Feminist Theories

Roberta Hamilton

Theory is a fancy word that sends most mortals rushing from the room convinced that what is coming is too rarefied, too pretentious, too difficult, or completely irrelevant. But I want to argue three things: first, that theory is very much intertwined with how we make sense of the world in an ordinary, day-to-day way; second, that we can gain something from being more systematic and probing about this activity of 'making sense'; and third, that feminists have made very good use, indeed, of this process.

In their attempts to provide explanations for the ways in which sexual hierarchies are created and sustained as well as strategies for confronting them, feminists have produced an enormous, diverse, and eclectic set of interpretations. Taken together, they constitute an unprecedented historical challenge to the organization of social life, the categories through which that life previously has been apprehended, the ways in which sexual oppression informs and is informed by the many social practices through which people are privileged and disadvantaged, included and excluded, wield and submit to power. This literature in its diversity, internal debates, many languages, and complexity defies synthesis. Yet it is all provoked by unease with current social arrangements and my concern is that we not lose sight of its origins within feminist movements that seek to transform our relationships to each other on the intimate, local and global levels. This paper represents one feminist's attempt to delineate the contours of contemporary feminist theories, their relationship to each other, and to remind us of their collective indebtedness to past and present feminist movement including the movement to bring feminism to the academy.

Let us begin then by examining the proposition that we all use theory and, further, that our lives would be well nigh impossible to live if we did not. In making decisions, in our interactions with others, in carrying out our activities we proceed on the basis of past experience and some form of conscious or unconscious speculation or prediction about the future. Through this process we provide ourselves with explanations about why things turned out as they did, and whether and how future outcomes will be similar or different.

In such ways we navigate our way through our relationships with parents, friends, children, teachers, store clerks, employers, employees, as well as our way through what we have come to think of as bureaucratic red tape: applications for university, jobs and unemployment insurance, filing tax returns et cetera. We make decisions about whether to study or go to the movies, whether to start, continue, alter or end relationships, use contraception, terminate a pregnancy, have a child, cook a meal or eat out. We don't do all of this blindly, although we may often wonder why we did what we did. We know what will irritate our parents, and why; what will make our teenage children apoplectic and what will give them some reason to believe they are understood; we have some understanding of why there are deadlines for applications, and what kinds of marks or skills are needed for admission; when we approach the job market we have some idea of whether we will be offered a job and what sort. To make all these decisions we have at our disposal diverse sets of experience, information and interpretations ranging from ideas about why we and others behave as we do through to explanations about how goods, services and power are distributed in our society.

Often, however, we feel perplexed; we wish we knew more so that we could feel more confident about our decisions; often we may be uncomprehending about how people behave or how 'the system' works. In these situations we have choices: to allow the world to remain a mystery, to accept 'common sense' understandings that are readily available in our own milieu, or to engage in a more conscious and coherent process of observing, researching, reading, thinking, discussing and interpreting. If we choose this 'third way' we will encounter a body of literature — whether about the physical world, on power and politics, on human psychology, on bureaucracy, on the law, on ethics and morality, or on sexuality — that others have produced. The 'answers' we find will always be tentative, and we may have to choose between very different answers or interpretations. Sometimes controversy will have given way to consensus. For a very long time people believed the world was flat; then some iconoclasts came along and made the perfectly ridiculous statement that the world was round. Imagine the surprise of those who once prosecuted these people as heretics if they were to find out that everyone, including present-day members of the same church that conducted the prosecutions, now believe that the earth is round.

Sometimes you may ask a question that no one seems to have asked before. And if there haven't been any questions, then there will not be any answers. You may be a pioneer. More likely, however, some people will have asked the questions before, but they may not be the ones who wrote the books; they may not be those who were in a position to decide that they were 'good' questions. Further, those who are in a position to decide may have a good deal to gain if *nobody* asks those questions. They may even prosecute those who do as heretics, dissenters, or enemies of the state. As Gertrude Stein lay dying she apparently sat up suddenly and asked 'what is the answer?' When she received no answer she rose one last time to ask, 'what then is the question?' The key to viable and convincing answers is in the question.

There is more to theory-making than asking, 'what is the question'? But it is a reasonable place to begin. Marx asked, 'what is the innermost secret of capitalism?' If people get paid for what they *make,* where do capitalists get their profit for further investment? The innermost secret, according to Marx, was that people do not get paid for what they produce. That is an assumption; it seems to be true, but it is not true. They actually get paid for selling their ability to labour — Marx called it labour power — to someone who owns the factory or the mine — 'the means of production' — for the going rate. Capitalists try to keep this wage as low as possible. Over time it can't fall below subsistence for working people as a whole, below what it takes to keep body and soul together, or there would be no more workers. Workers do what they can, through collective action, to raise it above subsistence. But regardless, workers will be paid for their ability to labour, what Marx called their labour power, not for what they have actually produced.

This is the innermost secret of capitalism. Unravelling this secret formed an integral part of Marx's theoretical enterprise: his task was to understand how capitalism worked, what it was that brought workers together to resist exploitation, and how capitalism itself might be superseded by socialism. But the theory didn't just come out of his head. He studied history; he read what economists and philosophers had already written; he observed contemporary German, English and French society; he participated in politics; he read newspapers. People have been arguing about the viability of different aspects of his observations and predictions — his theory — ever since. But many agree that, at the very least, his *questions* took us a giant step forward in understanding our economic system and capitalist society.

So theory-writing (about human society) is about constructing informed interpretations of what has been, of how we arrived where we are, of the *meaning* this has for different participants and then, on that basis, attempting to draw informed predictions about the possible outcomes, and the consequences of each. This last will always be contingent for it will depend on what people *choose* to do; one writer referred to this as "the paradox of human agency."[1] This is to convey the idea that 'what people choose to do' is never straightforward. We live in particular times and places and face varying sorts of constraint and possibility; even what we can imagine we would like to do is shaped by these circumstances. This may not seem like a contestable proposition. But this way of understanding the individual and society actually stands against the ideology of the rational, autonomous individual *man* that has dominated western thought in the past two or three centuries. These ideas are expressed in statements like 'any man [sic] can be President (Abe Lincoln: Log Cabin to president)' or 'we only have ourselves to blame for any misfortune from poverty to illness.' These ideas, with their origins in the Enlightenment and powerful adherents throughout this Age of Capitalism, have not, however, gone unopposed. Marx's challenge is encapsulated in the following famous passage:

> Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.[2]

That is, we are born into particular — if always shifting — sets of relationships, within families and households, communities, and states. Such relationships confer obligation and responsibility and shape access or lack of access to everything from economic resources and power and privilege to care and intimacy.

Feminists have had different ways of conveying this important idea that we are born into particular arrangements which shape all aspects of our lives. Indeed, the question of who and what constrains, oppresses and subordinates women, and how, not only unites feminists but also divides them.

Feminists and the Debate About Human Agency

There are a proliferating and overlapping number of feminist perspectives. My intention is not to contribute to the drawing of firm boundaries between them — boundaries which may only imitate conventional disciplinary boundaries and make it more difficult to ask questions about the origins and sustaining of hierarchical relations between the sexes. Yet, for the student of women's studies it is necessary to know something about the nature and history of these differences. The labels have been used a good deal, and even if labels are increasingly abandoned, it is important to know what is being abandoned and why.

Let us return to Marx's statement and see how feminists of differing persuasions — liberal feminists, socialist feminists, radical feminists, lesbian feminists, lesbian separatists, black feminists and feminists of colour — would elaborate, modify or overturn it. We have to consider also the ways in which feminists (who might also be in one or more of the above categories) have drawn on the insights of psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and linguistic theories in considering this question of (wo)men making their "own history but not under conditions chosen by themselves."

1 Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Somerset 1982),xiii.
2 Karl Marx,*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York 1963),15.

