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In search of feminist theory



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What is feminist theory? This is the first of two issues I will address in my reply. Two of the commentators offer analyses of feminist politics as if it were feminist theory. A third offers a tour of male high theory. Where is feminist theory in all of this? The second issue is that of a new convergence over the issue of difference, in that we all agree that difference cannot be analysed successfully without reference to overarching frameworks and to overlaps, together with a rejection of the notion that social locations are incommensurable.

Rita Felski suggests that story-telling is good for feminist politics – but is that the same as saying that it is good for feminist theory? Felski makes a powerful case for story-telling as one of the techniques of effective persuasion in politics. I am happy to agree that in politics rhetoric and presentation of the message do matter and that we should pay attention to the devices available. I am happy to agree that the rich repertoire of feminist narratives in the public sphere has been a powerful part of feminist politics. Indeed I will concede that story-telling can travel across cultural differences as well as reinforce commonalities. But I am reluctant to equate feminist politics with feminist theory. I think it is more effective to mark this separation, and to think in terms of alliances, than to blur the boundary. At the end of her article, however, Felski seems to agree that politics and theory are different, and certainly that science and literature are different. Science and story-telling each have their place within feminism, and they are separate. At this point we are in agreement. Feminist theory is not advanced by story-telling.

Ann Phoenix likewise frames her argument in terms of feminist politics rather than feminist theory. But her main concern is to contrast my rather pessimistic assessment of the state of feminist theory with an optimistic assessment in which the points for which I argue are already in play in feminist theory. Phoenix does not reject my arguments, but rather names other texts which have similar themes. I am happy to accept her gentle reminders of allies in these matters and her support for the main thrust of my argument.

Felski, like Phoenix, agrees that the question of difference is important and agrees with the direction I take to seek its resolution – the power of

argument. Felksi, like myself, notes the tendency in feminist theory to rely on universals whilst being reluctant to admit that this reliance is actually taking place.

The third commentator, Axeli Knapp, provides a review of male high theory. Again, is this feminist theory? Habermas may be interesting, but I did not write an article about him, nor Foucault, nor Marx, nor Mannheim. Indeed, since the point of her excursion appears to be little more than saying that the production of theory can be subject to social bias, the reason for this long discussion is even less clear, since we do not disagree on this point.

When it comes to feminist issues, Knapp appears to agree with me: 'Walby rightly states that Haraway does not explicate and justify the ethic and aesthetic norms that factually guide her writing' (2000: 216) and indeed that 'she is right to note that "myth, fiction, ethics and aesthetics are a very weak basis for feminist knowledge claims"' (2000: 216–17).

The real point of disagreement emerges when Knapp states that she 'understand[s] feminism as a variant of critical theory. As such it belongs to those traditions that have decisively interrogated empiricism and positivism' (2000: 217). This is an exceptionally narrow conception of feminism, excluding so many varieties of feminist theory. I don't think feminism 'belongs' to any such narrow (largely male) tradition. Critical theory as a school of thought is a tiny proportion of the breadth of thinking on which feminism draws. My conception of feminist theory is much more wide-ranging, and not confined to a sub-branch of a sub-branch of traditional theory. Further, by such a statement Knapp dismisses out of hand empirically informed feminist analyses as entering into her category of 'theory'. It is Knapp's commitment to critical theory which means that she does not actually engage with the issue of evidence, merely asserting that philosophers in her tradition have already dealt with it as an issue and dismissed it. But such summary dismissal of the role of empirical evidence in theory formation is not justified. No one claims that data is truth. But the collection and evaluation of evidence is a necessary step in theory building (as Felski also agrees).

When addressing the practical issues I raised in my article, Knapp fails to attend to the substantive issues raised, for instance, producing her own typology of difference, rather than addressing the specific examples and texts used in my article. Then, curiously, she recapitulates some of the main argument of my sections, as if what she said was in rejection of my own. For instance, on Fraser's concept of 'transformation', she notes that its meaning 'strongly depends on the underlying political and theoretical analysis' – but that was the central point of my argument here. Does Knapp agree with me, despite her best efforts, when we reach more substantive matters?

Indeed there seems to be a common agreement among all of us, myself and the three commentators, Felski, Phoenix and Knapp, that the time is past when the issue of difference can be deployed in feminist theory in such a way as to block analysis of commonalities as well. Perhaps what we are seeing here is convergence, or hybridization, between previously

different strands of feminist thinking. We all seem to agree that complex interconnections are the heart of the matter, that difference and universalism, and recognition, equality and transformation, are not necessarily incompatible in feminist theory. We cannot write of difference without reference to the wider framework on which we draw to situate those differences. We cannot write of women without reference to differences as well as commonalities. We seem to have reached a new common position that analyses of difference need to be situated within arguments about overarching frameworks.

Phoenix asks me to spell out what I mean by scientific method. I mean the testing of knowledge claims against evidence and other theories. All knowledge claims are fallible, of course. I think debates in feminist theory are sometimes under-supported by evidence. Debates on questions of 'what works' to change things would be improved if we had more evidence, in particular if we had more reliably comparative evidence. Theory which draws only on other theory is beginning to take a disproportionate amount of the resources of the women's studies community. Data collection is an indispensable part of the long chain of interrelated efforts to test and improve theories – it is not sufficient, but it is necessary. In short, I think feminist theorists, including Knapp, should not sneer at data collection.

Perhaps one of the difficulties we have is not only the divide between politics and theory, but also that between different disciplines. Feminist theory is rightly ambitious in seeking to transcend the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. But sometimes the methodological practices, and shorthand for reporting on these, do not travel well between those accustomed to the practices of different disciplines. Currently feminist theory is dominated by those drawn from philosophical and literary disciplines. For instance, the advisory board of *Feminist Theory* is drawn disproportionately from these disciplines at the expense of those from numerate disciplines, such as economics and geography. Within the literary disciplines the nature of the typical object of analysis, written text, and the practices of its collection, sifting and analysis are often different from those social science disciplines where the object of analysis may not take the form of a written text, but instead involve statistics. Yet analysis of data, whether it be text or statistics, is a key element in all disciplines. It would be a pity if the methodological shorthand of the literary disciplines were to dominate feminist theory. To reiterate, feminist theory is not a sub-branch of critical theory, but much more wide-ranging, including the full range of at least the human sciences.

So what is feminist theory? I think feminist theory is an attempt to explain the nature and complexities of gender inequality. I don't think it should be a euphemism for philosophy. Feminists should continue unashamedly to do science despite what some feminist philosophers say. Of course, science is not perfect – it is fallible by its nature. But it is better than fiction, better than story-telling, and better than aesthetics at producing knowledge. These may well be very effective and important forms of persuasion within politics. But politics is not the same as theory.