

SITUATING FEMINISM

FROM THOUGHT
TO ACTION

SONDRA FARGANIS

VOLUME 2

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY

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CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY

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*In memory of Alan,
who left us too soon.*

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1

INTRODUCTION

There is a tradition in social thought that examines the subtle relationships between political ideas and the fabric of the society out of which they emanate. This book is predicated on that relationship. It discusses contemporary feminist writings in the context of the political movements out of which they evolve. It asks how the ideas of feminist theory relate to other writings on the human condition and how feminist ideas relate to the practices of feminist politics. Theories are like stories: They tell us something about the world in which we live. Some stories are better than others, because they are either more in accord with our experiences of the world or more like the way we wish things were or because they just make for a better read. In any case, although theories may be relevant to the actions people take, they do not provide a total explanation for why the participants of political movements embrace them.

Our interest in feminism is all the more telling in the context of debates over multiculturalism, which are also struggling with juxtaposing ideas of a common humanity that takes into account the diversity of people's biographies. The question that confronts American society is whether there can be a variety of cultural views that are not mutually exclusive and that allow for accommodation without the imposition of some singular political viewpoint (Phillips, 1993). This is, as well, the root issue of nationalism and the recognition of ethnic diversity:

A civil society, based on the universality of human rights, can best allow us to realize ourselves as everything we are—not only members of our nation, but members of our family, our community, our region, our church, our professional association, our political

party, our country, our supranational communities—because it treats us chiefly as human beings whose individuality finds its primary, most natural, and most universal expression in citizenship, in the broadest and deepest sense of that word. (Havel, 1993, pp. 32-33)

To cite some examples of the complexity of theory to which I return later in more detail: The feminist concern with “difference” may be adopted because it reflects a sensitivity toward the variety of cultural experiences in which women find themselves; but differences can also be seen as either exotica or the inequities that are found in pluralistic societies that have multiple and distinct publics, or as a reflection of the overlapping identities and eclectic aspect of all postmodern societies. Or another instance: Not all forms of theory are antithetical to politics and many are its handmaidens, so activists might find theory a convenient way to organize the troops; but the cohesion and commitment that a political movement needs may make it the foe of a theory that wants to probe into the presuppositions and first principles of the movement, let alone a theory that is either antitheory, as some may hold postmodernism to be, or that builds on ideas of chaos, constant movement and change, or contradiction.

In choosing as a title for this book *Situating Feminism: From Thought to Action*, I want to call attention to the role that historical forces, both grand and small, play in the formation and formulation of theory and political action. Chance and contingency are too often ignored; they need to be kept in mind even as we write generalizations that argue that certain styles of thought, certain kinds of policies, and certain constellations of values predominate at certain times. The tendency to generalize must be offset by our preparedness to focus on the relative merits of particular historical actors and actions. Any analyses of feminist theory or of the subjects of which it writes must walk a tightrope between the generalizing that tries to capture the zeitgeist, or spirit of the times, and the particularizing of events that directs attention to a specific cast of characters. Skepticism of universalist ideas encourages us to think about how distinct and different people are; but by taking this track, there is the chance that moral indifference and uncertainty will undermine the very basis on which a feminist politics is founded—that is, the shared

status of women who want to overcome what they see as oppressive conditions and establish their human authenticity.

The intention of this book is to understand feminist theory within the context of the politics of the contemporary Women's Movement in the United States. In evaluating theoretical concepts that underlie this feminism, I examine some select cases and controversies that have confronted the second wave of the movement, a period conveniently seen as beginning in 1963 and not yet at closure as I write. As an exercise in the contextualization of theory, the book tries to document two things: (a) how the ideas that shape the Women's Movement redefine people's lives and (b) how the diverse experiences that affect women's lives shape their thoughts and actions. In moving between the world as postulated and the world as experienced, we can appreciate the intricate relationship between theory and practice.

After an explication of feminist theory, I turn, in the ensuing chapters, to specific controversies that illustrate how certain themes of feminist theory have been played out politically. Feminist writings are united by the assumption that gender is a significant component in constructing cultural, social, and political worlds. In the cases under review, particular aspects of this assumption are discussed: (a) the relationship between women's condition and theoretical writings on the cultural worlds in which they find themselves, (b) the scope and form of women's oppression, and (c) the ways suggested to counter this oppression.