Liberal Feminism

Feminism's history is intertwined with the individualistic ideology of liberalism. When Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, she was in broad agreement with the liberal democratic slogan — Liberty, Equality, Fraternity — of the French Revolution. What she argued was that women too were rational beings with the potential to be fully responsible for their own lives. For her, and for the liberal feminists who came after her, including those of our own time, the circumstances that shaped women's lives were the laws and prejudices that excluded them from the public sphere. During the next two hundred years, with much ebb and flow, women struggled for the right to higher education, entrance into the professions, the right to own property and hold public office and, of course, for suffrage, the right which came to symbolize full citizenship. For liberal feminists the laws that decreed that women were lesser beings than men were a product of ignorance. The expectation was that as men and women educated themselves on this subject, these laws and the prejudices that underwrote them would gradually be replaced by extending equality of opportunity to women as well.

Embedded in Wollstonecraft's writings and in her personal biography are painful clues that this public road to emancipation might not be the whole story[3] Pregnancy, childbirth and childcare both for themselves and for the perplexing obstacles they posed for economic independence, and the apparently unequal investment made by women and men in love: all this seems in retrospect to undercut the rationality and linear progress towards equality suggested by Wollstonecraft's liberalism. These fragmentary aspects of her thought moved to centre-stage in later feminist thought.

Marxism and the Woman Question

The issue of economic independence figures prominently in Marx and Engels' theory on 'the woman question.' They were the first to offer a systematic explanation for the sexual hierarchy that was linked to the means for its transcendence. Engels argued that our early ancestors lived in a state of primitive communism: everyone had to labour to survive and all that was available was shared. With their invention of animal husbandry and cultivation, they created the possibility of accumulating surplus. This was of monumental importance in human history. It opened up the possibility of longer, more secure lives. But the underside of this development was that this surplus could be controlled by some and used in the interests of the few against the many. The surplus would be claimed by the few as their 'Private property.' Some would labour so that others might prosper. Those men with a surplus wanted their 'own' children to inherit the wealth they had amassed. But how would men know who were their 'own' children? Only women have this assurance. The 'solution' was to turn women themselves into private property. If a man 'owned' a woman, she would labour for him, and she would only have sexual relations with him. Thus the idea of 'legitimacy' was born. Legitimacy means that a man's child is the child of 'his' wife.

In this interpretation, class society and male dominance enter onto the world stage together. For Engels these developments constituted the "world historic defeat of the

3 Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Boston 1981); Ann Snitow,"A Gender Diary," in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York, 1990; Rosalyn A. Sydie "From Liberal to Radical: the Work and Life of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Atlantis*, 17 (Autumn 1991).

female sex."[4] It followed, then, that with the abolition of private property (under communism), women would be emancipated. A first step towards this under capitalism was equality between working-class women and men, as economic desperation forced women also to become wage labourers — and hence economically independent. For marxists, then, the "circumstances" which shape women's lives are the relations of private property, and in our era, therefore, capitalist relations. They are the same relations that shape the lives of men, albeit, as we saw, in different ways.

Historically then, liberal feminism and the marxist perspective on 'the woman question' not only had different explanations for, and solutions to, the subordination of women but also they occupied different, and sometimes hostile political territory. Marxists accused feminists of being 'bourgeois,' and potentially dangerous to the working class because sex-specific ideas about oppression would pit working men and women against each other, on the one hand, and might create (false) grounds for 'class collaboration' between upper and working class women on the other. Feminists, for their part, often accused left-wing men and their political parties of being as disinterested — if not as hostile — as their class enemies to the rights of women.

Not until the late 1960s did another feminism develop which put liberal feminism and the marxist perspective on 'the woman question' into dialogue with each other and made fully visible the hitherto unexplored fragments in Wollstonecraft's writings. For this feminism launched a critique not only of the public world but also of the private world — the world of family, love, sexuality, pregnancy and childcare. Furthermore, these feminists argued that it was the interconnections between public and private worlds that were pivotal for understanding the sexual hierarchy. Women's liberation, therefore, depended upon the transformation of both.

But these second-wave feminists soon divided along political and theoretical lines into those calling themselves socialist feminist and those calling themselves radical feminist. For the purpose of this discussion the difference between them centred upon the question of *explanation*: who and what oppressed women and why.

Socialist Feminism

Socialist feminists argued, with marxists, that the relations of capital, and therefore class relations, were pivotal. But they differed from marxists in insisting that the oppressive relations between the sexes were not simply derivative of class, and that, therefore, the interconnections between sex oppression and class exploitation had to be addressed. In other words, for socialist feminists, it was no longer enough to talk about 'the woman question,' and they did not assume that the basis for women's oppression would disappear automatically with the overthrow of capitalism. These feminists focused upon the ways in which the labour done by women in the household — which they called domestic labour — helped sustain the capitalist system. On both a daily and generational level women contributed to the reproduction of labour power by having and rearing children and by looking after husbands between their wearying days (or nights) in mines and factories.[5] As a result, both capitalists and individual men benefited from the unpaid and personal service of women in the home.

Socialist feminists analyzed the interconnections between the public sphere of capitalist and state relations and the private sphere of the family/household. Not only

4 Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York 1942), 57.

5 Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, *The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and their Segregated Work* (Toronto 1984); Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love* (Toronto 1980).

did the complex range of tasks done in the home prop up the capitalist edifice and allow the system to function at a fraction of its 'real' cost, but in many ways the *appearance* of the distinction between private and public created and sustained the unequal relations between men and women throughout the society. Challenging the dominant interpretation, 'man in the work force bringing home the bacon, nurturing woman at home providing sustenance,' socialist feminists uncovered the historically specific development of this relationship during the rise of industrial capitalism. Men of capital together with middle-class social workers, and the better-paid male skilled workers worked in diverse, but mutually reinforcing ways to push women out of the labour force with promises of a 'family wage' for male workers. For women, the results of this long historical manoeuvre had been doubly exploitative and oppressive. Denied access to higher education and the professions, women were also pushed out of the better-paying jobs; the worst paid, and least protected jobs remained 'open' to them. Second, most men never earned a 'family wage' but were nonetheless expected to support a wife and children. Women compensated for inadequate wages by increasing household labour, taking in boarders, laundry and other people's children, and putting the needs of others before their own. Third, men earned the (main) wage and this relative privilege reinforced their power over their wives and children. Men were exploited in the work force, and they responded by flexing their muscles, literally and figuratively, at home. If they stayed at home.

Socialist feminists pointed to the final irony that when men deserted, as they often did, women, encouraged from birth to believe that men would care for them and their children, had to earn a living in the capitalist marketplace with "one hand tied behind their back" — no marketable skills, denied access to education, shut out of better-paying jobs, and with no social supports for child care. The family wage, portrayed as a form of security for working-class people, was unmasked as a fraud. Primarily the *idea* of family wage functioned as a rationale for excluding women from better-paying jobs and secure incomes, for paying them less, hiring them last and firing them first, and as a justification for women's sole responsibility for childcare and housework coupled with a lifetime of personal service to a particular man. No wonder that sociologists and socialist feminists Pat and Hugh Armstrong wanted to call *The Double Ghetto* (their path-breaking book on women's work in Canada) *Everyone Needs a Wife.*

During the 1970s, socialist feminism developed through heated debates and open dialogue with radical feminism, quickly taking on board many of its insights, while eschewing many of its explanations.

Radical Feminism

Radical feminists did not dispute the exploitative nature of capitalist relations but they argued that, buried deeper in human society, both historically and psychically, were the relations of domination and subordination between the sexes. Writing at the dawn of the contemporary women's movement, Shulamith Firestone located these differences between men and women in 'nature's' unequal allotment of reproductive tasks. Women bore, suckled and raised children, while men had the time and opportunity to develop social institutions — including the 'family' — through which they were able to appropriate power and control over women and children.[6] The

6 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York 1970).

bottom line was that men oppressed women, and overthrowing that oppression constituted the primary struggle in which feminists should engage.

