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13 Conclusion
What is feminist theory?

> If we continue to speak this sameness, if we speak to each other as men have spoken for centuries, as they have taught us to speak, we will fail each other. Again ... words will pass through our bodies, above our heads, disappear, make us disappear. (Irigaray, 1980:69)

In the sixties, feminists began to question various images, representations, ideas and presumptions traditional theories developed about women and the feminine. To begin with, feminists directed their theoretical attention to patriarchal discourses, those which were either openly hostile to and aggressive about women and the feminine, or those which had nothing at all to say about women. Feminists seemed largely preoccupied with the inclusion of women in those spheres from which they had been excluded, that is, with creating representations which would enable women to be regarded as men's *equals*. Instead of being ignored by and excluded from theory, women were to be *included* as possible objects of investigation. Issues of direct relevance to women's lives—the family, sexuality, the 'private' or domestic sphere, interpersonal relations—were to be included, in some instances for the first time, as a relevant and worthy object of intellectual concern. Generally, feminists continued to rely on the methods, techniques, concepts and frameworks of traditional patriarchal theories, especially in leftist or radical form, using them to develop accounts of women's oppression. Some of the relevant names circulating in feminist discourses at the time included Marx, Reich, Marcuse, Mcluhan, Laing, Cooper, Sartre, Fanon, Masters and Johnson. Women used these texts in their attempts to include women as the equals of men in the sphere of theoretical analysis, developing out of

various theories of (class or race) oppression by modifying and adjusting their details in order to account for women's specific oppression.

Among the relevant features or characteristics describing this phase in the development of feminist theory could be the following:

1. Women and the feminine become worthwhile objects of theory and research. Having been neglected, or denied value in patriarchal terms, women become focal points of empirical and theoretical investigation.
2. Women and the feminine, as excluded or neglected objects in traditional theoretical terms, are now conceptualised as men's equals—as the same as men in relevant socio-economic and intellectual terms.
3. While elements or components of patriarchal discourses may be criticised, questions about their more basic framework and assumptions, whether ontological, epistemological or political, remain unasked.
4. While remaining critical toward the attitude of patriarchal discourses to the position of women, feminist theory is largely concerned with 'women's issues', those which directly affect women's lives, leaving other, 'broader' or more 'public' issues uncriticised.
5. Patriarchal discourses were subjected to an either/or decision: either they were considered thoroughly infiltrated with patriarchal values and thus need to be rejected; or they are capable of 'rectification' so that women can now be included. Patriarchal discourses, in other words, were either rejected outright or were more or less wholeheartedly accepted (with 'minor adjustments').

However, within a short period it became clear that the aim of including women as men's equals within patriarchal theory contained a number of problems not anticipated at the outset. Perhaps most strikingly, it became increasingly clear that it was not possible simply to include women in those theories where they had previously been excluded, for this exclusion forms a fundamental structuring principle and key presumption of patriarchal discourses. Many patriarchal discourses were *incapable* of being broadened or extended to include women without major upheavals and transformations. There was no space within the confines of these discourses to accommodate women's inclusion and equal participation. Moreover, even if women were incorporated into patriarchal discourses, at best they could only be regarded as variations of a basic humanity. The project of women's equal inclusion meant that only women's *sameness to men*, only women's *humanity* and not their *womanliness* could be discussed. Further, while women could now be included as the objects of

theoretical speculation, their positions as the subjects or producers of knowledge was not raised. In other words, in adopting the role of the (male) subjects of knowledge, women began to assume the role of surrogate men.

As subjects of knowledge, women were faced with a dilemma. They could either remain detached from the 'objects' of their theoretical investigations (where these objects are women or femininity), in which case women may be considered to retain their 'objectivity' and 'neutrality'; or women could maintain a closeness to and identification with their 'objects'. In the first case, such women, while gaining the approval of their male colleagues and possibly some position of respect within academic communities, must nevertheless disavow their own positions as women. In the second case, by their self-inclusion within the category of objects investigated, many women lose the detachment needed to be considered 'scientific' or 'objective', resulting, perhaps, in ridicule or some form of academic secondariness. Yet such women, through the risks they thus take in questioning the most general assumptions and *givens* of intellectual inquiry, retain some possibility of maintaining identities as women. In the long run this may have led to questioning the use and value of the distinction between subject and object, transforming the very grounds of current debate.

