Another casualty of the end of the Cold War has been the bipolar imagery of radical politics. Here, talking to ABC Radio's Coming Out Show, Meaghan Morris considers the consequences for feminist theory.

In relation to feminism, theory is the practice of reflection on the processes of political change. It's a very slow and sometimes very unrewarding activity, but nevertheless it's the ground in which we invent new ways of going about practising feminist politics.

And feminist theory has been going through an enormously productive period. Projects that have been taking years to come to fruition are now starting to emerge in the form of very serious books. That's why we see, in the United States in particular, this strange phenomenon wherein the humanities in general are under attack, but feminist theory is the area that people most want to get involved in, because it remains one of the most productive areas of cultural production generally. What's most impressive is the scale on which feminist theory has been working — the ambition of projects like Carole Pateman's Sexual Contract for instance; texts that really are laying down the basis for a whole new critique of society, and new theories of politics. That's not something that some people would expect to listen to feminism for. It's been very popular over the last few years — especially in the quick-fix media — to say 'Feminism's finished...it's boring...it's 70s stuff'. But if you actually look at the output, the popularity, the size of courses, the demand for it right across the board, in all kinds of fields of study, that's simply not so. Feminism's getting bigger and stronger and more important. One of the most obvious reasons for that is that feminism is one of the few political positions from which people can talk about the amazing changes that have been happening in world politics, local politics and the global economy over the last couple of years.

The connection between deconstruction, very loosely defined, and feminism has been a powerful one in the last decade, because feminism is a process of profoundly questioning the structure of reality. Particularly in a highly mediated society like ours, the categories that we use to think about reality are part of the way we live. They're not some decorative reflection of reality, they're the way that...
we produce our society. Feminism right from the beginning has questioned ways of thinking and the practical impact of ways of thinking in people's lives. Because the history of women as subjected has been longstanding and complicated, feminist deconstruction has had an enormous amount of material to work with. Over the years we've developed skills for pulling apart the most obvious and taken-for-granted and apparently unchallengable ways of thinking. For that reason a lot of pioneering feminist theory is either laughed at as soon as it appears, or seems incredibly esoteric. Yet look at the world situation now. Two years ago virtually everyone expected that they were going to go on living in a Cold War environment forever, and that you could keep on protesting about the same old things because power blocs would never shift. Now those eternal verities of the post-war world have collapsed around people's ears. Feminism remains one of the most powerfully equipped modes of thought for inventing new concepts of relationship and new ways of acting, precisely because it's put so much energy into understanding how the world we live in has been stuck together.

The problem of 'post-feminism' is a complicated one. I have a lot of sympathy for young women for whom the word post-feminism was just a way of saying that they came to active life after the 70s with a different view of how to do things. I don't think there was a big problem with that. On the other hand, in inner-city culture in particular, sticking the word 'post' in front of something in order to remove it from existence, was a very 80s thing. It was very popular in the 80s to 'post' just about everything and assume you'd solved the problem. The decade was such a fag end of so many things -q the Cold War, the uncertainty of transition from the Australia of Malcolm Fraser to whatever it is that's starting to develop now, with the feeling of economic panic that the media keep expressing. People were in a kind of limbo. The era of 'posts' ended with the stock market crash of 1987, and the events in the Middle East over the last few months have well and truly put paid to it. It seems fairly clear now that we're no longer 'post-' anything but well and truly into a new era.

One of the reasons that feminist theory has become so strong is that for at least a decade there has been a lot of soul-searching, particularly by white middle class feminists, here and in the United States, about their relationship to questions of race, class and ethnic and cultural difference. And many of these questions are not always the same as questions of race and racism. Over the last few years it's become clear that this debate is starting to open a space for a practice of politics where people can act together in some kind of coalitional way. By this I don't just mean the kind of coalition that admits the differences between people in that kind of liberal, wishy-washy way - that's so prevalent: you know: everything's different, isn't that wonderful, and so on. These coalitions are much more violent than that. People are learning to discuss and cooperate politically with other people with whom they're very often actually quite at odds, or who have violently antagonistic interests. Perhaps it's over-optimistic, but it seems to me that part of the sense of fear that we all have at the moment about the volatility of the world is that a lot of our available political discourses have not been very strong at thinking about a multi-centred world, and constructing an oppositional political culture that is also multi-centred. All of the classic political movements are binary ones: capital/labour, men/women, black/white. That's not good enough any more. And because feminist theory has started to work on its own relationship to race and class and ethnicity and the environment, it has acquired a set of skills for at least thinking about these questions. If any kind of new political practice is going to come about in the next few years, it's going to be from that direction."

MEAGHAN MORRIS is a Sydney academic and writer. Her The Pirate's Fiancee is published by Verso books. She was talking to the ABC Radio National's Coming Out Show, for their Feminist Theory series. The series is available on ABC Radio Tapes from GPO Box 9994 in each capital city.