RECLAIMING THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF FEMINISM

How did you come to write the book?

It was originally a course in feminist theory which I taught at Barnard College for five years, from 1975 to 1980. It became clear to me that I had the material for a much larger study. It's based on the reading I've been doing since 1970, so it's about ten years' worth of reflection.

In that time you've moved from America to Australia. Has that affected the book?

Yes. I've been very affected by the Australian feminist milieu, which is very broad in its range — it's very aware of French, English, American and everybody's stuff. In a sense, it's much more cosmopolitan here than in America.

For instance, the English only speak to the English, and the French to the French .... but the Australians speak to everybody, and really have quite a clear idea of the difference between different feminist positions.

I was also influenced by the Australian political climate which is much further left than in America.

Do we have a creative input into that debate, or are we merely absorbing all these different strands?

I think the creative input is possibly not in straight feminist theory. It's more in the application of feminist theory and practice. I think the feminist writing on labour history puts together the psychological understanding of American feminists' work and the more traditional labour history approach of Australia and England. It's quite a creative mix.

I think Australian feminism is really intervening in structures — in trade unions, in government bureaucracies and so on, in a way I haven't seen previously, particularly in the US.

Could you briefly outline the structure of the book?

It's organised into three parts. Part 1 is an assessment of the people whom I take to be elaborating the position of Simone de Beauvoir. That's Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone and several feminist anthropologists like Sherry Ortner and Rosaldo. Then I took Susan Brownmiller. All those people, in different ways, are saying that it's basically difference from men that's the source of women's oppression.

In the last chapter I look at consciousness-raising which I see as a pivotal movement. It shifted that focus on difference as a form of oppression to difference as a possible source of strength.

In Part 2 I look at those writers who are saying that female differences should, in fact, be celebrated.

They ask what it is that women specialise in and shouldn't we put that into our politics? Particularly the capacity to nurture and many of the traditional women's values. That's people like Jean Baker-Miller, the psychologist, Adrienne Rich, the poet, and a whole strand of lesbian feminist writing from the early '70s.

The last part — Part 3 — covers the people I really part company with — Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin. They're talking about an essential femaleness which is superior.

So, in the debate on pornography, Griffin and Dworkin are saying "Somehow our sexuality is divorced from issues of power — it's pure. Women loving women don't encounter that kind of masochism ... "

Interview by Fiona Moore

Hester Eisenstein is the author of the new book Contemporary Feminist Thought (Unwin 1984). She has taught at Yale and Barnard College, Columbia University, where she helped establish the women's studies program. In 1980 she co-edited The Future of Difference. She now works as senior equal employment adviser to the NSW government.

This interview with her, by Fiona Moore, is reprinted from Tribune. It includes discussion which, for space reasons, was edited out of the Tribune article.
I really think that’s off the wall!
I wind up saying we really have to
build a new synthesis. We have to
transpose our women-centred vision
and values into the political arena.
I’ve been accused of not saying how
—which is fair enough! But I figure
that I have to be a different book.
What I was trying to do was open up
the debate.

Why don’t you consider, or do you, the
way in which marxism or socialist
feminism has been enriched by the
challenges of radical feminism as a
political contribution?
That’s not what I’m writing about.
Partly, I think, because a lot of people
have been writing about it, and that’s
not my particular expertise. So I
thought I’d like to write this book
about the American radical feminist
tradition, informed by my socialistic
feminism, but not taking on that other
debate.

You’re critical of radical feminism for
its consistent emphasis on the
psychological at the expense of the
economic factors. What do you see as
the proper role of psychology in the
construction of feminist theory?
I’m not throwing psychology out. I
think it’s been absolutely crucial. But
the point I’m making — and it’s
probably clearer in the American
context — is that there’s a tendency to
psychologise problems as a quite
deliberate manoeuvre, to take them off
the agenda of economic and political
action.

On the one hand, we’ve had this
absolutely brilliant dissection of the
psychology of femininity and so on.
Everyone has to develop that and
think about that. But the structure’s
still there, and it reproduces itself.

If you look at recent issues of Ms.
magazine, you have to sieve the pages
to find anything new about struggles
ever equal pay or safety in the
workplace.