In abandoning such attempts to include women where theory excluded them, many feminists came to realise that the project of women's inclusion as men's equals could not succeed (see chapter 6). This was because it was not simply the range and scope of objects that required transformation: more profoundly, and threateningly, the very questions posed and the methods used to answer them, basic assumptions about methodology, criteria of validity and merit, all needed to be seriously questioned. The political, ontological and epistemological commitments underlying patriarchal discourses, as well as their theoretical contents required re-evaluation from feminist perspectives, as it became increasingly clear that women could only be included in patriarchal texts as deviant or duplicate men: the a priori assumptions of sameness or interchangeability, sexual neutrality or indifference, the complete neglect of women's specificities and differences, could not be accommodated in traditional theoretical terms. The whole social, political, scientific and metaphysical underpinning of patriarchal theoretical systems needed to be shaken up.

While problematic and ultimately impossible, the aspiration towards an equality between men and women was nevertheless politically and historically necessary. Without such attempts, women could not question the naturalness or seeming inevitability of women's second-class status as citizens, subjects, sexual beings etc. This aim of equality served as a political, and perhaps as an experiential, pre-

requisite to the more far-reaching struggles directed towards female *autonomy*—that is, to women's right to political, social, economic and intellectual self-determination. This seems probably the most striking shift in feminist politics since its revival in the sixties.

This basic shift from a politics of equality to a politics of autonomy may have created an uneasy tension within feminist circles, for these two commitments are not necessarily compatible. Autonomy implies the right to see oneself in whatever terms one chooses—which may imply an integration or alliance with other groups and individuals or may not. Equality, on the other hand, implies a measurement according to a given standard (cf. Thornton, Thompson, Gatens). Equality is the equivalence of two (or more) terms, one of which takes the role of norm or model in unquestionable ways. Autonomy, by contrast, implies the right to accept or reject such norms or standards according to their apppropriateness to one's self-definition. Struggles for equality—so convincingly criticised in a number of the essays in this book—imply an acceptance of given standards and a conformity to their expectations and requirements. Struggles for autonomy, on the other hand, imply the right to reject such standards and create new ones.

Feminists concerned with questions surrounding women's autonomy and self-determination are, ironically, no less concerned with the work of male or masculinist theory than their equality-oriented counterparts, although the male proper names have changed significantly over the twenty-year period of feminism's existence as a self-consciously political intervention into theory. The names of Freud, Lacan, Nietzsche, Derrida, Deleuze, Althusser, Foucault in France, and Richard Rorty. Anthony Wilden, Frederic Jameson, Stephen Heath, Terry Eagleton, Paul de Man etc. in England and North America constitute just some of the 'names' with which contemporary feminist theory has engaged. But what has dramatically changed is the feminist attitude towards and use of patriarchal discourses. Instead of these discourses and their methods and assumptions providing uncriticised tools and frameworks by which women could be analysed as objects, now these discourses become the objects of critical feminist scrutiny. Such discourses and methods are now *tactically used* without necessarily retaining general commitment to their frameworks and presumptions. Feminists do not seem so eager to slot women into pre-existing patriarchal categories and theoretical spaces; instead, it is women's lives, and experiences, that provide criteria by which patriarchal texts can be judged. Basic, unspoken assumptions of patriarchal theories, the ways in which they develop and gain precedence, their use of criteria and methods of inclusion and exclusion are all beginning to be analysed from feminist perspectives (for example, Harding and Hintikka; Miles and Finn). Women

asserted themselves not as objects but as subjects of knowledge with particular perspectives and points of view often systematically different from men's. Such perspectives or viewpoints are not simply 'subjective' in the sense of individual, personal or idiosyncratic positions—'subjectivity' being seen as an *interference* with the 'objective' procedures of knowledge in just the same way that men's theoretical productions are a function of their lived positions in the world. The production of discourse is, for the first time, being examined as a process of *sexual division* and exclusion (cf. chapter 4).

