

Engendering *Modernity*

Feminism,
Social Theory
and Social Change

图书馆

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BARBARA L. MARSHALL

ENGENDERING MODERNITY

Feminism, Social Theory and Social Change

Barbara L. Marshall

Polity Press

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Engendering Modernity

For my mother, Maeve Marshall

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Introduction

This is a book about theory, written at a time when the very practice of theory has become increasingly suspect. I write as a feminist, and as a sociologist, who has been caught up in the debates about the status and purpose of theory, and who has had to confront some of the resulting questions about theory in both my teaching and my research. The practice of theory has been deeply affected by the debates about modernity versus postmodernity, and the attendant questions of the possibility of social theory which can foster human autonomy and emancipation. The assertions by certain theorists, such as Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty, that such theoretical aspirations are tied irredeemably to the now passé modern *épistème*, suggest that theory as an emancipatory project is indeed at an end. My basic premise is that these assertions are far from neutral. I see them as emanating from the same position of false universalism as that of the theoretical tradition they criticize. In other words, they express, as Christine Di Stephano puts it, the 'claims and needs of a constituency (white, privileged men of the industrialized West) that has already had an Enlightenment for itself and that is now ready and willing to subject that legacy to critical scrutiny' (1990: 75). Just as feminist historians and social theorists begin to reconstruct the ambivalent relationship of women to modernity, and to breathe new life into its emancipatory project, this very project is deemed bankrupt. I want

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to argue that, flawed as it is, the modern project still contains considerable potential to ground an emancipatory practice, and that some recent feminist theory is paradigmatic of how such a project might be reconstructed – or engendered.

I first used the term 'engender', in the manner in which I use it here, several years ago as I was working on a conference paper on women and the welfare state. I was struggling for a term which recognized the crucial role gender played in the initial construction of the welfare state, and which captured the active way in which gender is continually embedded in the operation of, and our experience of, welfare states today. I chose the term *engendering* both for its dictionary meaning of 'engender' – to enable or bring about – and for etymological reasons. The prefix 'en-' is commonly used to make a transitive verb out of a noun, as in 'endear' or 'encircle'. Thus it is in this dual sense that I want to speak of *engendering* modernity. I want to draw attention to the restructuring of gender relations as a fundamental characteristic of modernity, and to nurture a feminist vision of the emancipatory potential of social theory as a modern project.

To do this requires some major rethinking of the basic analytical categories of social theory, categories such as 'the individual', 'society', 'class', 'citizenship'. The experience of women has always been peripheral to the construction of these categories, and as this experience is reclaimed and inserted into the heart of social theory, the inadequacy of these categories, as traditionally conceived, becomes painfully apparent. Singled out for particular critique is the relationship between the individual and society as this has been understood in both classical and contemporary theories of modernity. The 'sociological individual', while ostensibly the universal subject of modernity, obscures a deeply gendered analysis of social life. Such a conception of the individual is premised upon a set of dualistic categories, such as public versus private, economy versus family, universal versus particular, which are constructed on the experience of Western, white, heterosexual males, and which have been overly abstracted and reified in social theory. As we begin to deconstruct these dualisms to better account for wider experiences of social life, the potential for theorizing the individual-society relationship in new ways arises. New questions around the subject and political agency, and the emergence of

distinctively modern contexts for identity formation rise to the top of the theoretical agenda. The central aim of this book, then, is to undertake the dual tasks of providing a revised account of modernity – one which includes the experience of women – and of considering what sort of a theoretical framework might be built on this revised account.

But do we need more theory? More specifically, do we need to take another stab at reconstructing 'malestream' theory? Some feminists view the sort of theoretical reconstruction I am proposing in a critical light. For example, as Stanley and Wise (1990: 43) characterize it, its aim is 'to clean up theoretical inadequacies *at the level of theory*, then to turn to small, carefully presented snippets of life to exemplify the success of the theoretical project'. The concern here, they charge, is 'with marking out a privileged role for feminist researchers in the production of "Theory" (with a decidedly capital T) as a transcendent and so privileged account of the realities of other women's lives'. Obviously, I view this project differently. I think it is important to understand theory, even (or perhaps, especially) non-feminist theory. The traditions of Western intellectual thought have shaped the way in which we see ourselves, and the way in which we construct and see 'others'. It is only by coming to terms with the way in which these theoretical traditions have been constructed to fracture our vision that we can begin to see things anew. As Lerner (1986: 13) suggests, the insight that 'men are not the centre of the world, but men and women are. . . will transform consciousness as decisively as did Copernicus's discovery that the earth is not the centre of the universe'. This transformation has continued as women of colour, unchilded women, poor women, lesbians and non-Western women, speaking from their experience, challenge the narrowness of the subject of earlier versions of feminist theories. These challenges have enriched and deepened our analytical perspectives. Yet a transcendental dimension is integral to the development of a critical social theory – direct experience does not exhaust the understanding of forces which shape our lives. An articulation of everyday experience to historically situated socio-economic and cultural formations is necessary. To continue with the Copernican analogy, social theory can help make sense of and *transform* our experience, 'just as our experience of the sun's sinking below the horizon has been transformed by our knowledge that the

world turns and that our location in the world turns away from the sun – even though from where we are it seems to sink' (D. Smith, 1987: 89).