In the Sears Roebuck case, I examine the broad issue of equality, as well as the policy implications of affirmative action and employment discrimination. The case centers not only on whether gendered differences can be taken into account without jeopardizing equality of treatment but also on the role that feminist scholarship plays in political battles. In the Baby M case, I detail the relationship between ideas of parenthood, as these are redefined by both technological imperatives and the Women's Movement. As in the other cases, a background issue is the concern with distinguishing public and private realms. In the Hedda Nussbaum case, I explore ideas of autonomy, agency, oppression, and victimization, asking how the writings of feminists—specifically, their reconstruction of ideas on social action—affect the ways in which we think about the control that an

individual woman has over her own life. The interplay between social determination and human agency is graphically illustrated in discussions on domestic violence. Finally, in the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas controversy, I investigate the politics of sexual harassment as well as the ability of the Women's Movement to set the agenda for the conflicts of its diverse constituents. Coming as it does some three decades after Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, the Hill/Thomas incident allows us to examine the ways in which feminist discourse restructures the political agenda.

Sociological analysis has, as one of its intentions, unpacking—taking apart or deconstructing—the conceptual schema and knowledge codes through which a society and its members think and act. Using a sociological prism, I want to examine (a) how the mores and traditions of social life and the actions of groups in institutions structure the lives of individuals and affect their behavior and social position and (b) the capability that people have of removing themselves from the conventions of their particular history. I share the assumption that sexuality is a social category and that gender is a social construct that has been put together by agents of socialization, that is, institutions, like the state, the family, the political party, the mass media, which use particular means to administer policies for particular ends. Certainly, I mean not to dismiss the biological rootedness of gender but, rather, to suggest, as have others, the intricate dialectical relationship between nature and society. Here, I reference the debates in and around sociobiology (Barash, 1977, 1979; Bleier, 1984; Hrdy, 1981; Kuper, 1994; Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984; Rose, 1982a, 1982b; Rosser, 1992; Rossi, 1977, 1978, 1984; Van den Berghe, 1979; E. O. Wilson, 1975, 1979) and the controversies that attend the viewpoint that sexuality is socially constructed, that our sexual orientation is culturally constructed and not naturally derived (Stein, 1992). Although it may be the case that, in a society, not all social and political institutions agree on social ends and there may not be uniform socialization, there are still prevailing gender constructs that predate our arrival and that may limit, constrain, and/or shape what we can do. Social change involves reframing these constructs, just as the reverse is also the case that the new constructs lead to social change. Feminist theory is the articulation and questioning of

the rules and regulations that govern gender, and the Women's Movement is the unified attempt to change the ways in which things are done.

Inquiries about the links between the epistemology of feminism and the politics of the Women's Movement allow for an examination of how different theories look at cases and controversies. Because social and political theories test their mettle in practical moments, it is useful to see if certain aspects of feminism lead to certain kinds of practices and policies. Actual cases and controversies ought to have, even if in fact they do not, the consequence of causing those of us who write about social matters to stop in our tracks and take stock of what we are looking at, what we are hearing, what we are saying. History does not move in such a regular and predictable pattern that analysis can be reduced to a mathematical formula; nor can we forecast with tight precision how events will unfold and how the participants in those events will behave. Unpredictable factors play their role in defeating the logic and logical analyses of historical events. Theory does not provide a neat fit with the activities generated in the name of that theory, for it may be but a single resource of movements (Freeman, 1975; Tilly, 1978). I mean by this that members of the Women's Movement may take action for reasons that do not necessarily accord with the articulated principles of the movement. Feminist ideas have not always been received in the ways intended, in part because there has not always been consensus within the Women's Movement as to what certain ideas are meant to convey or how they are to be translated into policies. It is also possible that circumstances were such that ideas intended to achieve one effect were diverted or co-opted or simply washed away in a sea of competing ideas.

By unpacking particular theories, specific cases, and controversies and delving into their underlying moral and political dimension, we spotlight the historical dimension of gender and examine how social factors shape the construction and reconstruction of the terms *feminine* and *masculine*. Although the logic and method of feminist theory is central to the discussion, the facticity of gender relationships and the content of gender policy cannot be disregarded. Any discussion of gender must be situated against the background of the dramatic social changes

that have occurred in the contemporary world in this century, most particularly changes in the composition of the workforce and in the forms of reproduction. Consequently, this discussion also has to ask how the movement came to be and where it is today: What unites and divides it? Is its diversity functional or dysfunctional? How important are categories other than gender (class, race, ethnicity, religion, and age)?

We look critically at feminism and the social changes that produced it and that it, in turn, generated. The discourses of feminism become a part of the social world they are describing; the ways in which we speak about sex and gender become a part of our social lives and alter those lives. Feminist theory has played a key role in asking how these social changes affect our sexual lives. First, by asking how men and women are different, feminists draw attention to the distinction between sex (biological properties) and gender (the cultural roles built on those properties). Second, by asking about the cultural dimension of gender differences, feminists examine the taken-for-granted masculine and feminine roles and the ways these are internalized. Third, by asking about where sexism is lodged and how it can be dislodged, feminists politicize gender.

