

THE OPPOSITIONAL IMAGINATION

Feminism, critique, and political theory

Joan Cocks

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FEMINIST THEORY



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For my parents

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Introduction

Things in Two's are Sometimes, but not Always, Dichotomies

This is a book about opposites. My preoccupations hinge on the tension point between philosophy and poetry, abstract thought and concrete experience, culture and counter-culture, objective and subjective force, domination and rebellion, and last but not at all least, masculine and feminine. Some of these oppositions I mean to preserve, some to reconcile, some to dissolve, and some to break into fragments.

Perhaps the most prominent opposition here is that between political theory and practical life. The nexus joining the two elements of this classic pair is notoriously complex. If political theory lives off the practical circumstances of ruling, serving, warring and uniting, the questions it asks are set free by those circumstances rather than being directly about them. Sometimes they are set almost entirely free, so that the political theorist seems to resemble a philosopher inquiring into a universal order of things. Sometimes they are set hardly free at all, so that the theorist seems more like an historian immersed in a welter of once-lived details. In fact, however, the political theorist occupies a distinctly third place – provoked by particular conditions and events to think about the right conceptualization, or real significance, or underlying logic, or moral or historical value, of all conditions and events that are broadly like or interestingly unlike them.

Paradoxically, the contributions that political theory has to offer to life depend on its achieving a partial distance from life. They depend on its agility in beginning with what actually is and then moving in all sorts of directions beyond it. There, theory can work to unearth the hidden complexities of the "what is." It can speculate about what

else there could be, or should be, besides it. It can determine how possibility might be transformed into actuality, and which social groups would be most likely to carry that transformation out. It also can choose to theorize not directly on the basis of social life but through commenting on prior political-philosophical commentaries or even through working off portrayals of society that are explicitly fictional. The possibilities for political theory's movement are almost endless. The one danger to those possibilities is that theory can lose altogether its connection and even its desire for a connection to actual political affairs. This it does when it embraces its own professional-philosophical texts as its only proper object of attention, and when it insists that the study of living ideas and practices is not political theory at all but some coarser and cruder activity.

It has been my intention here neither to collapse the distinction nor to snap the connection between political theory and the practical world. Moreover, it is the most abstract and idealist kind of theory that I have wanted to join to the most mundane and bodily aspects of actual life and to the most politically committed practices of resistance. In the book's first part, I discuss a kind of theory that attends to power as it is radiated through culture rather than as it is governmentally imposed. This is a power entrenched in ordinary linguistic distinctions, literary and imagistic representations, and habits of practice; as well as a counter-power emergent in distinctions, representations, and practices that are extraordinary and iconolastic. In the book's second part, I try to come to grips with a specific cultural order that rules over the sexed body (an order I call "the regime of Masculine/feminine"¹); a counter-cultural formation that has risen up against that regime (a formation which calls itself "radical feminism"); and, finally, figures and episodes of life in antithesis to both power and counter-power which are too fragmentary, multiple or fleeting to be summed up by a single name.

I have said that a political theoretical investigation typically begins at the point of some problem in practical life and then becomes a search for the categories and method by which the problem can be understood. The line of movement thus is from the concrete to the abstract, and to the illumination of the concrete by the abstract. Nevertheless, when the theorist comes to write about that illumination, the procedure very often is reversed. On the page, the theorist tends to begin with what Hegel would call "the idea of the idea" rather than with the idea of the concrete thing. That is, she

begins with a discourse on the categories and method she will use in making sense of the problem at hand. This difference between the procedure of investigation and the procedure of presentation reflects the twin facts that the practical world provides political theory with its original inspiration, while the search for a way to comprehend the world is theory's original condition and distinguishing mark. And one should note that from a theoretical point of view, it cannot be said that the inspiration is more important than the search, that the thing is more important than the idea; that the comprehension of the world is more important than the method of comprehension. It cannot be said, that is, that the worldly object is the end for theory and the abstract thought of the object merely the means. The equality of treatment of object and idea, indeed, is another point separating political theory from classical philosophy, which favors the idea, and from history, which favors the object.

The main body of this book follows this typical order of theoretical presentation, moving from a discussion of categories and method to a consideration of certain problems of sex and power in their light. The remarks below, however, follow the line of my initial investigation. They introduce the central questions of this book in the order in which they first posed themselves to me.

1.

If what is meant by "an extremity," a "margin," or "periphery," is something at an edge rather than a center – a set of practices that go against the grain, a point of view outside the range of all permissible points, tastes that are perversions of the normal – then I will be exploring extremities and centers of two antithetical sorts. First, I intend to probe a segment of feminism which, as a practical movement, proclaims itself radically opposed to the established order of sex and gender; and which, as an interpretation (and it is as an interpretation that it most concerns me here) understands that order in terms beyond the pale of common sense and all traditional intellectual musings. Now, if one looks at sex and gender no longer as people ordinarily and conventionally do, nor even from a respectable avant-garde position, but from this far periphery, what one sees is a tightly organized system of sex-based, malignant social power, exploitation and hatred where a loose arrangement of natural or customary power, mutual dependence and love had been seen before. Radical feminism has been determined to pierce through the

hypocrisies and romanticizations with which it claims the center has cloaked its rules and dictations. We will see how sharp and bright radical feminism's own gaze has been.