The difference between theory as *theory*, which seeks explanation, prediction and/or understanding of a phenomenon, and theory as *critique*, which calls forth action in the world, is crucial. Theory as critique has a long theoretical pedigree,¹ and those who endorse the project of critical theory today continue to find rich insights in Marx. As Fraser (1989: 113) suggests, Marx's conceptualization of critical theory as 'the self clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age' has yet to be surpassed. Critical theory, in its late twentieth-century manifestations, has gone far beyond Marx's critique of capitalism to attempt to clarify struggles which reach far beyond the realm of production. While the term 'critical theory' is most closely associated with the tradition of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, and with Jürgen Habermas, the best-known 'heir' of that tradition, I will use it to refer to a broader range of theories which embody some of the ideals of the Frankfurt tradition as described by Guess (1981: 2): 'A critical theory. . . is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation.' Thus conceived, critical theory is, with all its problems, 'the best of what is left of the Left' (Poster, 1989: 3).

My aim is not so much to argue for the utility of critical theory for feminism – I believe that feminists have been *doing* critical theory better than many self-proclaimed critical theorists for a long time – as to argue for the centrality of feminist theory for the development of critical social theory. Feminist theories have shared the ambivalent relationship of critical theory to the modernist tradition, questioning the ontology of labour central to Marxism yet unwilling to abandon its emancipatory project, and eschewing the faith in science represented by positivism in favour of multiple and reflective methodological strategies grounded in a critical knowledge-interest. However, I prefer the term critical feminist theory to socialist feminist theory, not so much to identify it with any particular stream of 'malestream' critical theory, but to get away from the association of socialist feminist theories with productivist models of society, which tend to make 'feminist' a qualifier of 'socialist'. A truly critical theory is indeed socialist, but

it is equally feminist and anti-racist. It is committed to the critique of all forms of domination and distortion.

One of my motivations for writing this book has been my concern with the extent to which some of the most exciting developments in theoretical thinking have occurred in relative isolation from one another (due, in no small part, to the continued marginalization of feminism in the academy), and with the tendency to recycle this isolation in the manner in which we teach theory to our students. This concern has influenced the selection of theories and concepts that frame my analysis. I have attempted to provide some openings for readers without extensive grounding in the feminist literature to see the convergence of feminist critiques with problems in social theory more generally, but have tried to avoid simply presenting a 'survey' of that literature. Thus, what follows is just one way of mapping the theoretical terrain. I have focused on some theories to the neglect of others, and have made some broad generalizations from different national contexts. I have tried to identify some of the significant points of intersection between different theoretical traditions, which means that others are ignored or underdeveloped. Those more swayed than I by the postmodern turn in theory will no doubt find my analysis lacking. Similarly, given my concern to recount a particular history of 'received' theory in the social sciences, I have not given extensive coverage of some of the more recent advances in, for example, feminist philosophy and psychoanalysis.² In spite of these limitations, I hope what follows will serve as a useful review and reconstruction of some important debates, while at the same time pushing those who embrace the goals of a critical social theory to become more explicitly feminist.

Chapter 1 will take modernity, and the relationship between modernity and capitalism, as the central problematic of classical social theory. I will look at how women have figured as a strategic absence in both classical and contemporary debates, resulting in a conception of the individual, and the individual-society relationship, which has profound implications for the manner in which we understand gender inequalities. Chapter 2 will re-examine the gendered division of labour as a fundamental concept in 'explaining' gender differences – in both feminist and non-feminist theories. Here, I will argue that prevailing theories of the division of labour have (a) rested on an overly narrow conception of labour, (b)

neglected the degree to which gender divisions shape both the material and ideological forms that the social division of labour takes, and (c) reified both the public-private dualism and its coincidence with a gendered division of labour. Building on this critique, I will review, in chapter 3, the genesis of socialist feminist theory in terms of a 'reproduction problematic'. After examining the manner in which feminist theory has challenged the Marxist conception of social reproduction, I will look at some current impasses in socialist feminist theory and suggest how we might begin to move beyond them. Chapter 4 takes the theorization of subjectivity as a central problematic for a critical social theory, and suggests that feminism has much to contribute to this project. Against both essentialist theories of gendered subjects and the poststructuralist dissolution of the subject, I will focus on the multiple and often contradictory nature of subjectivity, and on the active construction of gendered identities in terms of historically available modes of interpretation. Chapter 5 focuses on the role of the state and political discourse in the regulation of gendered identities, and looks at theories which suggest the possibility of emergent public spaces which might promote the contestation of identities. Finally, in chapter 6, I will suggest that social science cannot fully understand 'modernity' (nor, for that matter, postmodernity) until it comes to terms with the one-sided story it has constructed, and that the inherently political nature of feminist theory has the potential to revitalize the project of a critical social theory.

Gender and Modernity: Classical Issues, Contemporary Debates

1.1 Modernity and Social Theory: The Classical Connection

The connection between sociology and modernity is well rehearsed in the 'history of theory' texts.¹ While 'modernization' may be broadly understood as the transition from 'simple', homogenous societies to 'complex', highly differentiated ones, with the attendant questions about social order and social change, the discourse of 'modernity' includes the larger philosophical questions, dating back to the Enlightenment, surrounding rationalization as the underpinning of both modernization and the interpretations of progress in Western social and political thought.

Against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, modernity is associated with the release of the individual from the bonds of tradition, with the progressive differentiation of society, with the emergence of civil society, with political equality, with innovation and change. All of these accomplishments are associated with capitalism, industrialism, secularization, urbanization and rationalization. The changes associated with the advent of modernity were integral to the development of social theory.

Modern social and political theory took root in the Enlightenment abandonment of traditional religious authorities for a belief in human reason and progress. In sharp contrast to theological world