Feminists of autonomy can be contrasted with feminists committed to struggles of equality on at least the following points:

1. Women become both the subjects as well as the objects of knowledge; but, in occupying the position of subject, feminists do not continue to produce knowledge as if they were men, as if knowledge were sexually indifferent. Women's femininity is asserted as a theoretical undertaking, with a number of consequences, among them:
2. In assuming the positions of knower or subject, the methods, procedures, presumptions and techniques of theory are all put into question.
3. Feminists develop perspectives not just *on* or *about* women and 'women's issues' but about *any* object at all—including other theories, systems of representation etc., etc.
4. Feminists don't simply assert the either/or alternative, based on 'expelling unsound' or patriarchal elements or wholesale adoption of theoretical viewpoints. Instead, while attempting to 'work through' patriarchal texts, understanding how they work and how they exert their dominances, feminists attempt to use what they can of these theories—often against themselves! No longer simply condemning or accepting certain discourses, now they are analysed, examined and questioned—actively engaged with and challenged in their operations.
5. Feminist theory challenged both the content and the frameworks of discourses, disciplines and institutions, attempting to present alternatives or develop them where they did not yet exist.

These interventions and interrogations may have produced one of the most subversive challenges to patriarchal theory that this century, or epoch, has seen: 'It is a major historical event which holds the promise of enabling a more complete challenge to domination than has yet been possible before' (Finn and Miles, 1982:10).

In the diverse disciplines constituting the social sciences and humanities, in which most feminist, theorists received their training, many matured from a position akin to apprenticeship (where women learned the skills of prevailing (masculine) forms of scholarship and research) to a position of relative self-determination (where women

are able to use the techniques and skills they have acquired against the very disciplines in which they were trained). These disciplines, and the specific texts and practices associated with them, have become the objects of feminist analysis and criticism. Theory, rather than 'Woman' is now the terrain of contestation between feminists and non- or anti-feminists.

Feminist struggles for autonomy, self-determination and a viable place which women can occupy as women in the theoretical and socio-political universe—as can be seen from the diverse yet interconnected essays presented here—have developed into a two-pronged or dual-faceted form. On the one hand, feminist theory has radically questioned and attempted to undermine the presumptions, methods and frameworks of phallocentric or patriarchal discourses and disciplines. On the other hand, feminist theory has simultaneously attempted to explore and develop alternatives to these phallocentric systems, bringing into being new, hitherto unarticulated, feminine perspectives on the world. In other words, today feminist theory is involved in both an *anti-sexist* project, which involves challenging and deconstructing phallocentric discourses; and in a positive project of constructing and developing alternative models, methods, procedures, discourses etc.

The anti-sexist project clearly implies a thorough knowledge of and familiarity with prevailing theoretical paradigms and their histories. Such an endeavour means working with, understanding and reflecting on those theoretical systems which comprise women's history and their contemporary situation, and participating in women's oppression. Yet anti-sexism is largely negative and reactive, aiming to challenge what currently exists, what is presently dominant and responsible for women's phallocentric position in theoretical representation. Such a critical, reactive project is necessary if feminist theory is to avoid the intellectual perils of abstraction, idealisation or irrelevance. It risks projecting an ideal or utopian future for women which is unanchored in or unrelated to what exists here and now. It risks a series of commitments it may wish, on reflection, to reject. It risks repeating problems of the past without recognising them as problems or learning from them. The critical, anti-sexist project is directed against the methods, assumptions and procedures by which patriarchal discourses reduce women to a necessary dependence on men as well as against more insidious, structural expressions of misogyny, which, rather than making sexist pronouncements about women instead present perspectives on the world from a masculine point of view as if such a position were sexually neutral.