What remains at the same time obscured from both peripheral and conventional view are life-forms that negate, if not the center's authority, at least the breadth and depth of its control. Such life-forms include evasions of that control that subsist not apart from and against but in the interstices of the ordinary and everyday, and that are often tacit rather than overt, understated rather than overscored, and subversions that have attained a more definitive counter-existence, but that are still unmarked or are actively secretive. It equally will be my purpose to illuminate those figures, aspects of socio-sexual relations, and moments of actually lived life which lie outside not only the established rule of sex and gender but also radical feminism's counter-rule. Some examples of these are the male figure who is not at all a living condensation of egoism, self-aggrandizement and aggression; the female figure who, out of autonomy and strength rather than men's manipulations of her, her resentment and envy of men, or her own acclimatization to a "male mode" of behavior, acts with viciousness and cruelty; the male and female bodies that resemble each other more closely than they resemble "exemplar" bodies of their own sex; the erotic command that is issued through not the brutal but the delicate physical movement; the character who is a thoroughly polyglot mix of "masculine" and "feminine" traits.

In the past, studies that began at the margins of life were likely to be branded as being of secondary interest and importance, "not the main thing," irregular, trivial, and idiosyncratic. At the present moment, marginality happens to be something of a fashionable theme. While there is nothing much to be said in favor of fashion for its own sake, there are two things to be said on this particular fashion's behalf.² The political advantage in looking at peripheries and extremities is that power is exposed in what it drives from the center of life to the edges, and in what it incites as its own antitheses. But the generic advantage is compelling too: that peripheries and extremities are worth the intellectual detour simply for the shock and oddity of what is likely to turn up. As to why there is a magnetism to shock and oddity that can make detours too dangerous to take, so that the traveller sticks even more closely to the main route – for the moment, I must leave that question to the reader's private reflections.

It will be clear that I am signifying something fairly exclusive by

"the center," if I mean to pose radical feminism as "the extremity" rather than some different kind of cultural formation, political group, or radical vantage point; and if I mean to consider as figures concealed all around, the man who does not instantiate the masculine, the erotic command issued through the delicate physical movement, the body that escapes given gender assignments, as opposed to some entirely different series of liminal types. What I mean by "the center" here is an order of sex and gender inclusive of the established phallogentric discourse on the meaning of the body (a discourse of words, but also of mannerisms, gestures, bodily costumes and decoration, cultivated proclivities and tastes), the elaboration of the "masculine" and the "feminine" personality, the sexual division of labor, the social orchestration of biological reproduction, the assignments of public and domestic power and subjection made on the basis of genital type. The whole, massive weight of this will be treated as comprising an entrenched and hegemonic regime.

This is not at all to suggest that it is the only regime there is to social life. It is not to say that there are no other axes along which power spins itself out, or that this one is more important than the rest. Surely there is no reason why one power relation must be fundamental, why there must be only one right description of what lies at the heart of things: "It is class," "It is race," "It is sex." The human mind, which tolerates the idea of profusion when it comes to sensation, accident, poverty and wealth, should be able to tolerate the idea of profusion when it comes to power, with which, as unpleasant a fact as it is, social life is so evidently over-rich. On the other hand, it also is not to say that power has no rhyme or reason to it, that it is inexplicable, chaotic, unorganized, but only that there may be multiple organizations of it that are vigorously effective at one and the same time. I want to emphasize this quite clearly at the start, so that there will be no mistaken conflation of radical feminism's notion of the center and my own. I will not be treating power as if there must be a primary power relation from which all others spring, or with respect to which all others are secondary contradictions or delusory antagonisms, or compared to which all others are lesser versions, as if power relations were stretched tight on a single, parsimonious continuum. Power will not, then, be considered as some fixed quantity that, if it appears with force along one axis, must be that much less forceful along the others. It will not be assumed to be something that is identical with horror, so that the less horror there is the less power there must be, and the more power there is the

more horror there must be. Power will not be presumed to come from a single origin, either diachronically or synchronically, as if all its forms and instances had to be identically indebted. Finally, and to match a notion of power that even in these preliminary ways is highly fractured, it will be assumed (and isn't it a reasonable assumption?) that individual persons can occupy different positions along different axes of power at one and the same time. People are complicated enough, alas, to enjoy the various pleasures of domination while simultaneously suffering all the insults and injuries that subordination brings in its wake.

In sum, I will assume that there are as many legitimate descriptions of the center as there are axes of social power, and that individuals will have at least as many distinct relations to the center as there are such descriptions. This book does no more, when it is being specific, than probe one sort of center-extremity relation. But to the extent that there are certain resemblances of predicament among different such relations, the reader, I hope, will find enough stimulation here to make the comparative move on her own. I do mean my investigation of radical feminism to raise, at least implicitly, questions to do with the progress any cultural-political formation against any established order is likely to make, as well as the paradoxes and difficulties in which it is likely to become mired. Its most predictable kind of progress is bound to be its break to some degree with conventional, entrenched ideas and practices. Its most intractable paradox will be its repetition in reverse of dominant terms, principles, and assertions. Its most fascinating problems will occur if it forges a new mode of life in opposition to the old. For then, it will be poised to give birth to the twin tendencies of the Liberator, who for emancipation's sake pits itself against all old dictations, prohibitions and repressions; and the Censor, who for the sake of protecting the purity of the emergent mode of life, issues dictations, prohibitions, and repressions of its own. An important question, then, concerns the ways in which marginal cultural-political groups generate such progressions, paradoxes, and problems for themselves. There is, too, the question of whether such groups must gravitate towards a monolithic and conspiratorial view of the Oppressor, a romantic view of the Oppressed, and a belief in the possibility of an earthly utopia. Can a militant oppositional effort be sparked by complex, not simple, ideas? Or is the power of simple ideas a necessary stimulus to rebellion? Is disillusionment, then – when life ultimately is found to be complicated, not simple – rebellion's necessary end?