What you find, again and again, is
that what one has to change is one’s
psychology. If only you have your
head straight, all things will follow.
Anyone who is a feminist and has been
in the workplace knows that this is just
not dealing with the issues that arise.

I don’t mean to say it isn’t crucial for
women to change. The beginning is
with changing yourself and
strengthening yourself, defining what
goals you set yourself and what kinds
of reactions you have that you’d like to
fix to find your full strength.

But there are people in society
besides us, and other structures
besides individual psychology.

Does this emphasis on psychology
come from the consciousness-raising
process?
I think, in part, it does, although if you
look at the stuff about CR there were
some very good articles in the early
days which said “This is not therapy. It
has therapeutic value, but the
intention is to strengthen us and to
create little cells from which we will
grow out to make social change”.

What’s more to blame is the official
reception of feminism. Publishers are
delighted to produce book after
book on subjects like dealing with
anger. That goes right into the
mainstream of American individualism,
the power of positive thinking,
right back to the 1920s. Think right
and you’ll be rich and famous! That’s
a very strong tradition in American
capitalism; self-improvement.

Feminism, in a way, has gone right
into that stream, and if you’re not
careful you’re saying the same things
with the same religious fervour! And
we’re not saying we don’t need to
change, but that other things need
changing, too — like laws, distribution
of resources, education ....

Why did you look exclusively at
American feminist use of psychology
when there are French and British
feminists who are discussing similar
points about difference in a more
sophisticated way?
They are arguing that specific
biological differences, and the
different significant events of being a
woman must mean that women will
develop a different subjectivity.
They’re not talking about a specific
essence. They do take account of
historical and cultural variables. In a
way, by analysing American radical
feminism exclusively, you’ve chosen
an easy target.

It was just an arbitrary thing, which
was that the shape of the book was to
look at a particular set of
developments in American feminist
theory.

What I was trying to say is that,
within this American tradition, there
are more similarities than you realise.
There is a set of assumptions which
grow right out of Firestone and Millett
and into Mary Daly.
Hester Eisenstein.

I made a decision not to take on the world. So I really haven't dealt with the French feminist strand. I think that is worthy of much more detailed study. That whole problem of difference needs to be developed.

With the change from the androgynous ideal to the celebration of difference has come a concomitant change in the way motherhood is dealt with....

In the first wave, Firestone said (and a lot of people agreed with her) that there is no way to recuperate motherhood for women. If you're going to be a feminist, the whole weight of the ideology of motherhood, the expectations of nurturing and self-sacrifice is too heavy baggage. Even if you didn't give away heterosexual sex, you gave away reproducing.

I think that's shifted. A lot of people said, "Hey, isn't that too much of a sacrifice? Isn't there some way of looking at mothering in a feminist way?"

I think Adrienne Rich was saying that you could separate motherhood as an institution with the cultural trappings, from what mothering as a female experience might be, without all that other shit.

She argues that motherhood should be as freely chosen as any other work like writing or becoming an airline pilot. We shouldn't accept those dichotomies which are thrust upon us... like, if you're a real woman, you're a mother, and if you're a feminist, you're not a real woman.

So now we say, "Well, hang on, who's in charge of saying who the real women are?"

Let's look at pornography which, with proposed legislative changes, has again become a contentious issue for feminists here.

I think it's a very confusing issue. All I'm doing is looking at the writings of Griffin and Dworkin, which I think are very interesting, and I do try to give them credit for the points they make. Everybody argues about free speech and puts the issue of pornography in the light of civil liberties and free speech versus censorship.

They say "Yes, but look at what pornography is — it is, in fact, a device to silence woman". They have quite an elaborate cultural argument about how pornography operates as part of a cultural ideology, which essentially enforces the notion of women as sexual objects and, by definition therefore, as subjects.
They ask "Whose silence is being protected, whose free speech is being protected?" Of course, that doesn't resolve any of those issues.

I still find it very, very hard, and my personal view is that I wouldn't put my energy into it. I think it's a symptom, not a cause. I think it's attacking a cultural shadow, rather than asking what are the material relationships it gives rise to? The fact is that women can make more money taking off their clothes than doing other work! The crucial thing is power over women's bodies.

Why is that so central to feminist theory?