If, however, feminist theory remains *simply* reactive, *merely* a critique, paradoxically it affirms the very paradigms it seeks to contest. It remains on the very grounds it wishes to question and transform. To

criticise prevailing theoretical systems *without posing viable alternatives* is to affirm such theoretical systems as necessary. Although feminist theory must retain a familiarity with these systems, it must also establish a theoretical distance from too close an adherence to them. If feminist theory does not extend beyond the terms of anti-sexism, it remains bound up with a politics of sameness or equality even while criticising it. The limited but strategically necessary aim of destabilising and dismantling patriarchal discourses is only the first stage or prerequisite for a more encompassing and threatening challenge to patriarchal domination—the struggle for autonomy, implying struggles for the right to different paradigms, theoretical tools, and possibly even a reconceptualisation of the entire system of knowledges and acceptable theoretical methods.

Coupled with the anti-sexist project, feminism must thus also be involved in the positive task of experimenting with and creating alternatives to patriarchal theoretical norms. Feminist theory can no longer be content with adapting patriarchal theories so that they are capable of analysing woman—which in itself is a phallocentric endeavour, for it reduces women to theories and categories appropriate for and developed from masculine points of view. The positive components question and displace the very foundations upon which traditional theories are based.

It cannot be specified in advance what an autonomous feminist theory would involve, for this contradicts the very idea of autonomy, the right to choose and define the world for oneself. In their diversity and multiplicity, women claim the right to define their own aims and goals. Although it cannot be specified using one or many models, feminist theory can nevertheless be outlined negatively, for it seems clear that there are a number of theoretical assumptions it would not wish to reproduce. It cannot be regarded, for example, as the reverse or opposite of patriarchal texts, transforming their objects but not their underlying assumptions. On the contrary, it attempts to move beyond them, their frameworks and their limits.

In other words, feminist theory cannot be accurately regarded as a *competing* or rival account, diverging from patriarchal texts over what counts as true. It is not a true discourse, nor a mere objective or scientific account. It could be appropriately seen, rather, as a *strategy*, a local, specific, concrete, intervention with definite political, even if provisional, aims and goals. In the 1980s, feminist theory no longer seems to seek the status of unchangeable, trans-historical and trans-geographic truth in its hypotheses and propositions. Rather, it seeks effective forms of intervention into systems of power in order to subvert them and replace them with others more preferable. Strategy implies a recognition of the current situation, in both its general, structural features (macrolithic power alignments), and its specific,

detailed, regionalised forms (microlithic power investments). It needs to know the spaces and strategies of its adversaries in order to undermine their positions within an overall system. It must thus be aware of the kinds of counterstrategy or tactics used by phallocentric discourses to deploy in order to seek the points of vulnerability. All forms of strategy, in short, involve recognising what *is* in order to move on to what *should* be. Strategy always involves short-term aims, seen as necessary for the achievement of longer term ideals, which themselves are capable of being modified and transformed during the processes of struggle. As a form of strategy, feminist theory needs to use whatever means are available to it, whether these are 'patriarchal" or not. Phallocentric insights, concepts and theoretical tools are evaluated in terms of their usefulness, their functioning in particular contexts, rather than in terms of an ideal but impossible purity. As strategy, it is necessarily implicated in the systems it wishes to challenge. Aspirations to a theoretical purity, a position 'untainted' by patriarchal impingements, that is, forms of theoretical separatism where patriarchal terms and practices are rejected, seem naive. They are unable to struggle with, or thus move beyond the patriarchal terms that return to haunt them. In order to challenge and move beyond patriarchal models, feminists must be able to use whatever means are at hand, including those of the very systems it challenges.