Radical feminism was neither static nor monolithic however. As the critique developed many radical feminists began to locate men's power over women in their ability to control women sexually, and to develop the institutions which ensure continuing control.[7] Adrienne Rich coined the famous phrase 'compulsory heterosexuality' to encapsulate all those social and cultural imperatives that closed off all sexual options for women except monogamous heterosexual permanent coupling — usually called marriage.[8] In a world of unequal power relations between men and women, compulsory heterosexuality ensured not only women's sexual dependence upon men but also their economic, social and psychological dependence. From this perspective — sometimes called lesbian feminism, though it was by no means confined to lesbians — women's lives in patriarchal society were shaped by the myriad legal institutions and cultural messages that enjoined women (from the time they were young girls) to look to men for sexual satisfaction, personal validation, and life-long companionship, and to accept their subordination to men in general and their husbands in particular as part of the 'bargain.'[9] From this critical position some lesbian feminists took the short but dramatic step to a lesbian separatist position that women should no longer try to change the whole society but rather find ways to live apart from men and build the new society alone.

More generally, early radical feminism was eclipsed by what has been called cultural feminism — overlapping with, but not confined by a separatist perspective.[10] Women should build their own institutions from health clinics to women's shelters, to small businesses, art galleries, publishing houses, and magazines. The rationale for these developments varied widely: for some it was a way of building a permanent women's world; for others it was a refuge from the pain of day-to-day struggle with men; for others such autonomous organizing was intended to build a power base from which the whole society could be transformed.

What is key for the discussion on human agency is that radical, lesbian and cultural feminists argued that women are 'born into' arrangements which forced them to live their lives in subservience to men. These feminists might alter Marx's statement to something like: *Men* make their own history; women have no history of their own. Socialist feminists agree that most men of all social classes have the opportunity in both their intimate and work lives to dominate and oppress women. Yet they also argue that men's and women's lives are shaped by the relations of capital, relations which privilege a few at the expense of the many.

Anti-racist Feminisms

Women of colour and black feminists led the way in insisting that liberal, socialist and radical feminists failed to identify the key circumstances produced by racism that shape our lives: that is, racism produces lives of privilege for some and brutal oppression and exploitation for others. For these feminists, an understanding of what shapes women's lives must intertwine an analysis of racism with the Marxist focus on class and the radical feminist focus upon the sexual hierarchy: "[t]he circum-

7 Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (London 1984).
8 Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* (Summer 1980).
9 See *Resources for Feminist Research* (Sept-Dec 1990).
10 Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis 1989).

stances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" must include centrally those relations that are the living legacy of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery. Furthermore, they have argued — in opposition to the radical feminist perspective on sexual hierarchy — that while these relations of racism shaped the lives of men and women differently, they did not always or necessarily privilege men over women[11]

This challenge initially seemed to create irreconcilable differences among feminists. Michèle Barrett, for example, argued that the argument that racism must have 'equal billing' with class and sex dislodged the claim of socialist feminists to have a coherent theory of inequality.

> [E]xisting theories of social structure, already taxed by attempting to think about the inter-relations of class and gender, have been quite unable to integrate a third axis of systemic inequality into their conceptual maps.[12]

Yet the response to anti-racist feminisms has been taken up by feminists from across the spectrum who have redrawn their theoretical perspectives and political agendas. For example, by looking at the lives of men and women in particular historical and social contexts, some feminists have abandoned the question of whether class, race, or sex is the more salient relation for analysis in favour of understanding the historical specificity of complex relations of power.[13]

Feminism and Psychoanalysis

Some feminists have turned to psychoanalytic theories to explain how resolutely we are "born into" particular arrangements.[14] Starting from Freud's assertion that "women are made, not born," the focus here is upon how infants become gendered, how their sexual preference is shaped, and how they take their place within the hierarchical gendered order. What is particularly pertinent here is how we come to feel ourselves to be men or women as an intrinsic part of our being; this means that we are not just forced to be dominant or submissive, but that we are complicit in our subordination; we collaborate because it feels more comfortable than it would to resist. To put it more strongly, women who resist feel anxiety and therefore guilt, and women who resist make men feel anxious about their 'masculinity.'[15]

Freud's emphasis was upon the key role played by the Oedipus complex in the making of male identity. Little boys take their mothers (because they are the primary caregivers) as their first love object. When they realize unconsciously that these feelings bring them into potential conflict with their fathers, they experience great anxiety — castration anxiety — that their stronger and more powerful fathers will do them some injury for daring to compete with them. In the typical Freudian formulation, the small boy gives up his love for his mother, incorporates his father's standards within himself (the superego) and is 'bought off,' if you like, by the promise of a

11 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Talking Feminist Talking Black* (Toronto 1988); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York 1984); *Feminist Review* 20, 22, 23; Makeda Silvera, *Fireworks: The Best of Fireweed* (Toronto 1986); Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge 1991).

12 Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today* (London 1988), xii.

13 Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change* (Toronto 1988).

14 See the Review Essays "Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Current Controversies," *Signs* (Winter 1992), 435-466.

15 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York 1988).

woman of his own when he grows up. Freud was much less sure about what happened to the girl child during this period but, nonetheless, he came to believe that little girls also have their first love affair with their mother.[16] They soon realize, however, that they cannot possess the mother because they lack the necessary organ — the penis; hence Freud's famous — even notorious — insistence that women's identity is shaped profoundly by penis envy.

Feminists working with the insights of psychoanalysis have not simply accepted Freud's formulations. Rather, they have situated them within a societal context which announces to girl and boy children alike that one needs a penis to have power in a patriarchal world. They argue that all children will desire everything — penis, breasts, to have a baby (a wish often expressed by boy children as well as girl children). Only in a patriarchal world will the desire for a penis become overvalued, and the desire for breasts and pregnancy become undervalued.[17]

Some feminists — following the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan — have located the formation of masculine and feminine identities not in the process of bodily maturation and Oedipal complexes, but in the child's introduction to what Lacan called the Symbolic Order.[18] This symbolic order includes language — for words are the symbols through which we name everything around us, and perhaps the most important way in which we communicate with others. What conveys power in this Symbolic Order is not the penis as such but rather its symbol, the Phallus. For the boy child the Phallus represents the power that he comes to realize will accrue to him because he is male; the girl child's identity is designated by the boy child (and by her) by 'what she lacks.' What is important here is that there is no 'essential' meaning or power attached to maleness. Rather this power is defined and conveyed by the whole system of discourse in a society — that is, the language, gestures and all the symbols that convey power for some and lack of power for others. For example, if a father has a special chair in the living room that is bigger and more comfortable than anyone else's including the mothers's, this is not lost on the child; this is part of the 'discourse' that defines not only the hierarchy of male-female power but also introduces the child to his/her own place in this order.

Discourse Analysis

Lacan's ideas have been extremely influential, in part because they merge with those of some other major late twentieth-century theorists in highlighting the importance of discourse in not only creating human societies, but in providing whatever access we can have to discussing or understanding society. But these 'discourses,' which include but are not restricted to language, do not tell us 'the truth' about the world. For they are thoroughly informed not only by prevailing power relations — of class, race, sex, age, heterosexism — but also by a kind of common-sense rationale for accepting those power relations as given — the only way things could be.[19]

This discourse also provides the means for constructing our own identities — identities which are not 'fixed' as in the expression 'the real me' but rather are fragmented, changing, and contradictory. Freud argued that our psyches are a kind

16 Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures* (New York 1965).

17 Gad Horowitz, *Repression: Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Toronto 1977); Roberta Hamilton, "The Collusion with Patriarchy: A Psychoanalytic Account," in R. Hamilton and M. Barrett (eds.), *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (London 1986).

18 Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (New York 1974).

19 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York 1980).

of life-long battle ground between the id, ego and superego — between need, desire, possibility and conscience. These more recent theories of discourse accept this idea of the fragmented self. But they shift the ground for explanation away from the body as such to the way that the body — including need and desire — is constituted by the discourse, again as a lifelong, fragmented, contradictory, illusory process. Why illusory? Because discourse can never capture 'reality.' This would be an impossible task for two related reasons. First the terms of a discourse are always time-bound, space-bound, culture-bound — bound by the multiplicities of power relations that inform daily life. Second, there is no 'pure' reality outside of what is represented in discourse. There is no 'something' outside of that which is already interpreted — except that which is to be interpreted in some future moment. In this sense, discourse does not represent reality; it shapes and creates that-which-is-believed-to-be reality.