Until we can stop rape from happening, how can you talk about women being free? The denial of women's entire sexual self-determination is the fact that someone can take her by force. If someone wants you, you're absolutely annihilated as an independent force.

What kinds of political struggle do you think radical feminism has withdrawn from? Wasn't the redefinition of what is political one of the priorities of the early feminist movement?

What I'm pointing out is that, in the US, it's turned into a two-way race between strands of feminism. One category is women who read Mary Daly and say, "It's true! Affirmative action is a reformist waste of time. I won't dirty my hands with it".

So the really pure thing to do is to read feminist theory, form your own community and try not to intervene in any other structures because the minute you do, you're tainted.

But, if you carry that argument far enough, you couldn't even create feminist culture. It's intervening into what art is, or whatever.

All the very important practical interventions of the women's movement are looked down on by these theoretically pure people. On the other side, there are women making major interventions — in women's studies in academia, legal changes, and action in the political and union arenas.

All those are very interesting, but unless the theorists stop being so pure and start assessing them, there's a real split between theory and practice which wasn't the way we started out.

You choose not to use terms like socialist feminism, radical feminism, bourgeois feminism. Why is this?

What I'm trying to say is that the terms have shifted. I wanted to look at radical feminism and what had become of it.

In the early seventies, feminists said they were more left than marxists and the SDSniks (Students for Democratic Socialism). Robyn Morgan asserted that feminism was the true left. Now we have Mary Daly claiming the term radical feminism for what I would call metaphysical feminism. That's a very personal, interior, private quest.

She's very elitist. She says she's only interested in the women who understand her.

This is very different from saying we want to build a mass political movement, we want to reach all women, which was how we started out.

I really wanted to focus on the degeneration of the term radical.

I'm trying to make the point that it's not so obvious any more what is, or isn't bourgeois feminism. The political spectrum keeps on shifting to the right, particularly in the US. The Equal Rights Amendment seemed a very tokenist, reformist thing which a lot of people turned their noses up at. Then they discovered it had been defeated, and now they are saying "We'll take it. Give us a little bourgeois feminism!"

I think we need to be more sophisticated about our use of these terms. It's a fluid situation.

Zilla Eisenstein, in her book The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism, says "Instead of walking around as socialist feminists and being holier than thou about liberal feminists, let's try for some liberal goals and see how far we can get. And see if we can't radicalise people on the way."

You're very critical of radical feminism's universalism. But hasn't feminism moved away from marxism because of its own universalism?

I think the anger of feminism with marxism has to do more with marxism's refusal to encounter gender as a significant category of analysis, except in a very token way. They then come back to class and say that it is the main event.

In terms of universalism, though, I would argue that both marxism and feminism are guilty. They both come from a western philosophical position. In the current situation this has a kind of neo-imperialist effect because feminism is now being shoved down the throats of women in various third world countries in a way that denies difference.

The women there are put in an impossible position. They're having to say, "No, we're not interested in that western stuff. We're loyal to our traditional culture." They can't very well be proper nationalists and buy into this very western theoretical system. It's universalising in the sense of feminists saying: "Let's you do it like we do it."

I heard the editor of the Indian feminist journal Manushi talking on radio the other day about the necessity for third world women to define their own priorities. These women may well pose a challenge to the universalising of the western feminist experience.

Yes, it's very nice the way third world women are coming out and saying "When you talk about all women, you're also talking about us, and this is what we think."

You say we need to "reclaim the revolutionary potential of feminism". Do you identify priorities in terms of sites for feminist intervention?

I don't presume to tell other people where to put their energy. But I would say that one of the things that is interesting about the Australian scene is that women are, in fact, quietly intervening in many areas. They're attempting to have power in trade unions, both at the grassroots level and executive level. There is some legislation now, and it's starting to have some small impact.

Women are refusing to be marginalised, refusing to say "We'll do the women's issues, that'll be Point 94 .... " Somebody made the point recently that, in the old days of trade unions, the women's issues would always be negotiable. Like you'd say "This is the log of claims .... Point 92 child care and 93 English language classes for migrants."

And that was the first thing you'd negotiate away. And we're saying we do not want to be point 92. We want to be point No. 1. We want to be at the centre, we want feminist issues and feminist concerns to be on your priority list.

Fiona Moore is a journalist and works on Tribune.