As a series of strategic interventions into patriarchal texts, feminist theory does not simply aim to reveal what is 'wrong' with, or false about, patriarchal theories—to replacing one 'truth' with another. It aims to render patriarchal systems, methods and presumptions unable to function, unable to retain their dominance and power. It aims to make clear how such a dominance has been possible; and to make it no longer viable. Since feminist theory lacks the means to directly confront a sophisticated patriarchal theoretical regime in creating alternatives, feminists have had to resort to forms of intellectual guerilla warfare, striking out at the points of patriarchy's greatest weakness, its blindspots (see Irigaray, 1985a: Part I). The grounds and terrain upon which patriarchy develops its arguments reveals their partial and partisan instead of universal or representative position. Patriarchal intellectual systems are unlikely to allow such attempts at political subversion to proceed uncontested. In fact, it is clear that traditional discourses and the positions they support have developed a series of counter-strategies and tactical response to the incursions of feminism, and indeed, women, into its fields of operation. These range from more or less personal or petty tactics to more serious, far-ranging threats—from personal ridicule, ignorance, stereotyping, to forms of counterattack including wilful misrepresentation, being refused access to professional status and/or a livelihood or having one's work co-opted or neutralised. Such counterattacks are by no means mutual-

ly exclusive and are exercised with greater or lesser strength according to the degree of threat feminist theories and objections pose. Without at least some awareness of the range and ferocity of these counterattacks, feminism may be unable to effect the wide-ranging subversions it seeks. It need not be committed to patriarchal discourses and their values, yet without understanding them in detail, feminists will be unable to move beyond them.

In summary, feminist theory involves, first, a recognition of the overt and covert forms of misogyny in which discourses participate. This means developing the skills of recognising what makes these discourses patriarchal—including their explicit pronouncements about men and women, and their respective values, as well as the capacity to see how such theories divide up the world according to masculine interests. Second, it involves an ability to recognise patriarchal discourses in terms of their absences, gaps, lacunae, around the question of women and the feminine, understanding how these silences function to structure and make patriarchal discourses possible. Third, feminist theory must be capable of articulating the role that these silences and masculinist representations play in the suppression of femininity, and of affirming the possibility of other, alternative, perspectives, making patriarchal texts unable to assert their hegemony; and fourth, it must develop viable methods for superseding phallocentric systems of representation even if this means relying on patriarchal methods, using them as a starting point for new directions in theoretical research. By its very existence, such forms of feminist theory demonstrate that patriarchal discourses are *not* neutral, universal or unquestionable models, but are the effects of the specific (political) positions occupied by men.

On the basis of the essays gathered together in this collection, and works by a number of other feminists within social and political theory (see the bibliography), feminist theory can be provisionally located at the interface of the negative, anti-sexist project and a more positive, speculative, project. It is the refusal of a number of central values, concepts and operations necessary for the functioning of patriarchal theory, and an affirmation of the alternatives to these given forms of discourse. Among the central concepts and values questioned by feminist theory is a core of assumptions shared by most, if not all of the social sciences. In particular, it has seriously questioned patriarchal adherences to the following theoretical commitments:

1. Commitment to a singular or universal concept of truth and methods for verifying (or falsifying) truth. Few theories aspiring to the status of scientific objectivity and truth, conventionally understood, accept their own historicity and the effects that context, environment and particular circumstances have on the production and evaluation

of theory. In particular, such theoretical aspirations cannot acknowledge the costs (the silences, exclusions and invalidations) on which they are founded: in seeking the status of truth, they seek a position beyond history and outside power.

2. Its commitments to objectivity, observer-neutrality and the context-independence as unquestioned theoretical values. These are closely related to the overevaluation of science and truth as models for knowledge. Objectivity is considered as a form of interchangeability or substitutability of observers or experimenters, as a check against individual bias. This ideal of interchangeability is based on the assumption of a similarity of viewpoint and position between observers—who must be 'appropriately trained'. This assumption is necessarily blind to the different structural positions men and women occupy, their different degrees of access to suitable training, and their (possibly) different relations to their disciplines. The neutrality and universality of many patriarchal discourses presumed in the social sciences is thus sex-blind—unable to acknowledge the different social positions of men and women in presuming a neutral, interchangeable subject.