Central to understanding how this works is to understand the role of language. Words do not simply describe or identify. Words make distinctions and create oppositions. They tell us what is encompassed in a symbol and, by implication, what is not. Think of the words 'hot' and 'cold.' The very words structure how we describe everything from soup to sex. Yet, as we know, temperature comes on a continuum, and 'hot' and 'cold' are always relative. Hot and cold, when applied to sexual activity, carry with them the connotation of lust and evil that have so informed western civilization and the presumed identities of men and women. Medieval Catholic writers depicted women as full-of-lust waiting to tempt unsuspecting men into a life of sin. Later Protestants writers developed a language about women that described them as asexual; it was men who had to control their own lust. Thus a discourse that uses opposing concepts like hot and cold, rational and irrational (emotional), or aggressive and passive, depicts men and women as either one way OR the other, and ignores all the points on the continuum that are in between.

Some feminists have drawn upon this critique of the binary oppositions of language to expand upon the idea of fragmented and shifting identities. Our language helps create the sense that our identities are not only fixed, but gender-determined. When feminists deconstruct this language they open the space for consideration of identities that are not bound by biological sex — or race, age, sexuality or ethnicity or any other category that we use to fix and freeze identities. If we come back to the Lacanian idea that woman is defined by what she lacks — that is by what is *not* male — we can see how this works more generally at the level of language. The binary categories of language define the world in terms of oppositions. Language is like that. If we say something is 'beautiful' we are implicitly comparing it to something-that-is-not beautiful.

Women are what men are not: if we say 'men are aggressive' we are comparing them directly and indirectly to those — women — who are not; in like manner, if men are rational, women are irrational; if men independent, women are dependent. The point is not that men and women 'really' are this way, although in particular times and places they may behave so or they may be believed to be so. Again, let us reiterate, that the discourse does not convey 'reality'; rather it constitutes what appears to be reality. Furthermore, women who are not perceived to be passive and emotional may be defined as 'not real women' and men who are not perceived to be aggressive may be called effeminate! In such ways the discourse permits acknowledgement that men and women do not always conform to these oppositions. But the point is that this acknowledgement is made only in the terms of the discourse itself: the categories are retained but the individual people are labelled as deviants. In this

sense we can speak of discourses as 'closed systems'; they make thought difficult which is not consonant with itself.

Using this kind of analysis, feminists have argued that identities are not fixed, but rather are constructed continually in particular times and places. Nor are they unified but rather fragmented — in some circumstances we feel ourselves to be strong and powerful, in others weak and fragile, in others perhaps creative, stupid, lackadaisical, determined — the list is yours to make and remake. If this is so, the argument goes, how can we then talk about women and men as if these categories mean something that we can all agree upon? This kind of analysis which explores the ways in which language constructs thought has been called post-structuralism.

Feminism and Post-Structuralism

For feminist post-structuralists the task has been to

> ...unmake the chain of binary oppositions — masculine/feminine, market/non-market, public/private, waged/non-waged — and rethink the categoricalism that cantonizes gender, class, race, ethnicity and nationality, so as to see past the conceptual signage, which has illuminated the previously invisible but now threatens to obstruct our view of the living space beyond.[20]

The argument in this excerpt from Joy Parr's *The Gender of Breadwinners* is two-pronged. She acknowledges that it was necessary for feminists to use the category 'woman' in order to notice that previous 'knowledge' had been all about men and to initiate the process through which women would be included. Women had been invisible — present only in what was left unexamined, unexplored, unstated. But this process of 'making visible' must not simply recapitulate the pattern of androcentric perspectives and continue to use these categories — men and women — as though they really described the world.

For by doing this, we fall into two errors. First we perpetuate the categories of the discourse that once left us invisible. We refer to women and men *as if* we knew what they were and we perpetuate the oppositional character of those identities. Women still are defined by what men are not — even though we may now place more value on 'what men are not.' Second, we assume that when we use the word 'woman' we are referring to all women; we collapse the differences among women that accrue from class, racism, heterosexism, imperialism, even the idiosyncrasies of taste and talent. In this way the theoretical challenges to second-wave feminism from women of colour, black women, disabled women, lesbians, bisexuals, and older women converged with those of post-structuralism. The command is 'do not tell me what I am.'

How, then, might feminist post-structuralists respond to the issue of human agency, and in particular to Marx's statement that we make our history "under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past"? The difference from Marx could be located in the definition post-structuralists might give to "circumstances": they want to look at the process through which the categories of male/female, black/white, work/home, public/private are constituted in time and place, and how those categories, as they are defined at any particular time, contribute to the range of possibility and constraint. Furthermore, unlike Marx and most

20 Joy Parr. *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990), 8.

feminists before them, they argue that the ways in which male and female are defined are also implicated in all other categorization — whether of class, race, sexual preference, etc. How, for example, has 'working-class' as a category in the language informed shifting definitions of masculinity, and through inclusion and exclusion, shifting definitions of femininity? At the same time, how are gender definitions infused by notions of class?

Language appears 'innocent,' in that it appears simply as an instrument through which our ideas can be expressed. Students often express this with the statement "I know what I think but I just can't get it down on paper." But let us take a familiar example to see how language does not express our preexisting thought, but actually shapes that thought. The term 'working mother' has come into the language in the last twenty years with the great influx into the formal waged economy of women who have children. Embedded in the phrase, implicitly, are a whole host of shifting, value-laden gendered and classed characters. Counterposed to 'working mothers' are 'women who don't work' (and who just keep house and look after children), and the victims of working mothers, 'neglected children' (those whose mothers do not 'just' look after them). Implicit in the phrase 'working mothers' are also a cast of male characters. Whoever heard of a 'working father' or a child who was neglected because his father worked? 'Working mother' can also designate those women who take jobs away from men — contributing to the category therefore of 'unemployed men' — fathers who don't work and therefore are, by definition, 'bad fathers.' Furthermore, 'working mother' is more likely to be used with reference to women who do certain kinds of 'class-related' occupations that have relatively low monetary rewards and little status. Women who work in other sorts of 'class-related' occupations may be defined as 'professionals' rather than 'working mothers.' Here we see the operation of a kind of implicit 'override clause': sometimes gender terms take precedence, other times class terms, or racist terms, or terms referring to women's sexual lives.

Words do not just say what they appear to say; they carry and create shifting identities, possibilities and constraints. Joy Parr's description of gendered identities during a 1949 garment workers' strike in Paris, Ontario captures the feminist post-structuralist perspective: "gendered identities were masks that changed in the shifting light and shadow of the dispute — mercurial, unpredictable in the effects upon public sympathy."[21]

Feminist Theories and Social Change

These theories about human society are also, explicitly or implicitly, theories about the possibilities for social transformation and, in particular, of emancipation for those subordinate, oppressed, exploited and excluded. Indeed, these theories play a role in producing or complicating their own predictions about the future. For when theories present ideas which confirm peoples' sense of grievance, they also help to legitimate their resistance. For example, Marx's theories provided people throughout the world with an ideological legitimation to engage in revolutions. Catholics in Latin America intertwined their religious beliefs with an understanding of Marxism to argue that the Church should be on the side of the oppressed *in this life* — what has been called 'the preferential option of the poor.'[22] This complex set of beliefs — called liberation theology contributed to widespread forms of social protest as a new generation of

21 *Ibid.*, 113.
22 Gregory Baum, *Liberation Theology and Marxism* (Montreal 1986).

Church workers challenged the Church's age-old admonition that entrance into heaven depended upon acceptance upon the hierarchy of this world. While few theories — perhaps none — have unsettled the powerful as much as marxism, feminism arguably is running a close second. As women the world over increasingly question their subordination, victimization and exclusion they appropriate, revise and develop theoretical perspectives to legitimate their struggles.

The question is this: do some feminist theories understand the world in ways that trifle or negate the role of conscious human intervention — agency — in bringing about social change? Marxist theory argues that the working class has the potential to become a conscious agent of liberation. The initial site for the development of a shared consciousness of exploitation is the point of production — that is, the workplace. But socialist feminists have argued that women's collective and specific oppression is located in the private sphere, and in the inter-relationship between private and public. This suggests that marxism, left to its 'own devices,' does not provide sufficient legitimation, let alone an adequate strategy, for the 'rising of the women.'[23] Socialist feminists insist that women organize around their own interests in the workplace and that their demands address their interests as mothers and wives as well as their interests as waged workers. This involves a critique not only of relations between workers and employers but also of the relations between men and women in both public and intimate spaces.

