Kahn and Wolpe
Feminism and
Materialism

MATERIALIST FEMINISM

A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives

Edited by

Rosemary Hennessy

and

Chrys Ingraham

1997

ROUTLEDGE
New York & London

9

Feminism and Materialism

Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe

. . . By the latter part of 1976, when we first discussed our general ideas for producing a collection of essays dealing with the specificity of women's position from a materialist perspective, a good deal of writing from various "feminist" points of view had been published. Since only a few years earlier there had been virtually no work in this area available at all, any published material obviously filled what was by then a very great need within the "new" women's movement, and indeed was often grasped with eagerness, sometimes regardless of its quality or coherence. Women, irrespective of nationality and class position, were seen to comprise a homogeneous group bound together by one characteristic held in common—their "oppression" in all aspects of life. Descriptions of this oppression covered mental breakdowns, discrimination in jobs and education, sexuality, dependence on men, sex-role stereotyping, and so on. The list is long, and the need evidently existed to bring to light the numerous ways in which oppression was experienced by women themselves. In the urgency to gain this recognition, little concerted effort was made to develop a systematic analysis of the situations described. When such work was begun, there was a tendency to appropriate existing theory, first by pointing to its amnesia where women were concerned, and second, by attempting to insert the "woman question" into existing work and hence to add to rather than transform it. This took place in a variety of areas—in the social sciences, psychology, history, and art history in particular.

At the same time, when feminists who were also marxists began to criticize the failure of marxist theory in coming to terms with the specificity of women's situation, attempts to construct theoretical work in this area tended, like similar projects elsewhere, to draw on existing concepts (in this case the notions of value and productive and unproductive labour) and attempted to "apply" them unproblematically in relation to their own situation. What, however, did distinguish work in these different areas at this point in time was not the nature of the work itself—progressive though it was in relation to what had, or more correctly had not, gone before—so much as the means by which it was produced: generally through group discussion and collective

work, though usually with an awareness also of the needs of women working on their own. Hence, although the nature of knowledge was not yet radically challenged by the "additive" strategy, the ways in which work was produced constituted a transformation of traditional institutionalized modes of acquiring knowledge.

. . . the need for theory formulated itself precisely out of the unifying eclecticism of descriptive and empirical work undertaken under the banner of women's studies. The original aim to produce knowledge out of little or nothing meant that much work of an exploratory nature—work which would by its nature be heterogeneous—needed to be done. There was a necessary and inevitable tendency to draw on a variety of theoretical positions, often without formulating or arguing out the implications of these positions. The problematic potential of such a situation did not, however, emerge as long as the fact of work of any kind whatsoever being done was regarded as progressive. But the expansion of work meant that the very problems raised by its eclectic and largely descriptive nature had to be addressed, and the need for a more precise and explicit articulation of theoretical groundings and a greater rigor in analysis had to be faced. The risks of fragmentation and sectarianism attending such a development are evident, although the related danger of a retreat into "theoreticism"—the construction of theory for its own sake—is perhaps less so. That is why, in arguing the need for a more rigorous and analytical approach to work on the position of women—in arguing, that is, for theoretical work—we have still to question constantly the purpose of such work. The need for theory cannot be taken for granted: theory needs to be justified for each specific situation within which and for which it is produced.

At a conference in London in May 1976 organized around the concept of "patriarchy," at exactly a moment when intellectual work within the women's movement faced a crisis of unity and direction, an urgent call was made for an explanation of the need for theoretical activity. It was—in our view rightly—felt necessary to justify theoretical work of the kind articulated in the papers presented at that conference as oriented toward "the study of the forms of women's oppression both in the present and historically, the attempt to uncover the real basis for such oppression, and to explain why it takes the particular forms it does" (Himmelweit et al. 1976, p. 1). Nevertheless, some of that work did come under heavy criticism on the grounds of its inaccessibility and "elitism"; that is, it was felt that analyses were formulated in such a way as to exclude the majority of the participants from what was being said. It was also felt that any theoretically oriented enterprise by its very nature fails to take into account actions and events ordinary women experience and understand as meaningful. Criticisms such as these rest on a set of demands and positions which, because they tend to be unvoiced in the criticisms as they are formulated, need to be drawn out and examined in the light of their implications for theoretical work within a feminist problematic, however defined.

It is perhaps too easy to meet criticism of theory with counteraccusations of anti-intellectualism. If anti-intellectualism is a relevant conceptualization to employ here, it can be seen as contingently, and not necessarily, related to the subjectivism underlying—albeit often unconsciously—the position adopted by critical tendencies. The injunction to produce "analyses" that make sense of the everyday world is locatable within an epistemology articulated in the "action theory" formulated by Max Weber as embracing

> all human behavior when and in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it. . . . Action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning

> attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course. (Weber 1947, 88)

In its demand for analysis—or perhaps more appropriately, description—of concrete situations, the "subjectivist" position in effect argues for a concentration on specific areas of action that have meaning for the "actors" immediately concerned: in this case, for women. The implication of the action frame of reference is that the world is reducible to and explicable in terms of subjective meanings produced and deployed by actors in concrete situations of face-to-face interaction.