3. The commitment to a universal subject of knowledge, a subject presumed to have certain qualities and features: the ability to separate *him*self from feelings, emotions, passions, personal interests and motives, socio-economic and political factors, the past, one's aspirations for the future etc. This subject of knowledge is capable of achieving a distance from the object known, thus being able to reflect on it. It is, however, a subject incapable of accepting its own limits, its materiality and historicity, its immersion in socio-economic and political values. The subject is conceived as disembodied, rational sexually indifferent subject—a mind unlocated in space, time or constitutive interrelations with others (a status normally only attributed to angels! cf. Irigaray, 1984).

4. The commitment to a fixed, static truth, an immutable, given reality, a guaranteed knowledge of Being and access to Reason. Such an ahistorical view cannot account for the variability and historical nature of what counts as true except in terms of a greater and greater access to and knowledge of the truth, that is, except in terms of historical views being *false* views. It refuses to endorse the possibility of a 'politics of truth', of the political investments in truth (cf. Foucault, 1976; 1978). Truth, as a correspondence or veridical reflection of reality, is a *perspectiveless* knowledge, a knowledge without a point of view—or, what amounts to the same thing, a truth claiming a universal perspective.

5. The commitment to the intertranslatability of concepts, terms, truths, propositions and discourses. As embodied in a propositional form, knowledge 'is not regarded as dependent on its particular modes

of formulation, but on the underlying thoughts it is presumed to express. Language is considered a vehicle for the communication of pre-existent thoughts or ideas. It is seen merely as a medium, a dispensable tool for the transmission of thought, rather than being seen as thought's necessary condition. In denying the materiality of language, prevailing discourses can avoid recognising their dependence on and debt to tropes, figures of speech, images, metaphors etc. evoking the feminine, women or maternity. Patriarchal discourses ignore the complicity of discursive systems with oppressive social structures, and the dependence of discourses on particular positions established by particular modes of language.

There are, of course, many positive features that can be briefly sketched out in general ways which do not pre-empt women's various attempts at self-determination. Included among them are:

1. Intellectual commitments, not to truth, objectivity and neutrality, but to theoretical positions openly acknowledged as observer and context-specific. Rather than deny its spatio-temporal conditions and limits, feminist theory accepts and affirms them, for they are its raison d'étre. Following Nietzsche, it seems prepared to avow its own perspectivism, its specific position of enunciation, its being written from a particular point of view, with specific aims and goals.
2. In acknowledging its conditions of production, feminist theory seems prepared to question the value of the criteria of objectivity and scientificity so rigidly and imperialistically accepted by intellectual orthodoxies. This is not, however, an admission of any 'subjective bias'. The very distinction between objective (knowledge) and subjective (opinion) is put into question. Feminists seem prepared to accept that the knower always occupies a position, spatially, temporally, sexually and politically. This is a corollary of its perspectivism. It is neither subjective nor objective, neither absolute nor relative. These alternatives, for one thing, cannot explain the productive investments of power in the production of knowledges. This does not, however, mean that feminist theory used no criteria of evaluation or self-reflection. Rather, its norms of judgment are developed from *inter-subjective*, shared effects and functions; and in terms of a discourse's *intertexual* functions, its capacity to either undermine or affirm various dominant systems and structures.
3. Instead of presuming a space or gulf between the rational, knowing subject and the object known, feminist theory acknowledges the contiguity between them. Prevailing views of the rational subject posit a subject artificially and arbitrarily separated from its context. This creates a distance required for its separation from the emotions, passions, bodily interferences, relations with others and the socio-