Some radical feminist theorists draw such an unyielding account of women's subordination and victimization that they have difficulty explaining how women ever came to resist including, ironically, how the women's movement itself could ever have mobilized. Where was the space for the development of rebellious ideas, let alone the possibility for acting upon them? In a similar way, those feminists who have drawn upon, elaborated and critiqued Lacan's idea of the child's linguistic entrance into Symbolic Order seem, at times, to create a closed system, impervious to change. Luce Irigaray has argued that women are excluded from the discourse of the symbolic order. If we are to glimpse what women think or feel we must attend to the silences in their discourse, to the ways in which they may parody what men say — indeed as a theorist she repeats what male theorists have written, playing on their words to make her subtle point. From this perspective we may have access to what women imagine, but even these triumphs of imagination are, necessarily, entangled within masculine discourse.[24] Does such a perspective leave a space for women's resistance?

Feminist post-structuralists have also been accused by other feminists of pulling the rug out from under the women's movement.[25] If identities are fractured, if ideas of 'women' and 'men' must be deconstructed rather than accepted as given, what are the grounds for feminist movement? If people are going to mobilize politically, they have to mobilize around or about something. In the women's movement the mobilization has been — it sounds self-evident to say it — around and about and for women. What happens when the rallying cries about women's oppression, their common interests and needs, indeed, their victimization are invalidated?

23 Meredith Tax, *The Rising of Women* (New York 1980).

24 Maggie Berg, "Luce Irigary 'Contradictions': Post-Structuralism and Feminism," *Signs* (Autumn 1991).

25 Somer Brodribb, *A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (North Melbourne 1992); Nancy Harstock, "Foucault and Power: A Theory for Women?" in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York and London 1990); Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Post-feminist' Age* (New York 1991).

Although recent theoretical developments informed by post-structuralism and post modernism challenge the concept of 'identity' and therefore 'woman' in ways which appear, to some others, to shake the foundations for women's movement, the questions about 'what a woman is' informs older perspectives as well. That is, the disjunction between many renditions of liberal, radical and socialist feminisms and their poststructuralist critics has been overstated by those on both sides of the debate.

For the category 'woman'— what she is and what she should do — lies at the heart of most feminist analysis, albeit in different ways. Liberal feminists, dating back to Mary Wollstonecraft, argued that if women appeared less rational, less interested in the world, less given to philosophical thought and political activity, the explanation resided in the ways in which women were denied the opportunity for education. Women would be as 'rational' as some men (and as irrational as some others), if they were treated similarly in social terms. The 'essence' of woman, no more than man was to be found in their genetic makeup, their biology or their reproductive capacities. In the terms of the time, therefore, Wollstonecraft challenged the category 'woman' and, also, although less systematically, the category 'man' as well. For men, Wollstonecraft lamented, were disappointing in their inattention to love and the emotional life. Contemporary liberal feminists argue that there are no tasks in the public sphere — including armed combat roles in the military — for which women are unsuitable. At the same time they have argued for parental leave for fathers after birth, adoption, and in the case of children's illness. To the extent that we are defined by what we do, and what we have the capacity to do, therefore, liberal feminists have challenged dominant notions about women and men. Far from being discrete categories, women and men are more likely to overlap in their motivations, goals, and talents.

Socialist feminists went further than liberal feminists in challenging the concept 'woman' as a universal category. Following Marx they argue that the consciousness of human beings reflects the activities in which they engage and the accompanying relationships they create. Women in different historical periods and different social classes not only are different from each other, but in *some* respects share more with the men of their time and station than they do with other women. Furthermore, by analyzing the interconnections between the private and public sphere, through revealing and challenging the attempts to relegate women to the first, insisting that the tasks done in the household constituted "more than a labour of love," and by renaming that activity 'domestic labour' or 'work' socialist feminists challenged the dominant ideas that held that male and female nature and identities were discrete.

Early radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone argued that the differences between men and women resided only in their different roles in reproduction. While these differences had been crucial in creating social inequality, increasing control over pregnancy and birth as well as the promise of reproductive technology could (and should) eliminate the social consequences of these differences. The categories 'woman' and 'man' would cease to matter after the 'socialist feminist revolution.' Some later radical feminists do reclaim the category 'woman,' suggesting that she possesses certain qualities and attributes that distinguish her in important and irreconcilable ways from men. At the same time, however, many radical feminist analysis increasingly address the question of diversity among women — diversity resulting from racism, age, ethnicity, religious conviction and sexuality.

Some of the most trenchant criticisms of the assumption that there is a category 'woman' that may be used in theoretical discussions and political mobilization come from women of colour in the first world, and women in non-western societies. Their

analyses expose the chasms between dominant ideologies about 'women' and the lives that women lead, the assumptions of white feminists about female exploitation and oppression, and the centrality of racism, first-world imperialism, and cultural specificity in structuring their lives as women. In such ways they have challenged any attempt to universalize the category 'woman' and to counterpose the category 'woman' to 'man.' Paradoxically however — paralleling the air-tight categories 'men' and 'women' created by some radical feminists, some of these writers produce discrete racialized identities of their own — categories of white and black, women of colour and white women. The title *Black Feminist Thought* suggests another category 'white feminist thought.' But most of these writers have an explicit goal: to challenge racism and the ways in which racism creates hierarchical categories 'white' and 'black.' In the challenges to white feminists to confront their own racism, they insist that identities based on racial difference are politically and socially created. Furthermore, by looking at the ways in which racism and multi-national capitalisms informs people's lives, they also breakdown any sense of discrete categories of 'man' and 'woman.'

Seen in this light, the feminist post-structuralist assault on the concept of fixed 'identity' of any sort — woman/man, white/black, straight/gay — does not go against the grain of most previous feminist analysis. When Denise Riley says at the end of "Am I that Name?" that there are times when we need to mobilize "as if" there were women she puts into words an implicit assumption underlying much previous feminist analysis and action: women should not be defined by their biology; their life chances should not be defined by their relationships to men; the social constraints that have been legitimated by biological difference from men — whether women's size and physical strength, their role in reproduction, their capacity to bear children — must be challenged. All this suggests — in line with Riley and other feminist poststructuralists — that human beings will be defined and will define themselves less than previously by ascribed characteristics of sex.

All this suggests that the debate about 'identity' between those employing the methods of post-structuralism and other feminists is more contrived than real. Yet that is not the whole story. Post-structuralism offers a critique of the concept 'identity,' subject and subjectivity that challenges previous feminist assumptions. For post-structuralism, identities are not the properties of human beings, as such, but rather they are animated within and through discourses. The focus of analysis shifts from 'the subject in history' and the relationships between them to an analysis of the discourse. This involves attending to how the structure of language informs thought and constructs identities. Not only what is said, but what is not said; not just what is said but how it is said; not just what can be said but that which cannot be said: this is what constitutes the focus for post-structuralist analysis. Identities, therefore, are never fixed, but are always shifting and fragmented. When Riley critiques the subject 'woman' in history, it is in the context of a perspective which dislodged the very concept 'subject' from a privileged place in social analysis.

There are clearly tensions here. If the portrait of female subordination is painted in unequivocal terms, there is no way to explain or, indeed, hope for transformation. If, on the other hand, female identity across culture, time, space, situation, even moment-to-moment is completely contingent, what are the grounds or purposes of a women's movement?[26]

26 Denise Riley, *'Am I that Name?': Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Minneapolis,

This question — about the grounds and purposes for women's movements — is a poignant one for feminist scholars. For the remarkable and exponential development of feminist scholarship, perspectives, theories, and creative writing in the last twenty-five years originates with the questions, demands and goals of the contemporary women's movement. Understanding this important convergence is also a theoretical/historical undertaking. In seeking answers, feminists have taken up the question of the 'origins' of the gender hierarchies — not just the contemporary 'causes' and questions about "in whose interest" such hierarchies are sustained — but also questions about 'in the beginning' origins. How contingent are the categories 'men' and 'women'? To what extent do they encapsulate and describe biological and sociological 'realities'? How do we begin to answer those who claim that feminists are tampering with the laws of God and nature when they critique and seek to transform the relations between men and women? How serious a challenge to hitherto existing, androcentric 'knowledge' do feminists pose?

