Challenges ... and Problems


"Men may cook or weave or dress dolls or hunt humming birds, but if such activities are appropriate occupations for men, then the whole society, men and women alike, votes them as important. When the same occupations are performed by women, they are regarded as less important." Translated into the concerns of social theorising, this quote from Margaret Mead, used by one of the authors to introduce her chapter, encapsulates the fundamental insight of this collection of essays.

From several different perspectives, the thirteen chapters of the book explore the impact of feminist theory on contemporary western philosophy, liberal political theory, sociology and history. Although the authors differ in their theoretical positions, they share a map of the general outline of the battlefront.

Feminists, they argue, started by pointing out the absence of women from contemporary social theory. At first, their project involved using the tools provided by their respective disciplines to look at women and at their interests — their political participation, rights as citizens, history, work, sexuality, the bearing and raising of children. In the process, some feminists re-read the "founding fathers" of western philosophy, and discovered that most did have things to say about women, and very nasty things at that. In the ideal republic, Rousseau tells men "to renounce one's liberty is to renounce one's quality as a man, the rights and also the duties of humanity". Women, in the meanwhile, "must be trained to bear the yoke from the first so that they may not feel it: to master their own caprices and submit themselves to the will of others".

Today, the potential inherent in the first project has been all but exhausted. Gradually, "adding" women and their interests to social theory has revealed conceptual problems which could no longer be contained within the parent disciplines; after a certain point, feminist insights challenged the very foundations of western social and political theory. At this point, the contributors to Feminist Challenges explore two different paths. Some feminists try to reject "male-stream" social theorising altogether and seek to develop a new form of feminist social understanding. Others — the majority in this volume — make social theory and its categories themselves the object of feminist social inquiry.

The notion of an individual, so important in western social theory, is used by several of the authors to elaborate this theme. Put simply, the world is divided into a public and a private sphere, the former comprising...
government, politics, and paid work, and dominated by men, the latter centred on the family and inhabited by women. What happens in the public sphere is important, has a general significance, is truly human. What happens in the private sphere is closer to animal nature, is less important and unsuitable as a basis for deriving general principles about humanity.

In this scheme, humanity, rationality and individuality are defined in a way which not only leaves out significant female concerns, but are frequently the very antithesis of what it means and feels like to be a woman. Indeed, for such analysis to work, people's bodies have to be left out of the defining characteristics of individuals. In turn, since some aspects of rationality and citizenship are defined as the very opposite of women's activities and concerns, and femininity is seen as something which has to be transcended to become a citizen, it is not enough for women simply to seek equal access to science and to political life. Sex equality is not enough. Rationality and citizenship themselves have to be redefined.

Within the general framework of the book, different contributors to Feminist Challenges focus on particular issues. There is a useful chapter outlining some of the tricks which make women disappear from "male-stream" social theory, a chapter on the links between war and the definition of self in western philosophical tradition, and chapters examining the writings of French feminist theoreticians Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir.

There are two major problems in Feminist Challenges, one specific to this collection of essays and one more general. In Europe, feminist theories such as those put forward in this book have been challenged by black women for failing to come to grips with racism and with the very real differences in the social situation of black and white women in different cultures. (The British journal, Feminist Review, has been one forum for this debate.) Certainly, while some authors in this volume are careful to specify that they are dealing with a western tradition of social theory, others can, with some justification, be accused of ethnocentrism, and none address the issues of racial and ethnic differences among women directly. One reason for this is the book's greater emphasis on philosophy rather than on anthropology and history.

The second problem is more general. Feminist Challenges is a theoretical book about theories and, as such, epitomises both the achievements and the problems of theorising personal and political issues. The authors are interested in far more than writing for the sake of conceptual clarity and theoretical tidiness. Theirs is no academic exercise. They want to change the world. And indeed, the insights contained in this collection of essays will help feminist theoreticians understand and describe the world in radically new ways, help them see through some of the ways of thinking and understanding that are so crippling to women. But, by the same token, the technical language in which the book is written is not accessible to the majority of women in our society.

How can radicals bridge this gap between theory and ordinary people?

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