political world. Feminist theory seems openly prepared to accept the constitutive interrelations of the subject, its social position and its mediated relation to the object. For feminists (in so far as they uphold such a notion) the rational subject is *not* free of personal, social and political interests, but is necessarily implicated in them. Theories are seen as sexualised, as occupying a position in relation to the qualities and values associated with the two sexes, or the attributes of masculinity and femininity. But to claim a sexualisation of discourses and knowledges is not to equate the discourse's position with that of its author or producer; there is no (direct) correspondence between feminine or feminist texts and female authors, or between phallocentric texts and male authors. The sexual 'position of the text' can only be discerned contextually and in terms of the position which the speaking subject, (the implicit or explicit 'I' of the text), speaks from; the kind of subject (implicitly) presumed as the subject *spoken to* (or audience), and the kind of subject *spoken about* (or object). As well as the range of various subjects posited in any or all texts, the text's position also depends on the *kind of relations* asserted between these different subjects (cf. Benveniste, 1961:chs 19–20). In the case of feminist theory, the subject, object and audience are not dichotomously divided into mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive categories (subject/object, knower-master/ignorant-disciple, teacher/pupil, self/other etc. cf. Jay) but may be defined more in terms of continuities and/or differences. The speaking subject, the subject spoken to and the subject spoken about may be equated; but in any case, there is a constitutive interrelatedness presumed between all three terms. This means, for example and to take a concrete case, that men do not speak with greater objectivity about women's oppression, as some male academics recently asserted with great sincerity. Men too are necessarily implicated in and part of women's oppression. It is of course clear that their relations to such oppression must be very different from women's. In short, particular interests are served by every theoretical position and in any textual or discursive system. The politics or 'power' of the text (cf. Foucault, 1972) cannot, however, be automatically read off from what the text overtly *says*, but, more frequently, from *how* it says it, what is invoked, and what is thus effected. Feminist theory has the merit over prevailing discursive systems of being able not only to accept but to actively affirm its own political position(s) and aspirations, to accept that, far from being objective in the sense of 'disinterested' and 'unmotivated', it is highly motivated by the goals and strategies involved in creating an autonomy for women. Such motivation or purposiveness, however, does not invalidate feminist theory, but is its acknowledged function, its rationale;

4. Because it refuses to accept the pre-given values of truth,

objectivity, universality, neutrality and an abstract reason, feminist theory—along with some contemporary male theorists—is not committed to or motivated by these values. It sees itself in terms of a critical and constructive strategy. It is neither abstraction, blueprint nor handbook for action, nor a distanced form of reflection. These views, for one thing, imply a theory outside or beyond practice. In questioning the dichotomous conceptualisation of the relation between theory and practice, feminist theory considers itself both a 'theoretical practice'—a practice at the level of theory itself, a practice bound up with yet critical of the institutional frameworks within which the production of theoretical discourses usually occurs, a practice involving writing, reading, teaching, learning, assessment, and numerous other rituals and procedures; as well, it is a 'practical theory'—a theory openly seen as a part of practice, a tool or tactic playing a major part in the subversive, often dangerous assault on one particular site of the functioning of patriarchal power relations—the sphere of knowledge, which provides patriarchy with rationalisations and justifications for its ever-expanding control. Feminist theory is an interweaving of strands that are simultaneously theoretical and practical. It is a site where dominant discourses, subjugated discourses, voices hitherto silenced or excluded (cf. Allen, Thiele), forms of coercion and control as well as concerted forms of resistance are able to be worked through in relation to each other. It is a threshhold for the intervention of theories within concrete practices, and the restructuring of theory by the imperatives of experience and practice, a kind of hinge or doorway between the two domains. In aiming at a destruction of misogynistic theory and its fundamental assumptions and at establishing a positive influence on day-to-day and structural interactions between the sexes, it is neither a prelude to practice, nor a reflection on practice because it is already a form of practice within a specific region of patriarchy's operations.

5. Feminist theory, similarly, cannot be conceived in terms of the categories of rationality or irrationality. Since at least the seventeenth century, if not long before, reason has been understood in dichotomous terms, being characterised oppositionally and gaining its internal coherence only by the exclusion of its 'others'—the passions, the body, the emotions, nature, faith, materiality, dreaming, experience, perception, madness or many other terms (cf. Jay; Lloyd, 1984; Irigaray, 1984). In questioning this binary mode of categorisation, feminists demonstrated that reason is a concept associated with the norms and values of masculinity, and its opposites, or 'others', with femininity. Feminist theory today is not simply interested in reversing the values of rational/irrational or in affirming what has been hierarchically subordinated, but more significantly, in questioning the very structure of binary categories. In short, feminist theory seeks to

transform and extend the concept of reason so that instead of excluding concepts like experience, the body, history, etc. these are included within it or acknowledged as necessary for reason to function. In taking women's experiences and lives as a starting point for the development of theory, feminism attempts to develop alternatives to the rigid, hierarchical and exclusive concept of reason. It seeks a rationality not divided from experience, from oppression, from particularity or specificity; a reason, on the contrary, that includes them is a rationality not beyond or above experience but based upon it.