'Origins' of Gender Hierarchy

In seeking to explain the pervasiveness, and therefore the origins of female subordination, feminists confront vast multi-cultural, theological, biological, archeological, and anthropological literatures which assume and justify gender hierarchy in terms of biological differences, sexual temperaments, divine ordinance, and natural 'proclivities.' The argument about biological difference has been the most difficult because such differences seem to be irreducibly 'natural.' Indeed, a challenge to biological difference has often appeared ridiculous, a joke guaranteed to elicit laughter. In their practices and claims to domination, men appeared to have nature on their side. While that assumption was once much easier to make, it is not without its vocal proponents today, both among the powerful and those with little power, and among men and women.

Physical Size and Male Bonding

Let us look then at two different kinds of biological arguments — or rationalizations — for gender hierarchy that continue to enjoy broad consensus. On average, and in any particular society, men are bigger and physically stronger. This has led to a set of explanations which have insisted that men are more aggressive, and even that they have been genetically programmed to act collectively — through what has been called male bonding — in order to impose their will on women. Lionel Tiger is perhaps the best known spokesperson of this position which, at times, appears strikingly disingenuous: even if women want to become political leaders they cannot "because males are strongly predisposed to form and maintain all-male groups, particularly when matters of moment for the community are involved."[27] This was clearly a message that many wanted to hear. If biology is necessary — "sex differences are perforce related to male bonding and...male bonding is related to breeding advantage"[28] — we may as well sit back and enjoy.

1987); Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York and London 1989); Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*

27 Lionel Tiger, *Men in Groups* (New York 1969), 75.

28 *Ibid.*, 46.

Ideas like Tiger's which attempt to explain gendered social practices in terms of biological differences — part of the whole field of sociobiology — tend to be used to confirm rather than question the socio-historical relations between the sexes. As a result, feminists have tended to reject not only the specific findings of sociobiology but the whole field of inquiry.[29] Sociobiologist Sarah Hrdy has argued that this is short-sighted and that there is a great deal to be learned about the evolution of human society from sociobiology.[30] Sociobiology is not inherently 'sexist,' she argues; rather its practitioners have been sexist. When the evolution of the female differs from the evolution of the male, the female is treated as an irrelevant deviation from the norm.

A good example, Hrdy argues, is the female potential to be multi-orgasmic. Sociobiologists have regarded this as an 'aberration,' with no importance for the survival of the species. Hrdy argues that if they took their own precepts seriously — that there are no genuine flukes — they would have had to explore the reasons for this adaptation. Without going into her particular explanations, what is germane here is her argument that the female of the species has also evolved in a way to maximize her survival and the survival of her children. This has involved the development of competition as an adaptation to environment. Males, she demonstrates, have no genetic monopoly on competitive forms of behaviour.

Feminist archaeologists and anthropologists have been in a good position to argue that the usual assumptions of sociobiology are the assumptions of an ideology of male supremacy. By approaching societies with a set of critical questions about the distribution of resources, the relations of power and the division of labour, feminists have discovered that in many human societies women provide, in one way or another, most of the food necessary for the survival of themselves, the men and their children. They were not as impressed as earlier observers that men hunted and occasionally brought back the slaughtered animals for meat — particularly when hunting might supply as little as ten per cent of that society's food supply. Meanwhile, the women and older children were gathering, and perhaps planting and cultivating, the food that supplied the rest. Furthermore, they noticed that the women often worked together to do this, developing cooperative strategies in order to care for children, provide the necessities of life, and create a material and social culture. Recently, some anthropologists have also speculated that men did not even have the monopoly on hunting.

The differences in physical size between men and women and the surmised differences in genetic aptitude for bonding have not impressed feminist researchers trying to explain the near-universality of sexual hierarchies. But there is another set of biological differences that feminists have taken more seriously in their quest for explanations: namely, those differences related to the reproduction of the species.

The Sexual Division of Reproductive Labour

Women do almost all reproductive work; indeed men's role has been necessary, but so invisible that uncovering their participation was a rather late development in human history. That our early ancestors managed to link two events — conception and birth — which come nine months apart, and are of such different order — is quite mind-boggling. Most children — quite sensibly — do not believe it when they are first told.

29 Ruth Hubbard, "The Political Nature of 'Human Nature'" in Deborah L. Rhode (ed.), *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Differences* (New Haven 1990).

30 Sarah Hrdy, *The Woman Who Never Evolved* (Cambridge 1981), 198.

The link between women, pregnancy, child-birth and lactation has meant that if women do not do the reproductive labour, it will not be done. These reproductive differences have underwritten an assumption that this natural division of reproductive labour has an autonomous life of its own, impervious to the social environment in which it occurs. Further, these differences have provided a point of departure for arguing that the hierarchical relations between men and women derive from this division of labour. There are several major problems with the two-pronged leap which take us first from 'women have the babies' to 'and therefore women's lives are grounded in nature's imperatives,' and from there to 'and therefore women are destined to be subordinate to men.'

First, having babies is not a purely 'natural' activity. Women have the babies. But although only women *can* have babies, they do not always choose to do so. Throughout the ages women have tried to control their fertility, and often these attempts were thwarted through religious teachings, law, and the suppression of information.[31] In Canada it was illegal, until 1969, for doctors to provide their patients with birth control information and for pharmacists to sell contraceptive devices.[32] Quebec's recent programs include financial 'incentives' for parents for each child that they have. The historical record — particularly in France which has a long record of providing such inducements — indicates that if women have their price it is more than any government has yet been prepared to offer. Clearly, women cannot always be counted upon to produce the number of children those in power wish them to produce.[33] Women have remained celibate for life or for periods of time; they have loved women rather than men; they have developed and practiced methods of birth control; they have self-aborted or sought help from others. African women, on board galley ships en route to America as slaves, are known to have killed their new-borns rather than have them live the lives to which they were destined.

Second, while some women have refused to bear or suckle children or have been coerced or persuaded to do so, others have been encouraged or forced not to reproduce. State regulations have sometimes stipulated that women must be sterilized before qualifying for social welfare; third-world women have been treated like laboratory animals by first-world pharmaceutical companies engaged in contraceptive research. Also, infanticide has been a widespread practice in many societies; we know little about how women felt about this, but what we do know suggests that there is always a level of economic or political coercion.

Third, the assumption of 'naturalness' neglects the enormous variations in the conditions under which women in different historical periods, cultures and social classes have children.[34] Sometimes the economic and political organization of the society facilitates their reproductive work; other times there are enormous obstacles. In most cases, no special privileges greet pregnant women; if they are living in destitution, they will bear their children in destitution; if they live in countries at war, they will remain at risk; if they are subject to racist ideologies and practices, pregnancy will not alleviate them. In Canadian society, pregnancy was considered

31 Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York 1976).

32 Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren, *The Bedroom and the State: The Changing Practices and politics of Contraception and Abortion in Canada, 1880-1980* (Toronto 1986).

33 Jill Vickers, "At his mother's knee: Sex/Gender and the Construction of National Identities," in Greta Hofman Nemiroff (ed.), *Women and Men* (Toronto 1987).

34 Pat Armstrong and Hugh Armstrong, "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards Feminist Marxism," in *The Politics of Diversity*.

sufficient grounds for dismissal from paid employment until recently and, even now, these social practices die hard.

Fourth, there has been a related assumption that reproductive labour, stemming as it did from the 'natural' division of reproductive labour, was also 'natural.' This assumption served to link women more with the animal kingdom than with the productive labour of (primarily male) human beings. Mary O'Brien was the first to argue systematically that although women who carry their infants to term, do not have a *choice* about engaging in reproductive labour, this does not mean that they do not actively and consciously engage in this labour. Through this labour, women mediate their relationship with their children, and more generally between the generations and continued life on the planet. Reproductive labour is then human labour, actively entered into, and like productive labour, shapes the consciousness of women so engaged.[31]

Fifth, although the link between women and childbearing was produced by nature, the link between women and childcare (outside of lactation) is humanly created. Men may actually *do* very little of the world's nurturing work. But their biology is not the reason; rather their biology has been invoked as *rationale* for this lack of participation. Enough men have done enough of this work to indicate that their relative absence from this line-of-work is not a result of genetic programming.