Sexuality has been a topic of interest to social theory since Sigmund Freud wrote systematically of its centrality to human life. The 20th century revolution in sexual mores has been chronicled by researchers who, like Freud, asked questions about the ways in which sex was organized and classified. Neo-Freudians such as Herbert Marcuse (1955) and Freudian revisionists such as Erich Fromm (1955) introduced history into the discussion by asking how personalities are organized historically, and with other theorists involved with the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1973; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972), issues of sexual repression, familial patterns, and the relationship of work to pleasure and leisure were given political import. Taking their cues not only from Freud but also from Karl Marx, writers like Marcuse looked to explain the commodification of sex and the organization of gender in terms and categories that altered our understanding of culture and personality. In this sense, Michel Foucault is a likely heir to Marcuse, because he, too, looked to see how sex related to discourse and social practices (Foucault, 1978, 1985, 1986). In examining how the individual

comes to know of himself or herself through the production of sexual texts, Foucault's (1972, 1973, 1977, 1980, 1988) fascination with the legal codification of sexuality is part of a more genuine concern with the nexus between power, laws, and sexuality. With Foucault, sex and gender were given a linguistic turn; that is, we were encouraged to see how much of what we take to be real, even sex, results from our using language in a certain way and codifying it along certain lines (Butler, 1989; Eagleton, 1983; Flax, 1990; Seidman, 1992, 1993; Synnott, 1993).

As Marx used class as a prism through which to view history, so feminist theorists use gender, asking why women are powerless or subordinate or, conversely, why men have power or dominate. As Marx asked how the dialectic of history and political action alters class oppression, so feminism has asked what would have to be done to replace gender oppression, or, somewhat differently, what would it take to redefine sexuality so that it would not be the system of domination, the playing field for power it presently is. As socialists/Marxists/communists were the vanguard of the workers' movement, so feminists see themselves as the new agents of historical change. They see their mission as one of enlightening women about the ways in which a patriarchal society and a phallocentric culture are oppressive. Where workers were to shape a social movement, now women are to restructure the politics of the state. Feminist writings can be understood as giving voice where none was heard before. They "name" things that were not named and articulate sentiments that were silent.

As a discipline, and when it is at its best, sociology has asked the kinds of questions that are of interest to feminist theory: How does a society produce and satisfy the needs and wants of its members? How do social structure and character interact? What kinds of societies produce what kinds of people? How do people learn to live in their environment? How do persons learn the societal values that contribute to the production of goods and the reproduction of persons? How do people choose between competing social values? Theorists influenced by the Frankfurt School/Critical Theory—most particularly, Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1987)—and by the writings of Foucault as well as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) and Jacques Derrida (1978, 1982) and whom we roughly group together under the rubric of *postmod-*

ernism, are also interested in the issues germane to feminist theory.

What is unique to feminist theory is the centrality accorded gender. In its accounting of social transformation, it starts with the ways in which women have been thought about, talked about, written about, and ignored. It looks at women's roles in the workforce, at methods for bearing and rearing children, at patterns of interpersonal behavior in both private and public realms. Although there is great variation in feminist theory—and I address this in the next chapter—it is bound together by the recognition of this central role that gender plays in the lives of people. Its contribution is a set of writings that start from the world as women see it and its objective is to bring to the fore a perspective that has been missing.

In its way, feminist theory is asking sociological questions: What does a particular society understand by the term *woman*? How does the society regard sexual differences? What social roles and social policies follow from these differences? How does the society rank gendered roles and characteristics? What is particular and, in this sense, new, is feminist theory's use of gender as *the* methodological prism: It looks at gender and gendered differences; it looks at how those differences are hierarchically arranged and valued; it lays out arguments for how these hierarchies lead to inequities and discriminations; it looks at issues and problems and practices in ways that mainstream social theory might not.

This use of gender as a new prism through which to examine the social and political world is sufficiently varied to cover both macro or micro accounts of gendered behavior in either discursive or critical formats. Whether it is reframing old questions or asking new ones, its intent is to interpret social reality by asking where gender figures in the discussion. It offers, in effect, a new epistemology. Feminist theory is consciously and purposely arguing for an important reconstruction of the humanities and the social sciences, if not of science itself. The kinds of issues raised by feminist theory—the ways in which culture and society evolve, the symbiotic relationship between character and social structure, the dialectic of how one knows what one knows, that is, the dialectic of epistemology and the social order—are central, as I have said, to the tradition of social theory. Feminist theory