From this position, criticism of theoretical work on the grounds that it does not immediately relate to "reality" may then be seen as an assertion of the impossibility of describing, let alone of analyzing, situations and instances not open to experiential observation. What must follow from the demand for making sense of the everyday world through meaningful experiences is not a rejection of all theory per se. Because such a demand is located within an epistemological base (largely unrecognized in this instance), the rejection is of specific theoretical positions, which may be described as "structural" or "holistic." We should make it clear, however, that in arguing that certain demands to justify theory may actually constitute an effective rejection of particular types of theoretical work, we certainly would not wish to suggest that no justification is required for theoretical activity.

The problematic relationship between theory and "practice" always poses itself quite acutely for the women's movement, precisely because it has been one of the projects of the movement to construct knowledge of the nature and causes of our oppression, with a view to changing that situation. The need for theoretical work arises quite simply from the very urgent and specific need for constructing an analytical and effectual understanding of women's situation. And an intervention in theory or knowledge may certainly be seen as itself constituting a change in the world. But nonetheless a distinction is to be made between theory and theoreticism. Theoreticism is not necessarily inherent in every theoretical enterprise, but tends to have its operation within a series of institutions and institutional discourses. Specifically in our society at present, the production and dissemination of knowledge is largely a specialized activity with its own institutions—a term that embodies not simply a concrete sociological conceptualization, but embraces also the very terms within which appropriate modes of inquiry, limits and boundaries of "subjects," and ways of producing and making use of knowledge are defined. This same institutional discourse incorporates also a mode of address that renders the theoretician as the authoritative source of knowledge. This is what we mean by theoreticism. But it may, even with a full awareness of this pitfall, be the case that the way in which concepts are presented and argued results in apparent inaccessibility. However, the complexity of many of the issues to be grappled with does demand an engagement on the part of the reader as much as of the author, in the sense that both reader and author are involved in the production of theory. In pointing out the dangers of theoreticism, we are calling attention also to the authoritarianism of theoreticist discourse, which constitutes the reader as a passive recipient of the privileged knowledge of another. Theorizing is not a oneway activity. The very way in which the women's movement operates—the means by which women are acquiring and using knowledge about themselves—runs counter to theoreticist tendencies: for example, women's studies is by nature interdisciplinary and hence subverts boundaries between

subjects. Moreover, because of the means by which such knowledge is—or has been—produced, it may call into question the authoritarian character of traditional academic discourse. But, as we have already suggested, such a challenge is a possible and not a necessary accompaniment of the kind of work and ways of working done under the rubric of women's studies: the institutionalized character of its development can mean that work done within women's studies may become isolated from its origins and open to theorizing for its own sake . . .

In arguing for theory in feminist intellectual work, we are arguing for a theoretical contribution of a particular kind . . . materialism. We are here adopting Engels's definition of the term:

> According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. (Engels 1972, 71)

The materialist problematic is based on a conceptualization of human society as defined specifically by its productivity: primarily of the means of subsistence and of value by the transformation of nature through work. United with this is a conceptualization of history as the site of the transformation of the social relations of production and reproduction. As far as an analysis of the position of women is concerned, materialism would locate that position in terms of the relations of production and reproduction at various moments in history. In doing this, one of its central concerns would be the determinate character of the sexual division of labor and the implications of this for power relations between men and women at different conjunctures. At the same time, however, the connection between this set of relations and the social relations specific to modes of production—that is, relations between classes—must also be thought.

It is at this point that the issue at the heart of the attempt to construct a marxist feminism is raised: although we regard its production as a priority, we have to recognize that marxist feminist theoretical work is as yet in its infancy. It is for this reason that we have drawn the theoretical boundaries of our work inclusively around the terrain of materialism and have not focused attention exclusively on marxist feminist analyses; though we very much hope in doing this that some of the issues indicated in this book are of potential importance for a marxist feminist problematic and will be taken up and developed further. The starting point for a marxist—or a classic marxist—analysis, as opposed to a materialist one, would be an account of the laws of motion and transformation of modes of production, especially of the capitalist mode of production, and of the ways in which value is created and capital accumulated within this mode. The problem is that although in our view the subordination of women is to be thus analyzed historically in terms of the relation of women to modes of production and reproduction, this particular issue is scarcely addressed within traditional marxist thought. In this sense the suppression and subordination of women as such is not seen as constituting a problem requiring analysis, beyond the assertion that the prior condition of women's "emancipation" is that they be brought into the sphere of capitalist production. It is no coincidence that the attempt to construct analyses of the specificity

of the subordination of women in capitalism, in terms of orthodox approaches to the labor theory of value through an examination of domestic labor, encountered such obstacles that attempts of this sort have by now been virtually abandoned. This situation suggests that Veronica Beechey is right in her assessment that "a correct analysis of the subordination of women cannot be provided by Marxists unless Marxism itself is transformed" (1971, 61)—transformed, for instance, through an attempt to come to terms properly with the sexual division of labor. It is clear . . . that much marxist analysis, in subsuming women to the general categories of that problematic—class relations, labor process, the state, and so on—fails to confront the specificity of women's oppression. There is often an automatic assumption that there is no need to do so; analysis is applicable to all groups and fractions at any moment in history, and a transformation of capitalism according to marxist precepts would entail the emancipation of all members of society, male or female. Materialist analyses of women's condition, to the extent that they constitute an attempt to transform marxism, constitute also a move toward the construction of a marxist feminism.