Sixth, the link between child-bearing and female subordination is clearly an invention — a highly ingenious invention — developed in most, though perhaps not all, human societies.[32] That the forms of female subordination are neither universal nor uniform constitute sufficient grounds for believing that the hierarchical relations between men and women are socially constructed. But even those feminists who insist most strenuously that women have always been subordinate and that the roots of this subordination are to be found in the division of reproductive labour, argue that this does not mean that women must remain subordinate. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone argued that women's subordination, stemming from nature's unequal allotment of reproductive tasks, was universal. But, in her words, "...to grant that the sexual balance of power is biologically based is not to lose our case. We are no longer just animals. And the Kingdom of Nature does not reign absolute."[33]

It is difficult to avoid concluding that the sexual division of reproductive labour has made it possible, though not necessary, for men in many different kinds of societies to dominate and control women and their children. Indeed, the organization of contemporary Canadian society ensures that women who bear children will be at economic, political and social disadvantage compared to the men of their social class, ethnic group, age etc. But as this discussion of the sexual division of reproductive labour indicates, this hierarchy is not our 'natural' inheritance but rather is socially and historically constructed in ways that need to be explored in each situation.[34] I am persuaded, however, that if we are to understand the subordination of women historically and cross-culturally, and understand why women have not resisted that subordination more massively, we must take into account the sexual division of reproductive labour. It has meant that women are dependent upon men for at least part of their adult lives, and that men have had more freedom — namely time and energy — to consolidate their power over women.

31 Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (London 1981).
32 Kathleen Gough, *The Origin of the Family* (Toronto 1970).
33 Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 10.
34 Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*.

This question of the 'origins' of the gender hierarchy and the role of the sexual division of labour is, I believe, necessary for understanding what French historians have called *la longue duree* — and also the pervasiveness of gender hierarchies. But if that were the end of the story we would have no way of explaining the countless variations in the sexual hierarchies, nor how and why women came to resist. Entering this discussion requires a brief diversion into the more general question of how those in power retain — and eventually may lose — their power. This question hinges on the ability of the dominant to convince the dominated that the power relations between them are legitimate, even natural.

Legitimating Power, Challenging Power

Just as the kings of the Middle Ages, and the aristocrats who lived off the court, propagated the idea of 'the divine right of kings,' so men have insisted that their power is naturally or divinely ordained. Dominant groups do not willingly give up their prerogatives. About this much at least the historical record is rather clear. There may be a bit of cross-dressing: Friedrich Engels Sr. owned factories; yet his son co-authored the *Communist Manifesto* with Karl Marx. There is evidence of some cross-class solidarity in the feminist movements. Some men have allied themselves with feminist struggles, even in the early part of this century when it was a far less popular cause. Yet such exceptions serve to throw that which is usually taken for granted into relief: that the ideas developed, believed and perpetrated by dominant groups legitimate their power. These ideas explain the relations of power and the distribution of resources in the society in ways that make them appear eminently reasonable and correct — not just to those whose interests they protect, but to those who are oppressed and exploited by them.

There is nothing necessarily conspiratorial about this. We all develop explanations for what we are doing that try to make sense of our behaviour and to justify our actions. But we all do not have the same opportunity to disseminate our ideas, to persuade others, and to pass laws which help produce the outcomes we wish. For example, the elites in the feudal world were well-served by the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church: kings and peasants alike were encouraged to accept their worldly conditions and to anticipate retribution or compensation in the afterlife. These teachings, drawn selectively from the Old and New Testament, probably encouraged the rich to be charitable towards the poor, and the poor to resign themselves to their fate. Peasants resisted increased impositions by church, state or lords. But they seldom attacked the whole edifice, and when they did the results were bloody.

The ideas of the dominant class or the elites are accepted, in large part, because they appear to describe everyday reality. Those in power *are* more articulate by the very standards that they are in a position to create, define and enforce — for example, the notion of 'good' English. They do have more 'formal' education, and they do own most of the wealth. Dominant groups, then, tend to have a monopoly not just on societal resources and the means to attain and retain them, but also on the development and dissemination of ideas.

Challenges to dominant ideas do not come out of the air; they make their entrance onto the world stage with groups of people whose life activities and relationships are changing, changing in ways which bring their needs and desires into conflict with the dominant social practices and ideas of the time.[39] All this happens in a most uneven

sort of way. The power to effect change is highly variable; laws need to be enforced, not just made. The language encountered from the past and the meaning given to words must be renegotiated.[40] In aristocratic society, for example, the word 'work' was pejorative; it implied that a man had insufficient income to live a life of ease and had to turn to trade or manual labour. Over time the word 'work' was redefined by the developing bourgeoisie. Work became a sign of virtue and worth; those who did not work, did not deserve to eat. What is key here is that challenges to established authority and power occur, and in this process great transformations can be wrought.

Exploring how and why women resist deprivation and oppression has intrigued feminist scholars from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. What I want to do here is provide a brief reminder — an argument really — that feminist theories developed within social movements, that they made their way into the academy through direct and circuitous ways, and that their presence there today continues to depend on their interconnections with emancipatory social movements.

Feminist Movements, Feminist Theories, and the Academy

During the 1970s the women's movement — in all its incarnations — challenged the relations of domination and subordination between men and women in every aspect of life. What perplexed many, especially those in the media who had to 'cover' the story, was that this was, for the most part, a movement with no organization, no leadership, and no centre. Indeed, in 1976 *The Star Weekly Magazine* ran a cover story with a cross and wreath declaring that 'the women's movement is dead'! This was to the considerable surprise of the ever-increasing numbers of women who were referring to themselves as feminists. At the same time, even more women were overheard saying, "I'm not a feminist but...." And the number of 'buts' began to multiply as women from all walks of life began to tell their stories, to seek support from other women, to start women centres, to raise funds for shelters for women physically abused by their 'loved' ones and rape crisis centres for women violated by strangers and 'friends.' Whole areas of life were uncloseted, labelled, interpreted, and made the subject of countless newspaper stories. Who had ever heard of a 'battered woman' before the 1970s? A date rape? Even a botched abortion? These were experiences that women had endured in private, most often blaming themselves, thus compounding their hurt with guilt and shame.

This second wave of feminism was remarkable in many ways: the sheer numbers of women who shaped its ever-expanding 'agenda'; the links that were drawn between aspects of life once considered discrete — economic life and the family, private and public, work and home, love and brutality; the interconnections between the feminist movement and movements for lesbian and gay liberation, peace, ecology, and against racism; its development as women's studies within the academy; and from the vantage point of 1990, its longevity. Indeed, of all the social movements of the 1960s, the women's movement, however diversified it became, however its strategies were adapted to new circumstances, continued to grow in countries throughout the world.

These movements were political but they were also, and intrinsically, theoretical challenges to the relations of domination and subordination between men and women. Feminist activists argued that these relations are socially constructed rather than being

39 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977) and *Culture* (London 1981).
40 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London 1976).

ordained by nature or God. An important aspect of feminist theory has been, as we saw in the section on 'origins,' to seek explanations for women's subordination, the ways in which their subordination is maintained, and the ways in which they have tried to resist the consequences of their inferior status. This question of resistance is of great importance. For feminist theories themselves are products, manifestations, and tools of that resistance. They developed within the feminist movements: the fledgling movement that developed during the French Revolution; the widespread movement that was initiated in 1848 at Seneca Falls and culminated with the granting of female suffrage; and the contemporary feminist movement that began in the 1960s in the United States. Women's Studies developed from the contemporary women's movement and has been called its academic arm. Many feminists believe that unless it retains its organic and political links with that movement, women's studies will lose its critical edge, its power to probe behind appearances, and its potential to transform society.

