Despite Rumours


Despite occasional rumours to the contrary, Australian women have not, over the last two decades, achieved equality. Statistics on the distribution of wealth, poverty, good jobs and housework all show that women's position has improved only marginally or even worsened in some areas.

And yet many of the gains initiated by the women's movement are truly remarkable. In the early 'seventies, zoneo notes for the first women's studies students emphasised the fact that few 'properly' published books mentioned women, let alone feminists and their ideas. In contrast, between September 1989 and March 1990 Allen and Unwin published eight new women's studies titles and reprinted another one. The three books reviewed here are a part of this series. Together, they demonstrate the range and sophistication of contemporary feminist writing in Australia.

Frogs and Snails deals with the way pre-school children understand some popular non-sexist children's stories. Bureaucrats helps rethink economics and public policy by discussing a variety of approaches to the unpaid labour of women within the household. And Household Work deals, in part, with the increasing strategic importance of 'femocrats' (feminist bureaucrats) within the public service. Twenty years ago, there were no femocrats or non-sexist children's books to write about. The first Women's Adviser to the Prime Minister was appointed in 1973, the same year that a group of women formed the children's book collective later responsible for many of the titles examined by Davies.

Frogs and Snails deals with a puzzle most feminist-inclined parents have tried to work out again and again. Why does Kate, despite the best non-sexist childrearing they can fathom, demand pink frilly dresses and plan to be a nurse? And why does Sam refuse to play with girls and keep trying to procure a gun? The theoretical understanding which helped inspire the writers of non-sexist children's stories revolved around sex-role stereotypes. In the trade, this came to be seen as a feminist version of behaviourist theory. Bronwyn Davies criticises such theories from what the trade would call a materialist reading of poststructuralist theory. In case you are wondering, this does concern you. The author argues that many of the non-sexist stories don't work as they are supposed to because children give them a meaning considerably different from that intended by the author, or the feminist parent.

To make her case, Davies actually went and talked to the little people themselves; read them stories and watched them at the pre-schools. The main point of her argument is that feminist writers and parents can make life difficult for children who come to understand that there are only two genders in society, and that people have to be unambiguously one or the other to be seen as normal. Given this predicament, life can become difficult if one is not allowed to use some of the most obvious and 'easy' signs of gender identity like guns or dolls. The way out of the swamp is more difficult.

Davies argues convincingly that the insistence on two mutually exclusive gender categories is a product of our society, an arrangement which can - and should - change. But she says little about the political implications of such change, and her recipes for achieving it sound neither convincing nor practical.

A book which explores just these issues, Household Work, is a collection of essays dealing with women's varied contribution to the household economy, and the economy as a whole. The book analyses, from different perspectives, the activities carried on within households, the complex position of women within them and the extent to which their work can be passed on to others, and the different forms of income support available for households.

The authors do not present a unified 'correct line'. Instead, there is a series of brief and clear overviews, statements of approach and reports of interesting projects, followed by a brief commentary and critique. Many of the questions raised have significant political implications (not least for Bronwyn Davies' general
proposals to change the gender order). Who shares the housework with highly-paid professional women? Their husbands or other women whom they now have the money to employ? Do all women benefit equally from equal opportunity policies? If housework is seen as 'real' work, how should its value be calculated?

Bureaucrats, Technocrats, Femocrats takes up in more detail some of these issues, dealing with topics such as administrative reform, the role of femocrats, restructuring, and the crisis of the welfare state, essays which promise to make a major contribution to theories of the state.

You might not always agree with the book's important and original ideas but they certainly make you think. For example, Yeatman argues, using a variant of the 'contradictory class location theory', that femocrats are a class of their own, and in a double sense.

First, their adherence to feminist ideology is crucial to keeping their jobs as femocrats, a relatively privileged individualised economic class position. Second, they neither share the gender-class privileges of men, nor the gender-class position of most women, who are dependent on patriarchal economic support.

This does not make femocrats public enemies, but complicates appreciably any calculations they might make about the best policies to benefit Australian women. Yeatman's book concludes with an exciting chapter on the politics of discourse, a long way away from four-year-olds and their understanding of feminist fairy tales, but using a similar theoretical perspective and crucial to any project of creating a better world for them.

You now hopefully have some sense of the scope and complexity of contemporary feminist analysis in Australia. But does all this mean that you will need a degree in women's studies to bring up your kids or join a pressure group?

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### A Cure for Enthusiasts


The most serious virus which infects the world of computers is enthusiasm. It affects people, predominantly writers, rather than the machines themselves and produces a number of distressing symptoms.

Consider this, the first sentence from Inside the IBM-PC by Peter Norton: "This is the beginning of a marvellous voyage of discovery into the secrets, wonders, and mysteries of the IBM Personal Computer". The use of words like 'secrets', 'wonders' and 'mysteries' are all certain symptoms of galloping enthusiasm.

