suggest an equally simplistic analysis—the 'seesaw effect'—that when women succeed in one or two spheres there are certain backlashes in the other one or two; for instance, when women have achieved fairly high representation in politics, it is highly unlikely that they will have any equality either in economic terms or in their private lives.

Yet, as Kaplan goes on to show, the Scandinavian countries lead the world both in female political representation and in a range of social benefits such as child care and parental leave. Sweden introduced legalised abortion with little dissent and makes a formal commitment to increasing domestic role-sharing between men and women—all reforms which affect women's 'private' lives. True, there are weak spots in the Scandinavian reform agenda—there has been little success in attempts to alter sex segregation in the workplace, for example, and violence against women has only recently come onto the political agenda—but, surely, it is more useful to disentangle the complex reasons for this uneven progress than to impose a formula which simply doesn't work.

Given Kaplan's decision to paint with a broad brush, some of the painting is slipshod, but this should not deter readers from buying and reading Contemporary Western European Feminism. There is a wealth of material here and some thoughtful insights on particular countries. It is just unfortunate that, instead of signposting such insights in an introduction and drawing them together in a conclusion, Kaplan uses the opening and closing sections to offer theoretical analyses which are distracting and insufficiently developed to be meaningful.

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List

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