A History of Women's Studies

This discussion provides a more general context to look at our more particular question: how did women come to question their subordinate position and to challenge the power that men have in their lives, whether as politicians, employers, fathers, husbands — or as gatekeepers in academia. This is an enormously complex historical question. In their attempts to answer it, feminists have had to study the specific countries and time periods in which such challenges developed; they have looked at all aspects of life from the macro-economic to the small details of intimate life; and they have drawn on the insights of many disciplines, all the while challenging these disciplines themselves.

In the last fifteen years Women's Studies courses and programs have developed within the university. It is not clear why these new programs carry the name women's studies rather than feminist studies. In trying to clarify this we launch ourselves, once again, onto controversial theoretical terrain.

The first feminist forays into redrawing the intellectual map involved redressing the balance of scholarship by studying and writing about women. In a sense, then, the map became larger, but what was already there remained more or less the same. Feminists added books on famous women to the enormous collection of books on famous men; they researched what women had been doing while men had been making war and peace and then war again; they explored women's sexuality for itself and not as a complement and compliment to male sexuality. As part of a challenge to Freudian formulations on female sexuality, the psychoanalyst, Mary Jane Sherfey, wrote that women could have fifty or more orgasms in an hour's time.[41] If that seemed formidable, it was a challenging response to the accepted view that the ratio of male to female orgasms could only be one-to-one, since real women only responded to real sex, namely sexual intercourse.

In a sense, then, women's studies took its name during this compensatory period. If all knowledge to date had been men's studies, and that seemed the case, women's studies would complete the other half of the picture. But from the beginning this was not all that the new feminist scholars were doing. Feminists were challenging the power that men had over women — economic, political, and social power, the power

41 "On the Nature of Female Sexuality" in Jean Baker Miller (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Women* (Harmondsworth, England 1972), 138.

that kept women out of the literary canon and denied them artistic recognition. It was impossible, therefore, to study women apart from the relationships which structure their lives; it is impossible to study women without studying men.

The late feminist historian Joan Kelly put this well. When we come to evaluate the position of women at any point in history, we must look at the *relation* between men and women.[42] In other words, if we argued that women were oppressed in Canada, and took as evidence the statistics on income which showed that a high percentage of women lived below the current poverty line as set by Statistics Canada, for example, and we knew nothing else we could shake our head in despair, but we would know nothing about the relationship between women and poverty. If the statistics indicated, however, that a much higher percentage of women than men in Canada lived below that same poverty line, we have some evidence that being female constitutes an economic disadvantage in the society relative to men. But the statistics alone tell us nothing about how this comes to be: how the relationship between 'being female' and 'being poor' is mediated. As we pursue these questions we again must ask about the relation between men and women in order to explain how this happens.

This is what Pat and Hugh Armstrong did in their path-breaking work *The Double Ghetto*. The questions took them both into the labour force and into the home — how was it that women came to do the lion's share of domestic labour and childcare and hold a disproportionate share of the low-paid jobs in the labour force? Again, the questions always raise explicit and implicit comparisons between the lives of women and the lives of men. How do men come by and maintain their power over women? How is it possible for motherhood to be so valorized, on the one hand, and so badly rewarded on the other? Why are women, in Patricia Connelly's words "Last Hired, First Fired"?[43] And when we probe all these questions which lead us to into areas once never discussed — into the underside of intimate life, into the ways in which men do exert power over women, into sexual and psychological harassment, wife battering and rape, into the apparent unwillingness of men to accept women as equals at work, we are still asking questions about a *relation*. Men are seldom absent from these discussions, though at times their presence may be shadowy rather than explicit.

We must conclude, I think, that 'women's studies,' for all the positive connotations it has for those of us who have struggled for its inclusion in the academy, is, in fact, too limited a title for all that happens under its rubric. For it is impossible to study women without studying men; indeed what we are studying is a *relation* — a relation of power; what we are studying is a *process* — a process through which ideas about masculinity and femininity are constructed, continuously in time and space, and in relation to each other. What we are studying is the process of constructing sexual identities and sexual preferences and how and why some carry social acceptability and others social stigma. Much of this we only know because some people have taken the risks of living openly against the ideological grain of their whole society.

This necessarily involves us in a massive critique of existing society — its relationships, institutions, and ideologies. The tools for this endeavour are the questions raised by feminist theories, indeed by all theories that call the current distribution of power and privilege into question. Feminists have refashioned marxism in their attempts to understand the relation between class and gender; feminists of colour have insisted that white feminists undertake the difficult intellectual and

42 Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago 1984).
43 Patricia Connelly, *Last Hired: First Fired* (Toronto 1978).

emotional task of acknowledging and dismantling their own racism; psychoanalytic theories have been reread for what they might tell us about power, control, misogyny and internalized oppression; lesbians and gays have put the oppressive system of compulsory heterosexuality on the agenda, and related this system to male privilege, racial stereotypes, and class exploitation. Feminists have been drawn to the newer theories of post-structuralism and deconstructionism and turned them into powerful ways of examining both how language creates, sustains and constrains our sense of who we are and, at the same time, how language, by its volatility and flexibility, may open up the spaces for oppositional discourses and resistance.

In this quest no body of literature, no institution has remained untouched. The literary canons of Western civilization have been reread, no longer just as 'great literature' but as specific renditions of the relations between men and women, elaborate maps of patriarchal culture, and for insight into the ways in which women speak, acquiesce and resist. The writings of women have been resurrected, republished or printed for the first time. Historically, women have written much more than we believed twenty years ago; everything from their diaries and notebooks through to novels and poetry are scanned for their aesthetic contribution and for the insights they provide into the lives of women, once unknown.

Feminist scholarship precedes from an understanding that 'knowledge' is not prepackaged; knowledge is never simply a given. On the contrary, what passes for knowledge is always historically specific, and communicated by — insisted upon through — language. Indeed, there is widespread agreement that language is part and parcel of that knowledge, inextricably linked with its creation.

For example, think of the idea of 'good' English. Who speaks 'good' English, and who has the opportunity to define this English as 'good'? Good English becomes part and parcel of the introduction to society of some children and not others; children not so initiated will have to learn 'good' English at school as something like an unknown object. For those who are initiated from birth it will be an intrinsic aspect of their identity, and unbeknownst to them will privilege them in relationship to others.

In like-minded fashion feminists have challenged what passes for knowledge, and have argued that men of the elites have had privileged access to creating knowledge — that is, to creating those descriptions, 'information' and interpretations of the world that are deemed important for educated people to know. Simultaneously this means that they also have the power of omission — to leave what is not considered important outside the canon of knowledge. These omissions constitute the corollary of knowledge — that which is too irrelevant to formulate, to pass on, or to explain. Feminists of all persuasions have been filling in what has been left out, filling in the silences. But in so doing, they also depose that which was already there from its privileged location as 'knowledge.' For they call into question the methods through which that 'knowledge' has been created and privileged. How can the great events of human history exclude the reproductive labour of women? Why are some paintings hung in galleries, and others left in people's private bedrooms? Why is the conversation of men often defined as weighty and profound, the conversation of women as gossip and idle chatter? Why are women enjoined to be chaste (by means subtle and cruel) while men are presumed to require 'experience'?

Feminist theories offer to make visible, analyze and critique the hierarchical social relations between men and women in all societies, and in every aspect of society from the level of macro-economics and international politics through to sexuality and the intimate social practices of everyday life. They offer to expose the socially con-

structed nature of those relations and to try and explain how they are sustained at the intra-psychic and inter-subjective levels. There is always an explicit or at least implicit critique offered of these relations of domination and subordination. If feminist theories can explain why and how things are as they are, they also provide explicitly or implicitly the possibility of transformation, societies no longer informed by exploitative and oppressive relations between the sexes.

In writing this paper, I proceed from the position that there are many ways of 'knowing,' none of them final and incontestable. In many ways, it seems to me, the different theories, on what we can know and how, serve as constraints on each other. That is, they serve to keep us in a critical mode, an undogmatic frame-of-mind that keeps us asking the questions about women, men, and the relationships between and among them, that have been so many millennia in coming.