6. In challenging phallocentrism, feminist theory must also challenge the evasion of history and materiality so marked in theoretical traditions in the West. In conceiving of itself as a rational, private, individual activity and struggle towards truth and knowledge, a pure, intellectual activity, it must also deny its status as a historical and political product. Predominant theoretical traditions refuse to accept their dependence on the materiality of writing, on practices involved in training, producing, publishing and promoting certain methods, viewpoints and representatives, on struggles for authority and domination. In opposition to these prevailing theoretical ideals, feminist theory openly acknowledges its own materiality as the materiality of language (language being seen as a weapon of political struggle, domination and resistance), of desire (desire as the will to achieve certain arrangements of potentially satisfying 'objects'—the desire for an identity, a sexuality and a recognised place in culture being the most clear-cut and uncontentious among feminists) and of power (power not just as a force visible in the acts, events and processes within political and public life, but also as a series of tactical alignments between institutions, knowledges, practices involved with the control and supervision of individuals and groups); in more particular terms, the alignments of male socio-economic domination with the forms of learning, training, knowledge, and theory.

7. In rejecting leading models of intellectual inquiry (among them, the requirements of formal logic, the structuring of concepts according to binary oppositional structures, the use of grammar and syntax for creating singular, clear, unambiguous, precise modes of articulation and many other assumed textual values), and its acceptance of the idea of its materiality as theory, feminist theory is involved in continuing explorations of and experimentation with new forms of writing, new methods of analysis, new positions of enunciation, new kinds of discourse.

No one method, form of writing, speaking position, mode of argument can act as representative, model or ideal for feminist theory. Instead of attempting to establish a new theoretical norm, feminist

theory seeks a new *discursive space*, a space where women can write, read and think *as women*. This space will encourage a proliferation of voices, instead of a hierarchical structuring of them, a plurality of perspectives and interests instead of the monopoly of the one—new kinds of questions and different kinds of answer. No one form would be privileged as *the* truth, the correct interpretation, the right method; rather, knowledges, methods, interpretations can be judged and used according to their appropriateness to a given context, a specific strategy and particular effects.

Feminist theory is capable of locating itself historically, materially, enunciatively and politically in relation to patriarchal structures. During its development over the last 25 years it has emerged as a capacity to look at women in new, hitherto unexplored ways by refusing to reduce and explain women's specificity to terms that are inherently masculine; it has developed the ability to look at any object from the point of view of perspectives and interests of women, of understanding and going beyond phallocentrism in developing different kinds of theory and practice. This description may sound like an idealised or utopian version of what a self-conscious and politically committed, active and informed theoretical practice should involve. Perhaps. It is not yet clear how far along this utopian path feminist discourses have come. But as the essays published here testify, feminist theory is in the process of developing along these diverse trajectories. It is in the process of reassessing the theoretical heritage it needs to supersede in order to claim a future for itself. This future may initiate a new theoretical epoch, one capable of accepting the full implications of acknowledging sexual difference. Theory in the future would be seen as sexual, textual, political and historical production. Although this may threaten those who adhere to the values of phallocentrism, it may open up hitherto unimagined sites, sources and tools for theoretical exploration. An autonomous femininity may introduce, for the first time in our recorded history, the possibility of dialogue with an 'alien voice', the voice of woman.

> Sexual difference would constitute the horizon of worlds of a still unknown fecundity ... Fecundity of birth and regenerescence for amorous partners, but still production of a new epoch of thought, art, poetry, language ... Creation of a new *poietics*. (Irigaray, 1984:1)

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