Later on the same page Norton, who's one of the world's leading experts on the IBM-PC, says: "In this book, we - you and I - will set off to discover the mysteries and wonders of what the PC is and what marvels it can perform. I am excited and enthused about the PC and the PC family, and I want to lead you into understanding the workings of this marvel and sharing with me the excitement of knowing what it is, how it works, and what it does."

By this stage normal (ie. non-enthusiast) readers will have put the book down. Like tourists who've stepped into an Indian restaurant only to find themselves surrounded by shaven-headed people in saffron robes chanting 'Hare Krishna', normal readers will realise that they've inadvertently got mixed up with a bizarre cult, whose mysteries they have no desire to share.

Enthusiasts, with their wide-staring eyes (from having stared at the screen too long), their extraordinary prose style (from having read nothing but computer manuals for the last ten years), and their almost complete inability to speak anything that resembles normal English, are the biggest problem confronting computing.

Computing enthusiasts infest all computer magazines, they write all the instructions for computers and their programs, and they run all the businesses that make and sell computers. Walk into the local computer shop and ask a simple question, like 'what should I do with a computer'. You will get the same sort of reception as if you'd tried to buy a condom in the Vatican City.

If you have computers at work you will almost certainly have an enthusiast who hovers around the machines, like an anxious mother hen. Ask your resident enthusiast a simple question, like 'why does it bleep when I do that?', and you will be overwhelmed by details of CPU speeds, register stacks and hardware interrupts.

Yet most of us don't want to know about Mhz, Mb, or MIPS, nor about RAMs, ROMs or EPROMs; most of us would prefer to know what the machine does and what threats to ourselves, our jobs and the ways we live it offers. Computers in the Human Context will tell you.

It's a collection of more than forty essays whose topics range from "Computers and gender" to "The dangers of information control", from "Brazil's independent computer strategy" to "Why computers may never think like people". Some essays are written by enthusiasts who extol the virtues of Information Technology (IT) and explain how new technologies will revolutionise everything from the ways we work and play, to the ways we vote and educate our children.

But the 'enthusiast' essays are fol-
In the Human Context

Irrted by debunking ones which examine the hopeful hi-tech predictions in greater detail. The debunkers both pull-apart the enthusiasts' predictions, looking for alternative 'facts' that imply different futures, and look for the darker side to IT.

The 'information revolution' does, for example, offer the possibility of easy access to unlimited sources of knowledge and information and, in theory, that could mean a far better-informed citizenry. But it's far more likely that the new technologies will lead to far greater centralisation of knowledge and information, and thus greater control over it.

We all know how the junk mail industry has boomed as a result of the growth of computer lists of names and addresses; the same technology allows everyone from ASIO to market research companies to keep more and more detailed files on more and more of us. For example, by the time the Baader-Meinhof gang's attacks came to an end, the West German police computers had a list of possible suspects and sympathisers with over ten million names on it. The Baader-Meinhof propaganda that West Germany was becoming a police state had been fulfilled.

The impact that computers are having on our lives is already enormous. They have radically altered many areas of employment, abolishing some jobs and transforming others into boring ones.

Understanding the implications of technology is essential if the debate isn't going to be dominated by those who have a vested interest in seeing computers used ever more widely.

*Computer in the Human Context* has over 500 pages of fairly small print. Few people are going to read all of it, but its organisation into sections on different themes makes it easy to pick out the essays on topics that interest or affect you. It's a valuable contribution to a debate that the Left needs to get much more involved in. Computers are far too important an area to be left to the enthusiasts.

JIM ENDERSBY is almost a computer enthusiast.

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**Independents' Day**

*(continued from page 9)*

...figure, is controlled by a discipline identical to the control that exists in a party chamber.

Wherever independents or third parties have held the balance of power in our state parliaments, one of two dynamics prevailed: the instability brings a rapid termination of the parliament (South Australia 1970, Tasmania 1972) or the independents become an extension of the government party on a de facto basis (Tasmania and South Australia now). Indeed, the Greens in Tasmania are observing the model of Australian Labor in the 1890s and the early federal parliaments - support in return for concessions. The Tasmanian Greens are displaying a respect for Westminster that reflects the international example of the West German Greens in their attitude to the appurtenances of parliamentary democracy.

The examples here and overseas provide one lesson, completely irrefutable: if there are sufficient independents or third party figures to matter, they can be effective only by taking on the assumptions and practices of the parties. If they make the parliament unworkable, the electorate will sweep them away at the next opportunity. Survival dictates that they become akin to another party in the party system. Somewhere in all this, the point of voting for an independent is lost.

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