FEMINISM AND MATERIALISM

Women and Modes of Production

Edited by
Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe

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ANNETTE KUHN AND
ANNMARIE WOLPE

Volume 7

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1978

This edition first published in 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

First issued in paperback 2014

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group, an informa company

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-63505-9 (Volume 7)
ISBN: 978-0-415-75223-7 (pbk)

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Routledge and Kegan Paul
London, Henley and Boston

First published in 1978
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
39 Store Street,
London WC1E 7DD,
Broadway House,
Newtown Road,
Henley-on-Thames,
Oxon RG9 1EN and
9 Park Street,
Boston, Mass. 02108, USA
Set by Hope Services, Wantage
and printed in Great Britain by
Lowe & Brydone, Thetford, Norfolk

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Feminism and materialism.

1. Women – Social conditions
I. Kuhn, Annette II. Wolpe, AnnMarie
301.41'2 HQ1154 78-40670

ISBN 0 7100 0072 3
ISBN 0 7100 0074 X Pbk

Preface

The way in which this reader came to be produced and the rationale for its production are outlined by us in our introductory paper. As far as the main body of the book is concerned, readers will undoubtedly become aware that many of the contributors have felt the need to give a critical appraisal of the current state of work in their particular fields of interest before embarking on their own analyses. The prevalence of this strategy indicates the extent to which a move into new areas of work and forms of theorizing involves a necessary, and often a very difficult, break with the problematics which inform much of the existing work in the areas drawn on. The order in which the contributions are presented here has its logic in the two main themes which emerge constantly throughout the book – the family and the labour process. The recurrent concern with these issues is a demonstration of their centrality with regard to the position of women in society, and suggests that an understanding of the precise character of the position of women is necessarily based on an analysis of the operation of the structures of family and labour process; and more than that, as we indicate in our introductory paper, these structures are to be understood in their historical concreteness.

It will also be apparent that there are a number of concepts which reappear throughout the book – patriarchy, ideology, value, and so on, concepts which even if only in their repeti-

tion may be seen as giving some indication of their importance for the project of this book. This is not to suggest, however, that they have always been fully worked out or developed in the contexts in which they are mobilized: it is perhaps not yet the moment for that. They may, though, be taken as guidelines for the future work which obviously needs to be, and will be, conducted in the construction of a feminist theory; we have offered some suggestions as to the specific concerns of such future work in the brief introduction which precedes each of the papers. Nor are the various contributions uniform in their approach to the construction of such a body of theory: it might be argued, for instance, that some inscribe forms of determinism not present in others. Whatever the absences in or inadequacies of particular contributions, however, it is nevertheless hoped that the individual papers and the book as a whole will stimulate discussion and provide a focus both for ongoing work and for work which will be undertaken in the future.

We would like to acknowledge here the work done by the contributors to the book, who have worked together to a considerable extent in its production. Tribute must also be paid by both editors and contributors to the work of the secretaries who dealt with the manuscript: Daphne Clench and Shirley Webb in particular ensured, under conditions of their usual overwork, that the typescript was ready in time to meet our deadline. Christine Pearce gave indispensable last-minute support and assistance, and many other feminist friends, notably Mary McIntosh, offered the practical and intellectual support which women so often need in order to deal with their many and varied responsibilities: this, in many ways, is what the book is all about.

London
November 1977

Annette Kuhn
AnnMarie Wolpe

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Contents

	Preface	vii
	Notes on contributors	ix
1	Feminism and materialism *Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe*	1
2	Patriarchy and relations of production *Roisin McDonough and Rachel Harrison*	11
3	Structures of patriarchy and capital in the family *Annette Kuhn*	42
4	Church, state, and family: the women's movement in Italy *Lesley Caldwell*	68
5	Sexual division of labour: the case of nursing *Eva Gamarnikow*	96
6	Modes of appropriation and the sexual division of labour: a case study from Oaxaca, Mexico *Kate Young*	124

7 Women and production: a critical analysis of some sociological theories of women's work 155
Veronica Beechey

8 Domestic labour and Marx's theory of value 198
Paul Smith

9 Women, sex, and class 220
Jackie West

10 The state and the oppression of women 254
Mary McIntosh

11 Education and the sexual division of labour 290
AnnMarie Wolpe

1 Feminism and materialism

Annette Kuhn
and
AnnMarie Wolpe

The nature of this book – the issues it addresses and the direction from which they are addressed – has been shaped from the very first by an assessment of the state of theoretical work around the position of women. By the latter part of 1976, when we first discussed our general ideas for producing a collection of essays dealing with the specificity of women's position from a materialist perspective, a good deal of writing from various 'feminist' points of view had been published. Since only a few years earlier there had been virtually no work in this area available at all, any published material obviously filled what was by then a very great need within the 'new' women's movement, and indeed was often grasped with eagerness, sometimes regardless of its quality or coherence. Women, irrespective of nationality and class position, were seen to comprise a homogeneous group bound together by one characteristic held in common – their 'oppression' in all aspects of life. Descriptions of this oppression covered mental breakdowns, discrimination in jobs and education, sexuality, dependence on men, sex-role stereotyping, and so on. The list is long, and the need evidently existed to bring to light and give recognition to the numerous ways in which oppression was experienced by women themselves. In the urgency to gain this recognition, little concerted effort was made to develop a systematic analysis of the situations described. When such work was begun, there was a tendency

to appropriate existing theory, first by pointing to its amnesia where women were concerned, and second, by attempting to insert the 'woman question' into existing work and hence to add to rather than transform it. This took place in a variety of areas – in the social sciences, in psychology, history, and art history in particular.

At the same time when feminists who were also marxists began to criticize the failure of marxist theory in coming to terms with the specificity of women's situation, attempts to construct theoretical work in this area tended, like similar projects elsewhere, to draw on existing concepts (in particular in this case the notions of value and productive and unproductive labour) and attempt to 'apply' them unproblematically in relation to their own situation. What, however, did distinguish work in these different areas at this point in time was not the nature of the work itself – progressive though it was in relation to what had, or more correctly had not, gone before – so much as the means by which it was produced: generally through group discussion and collective work, though usually with an awareness also of the needs of women working on their own. Hence although the nature of knowledge was not yet radically challenged by the 'additive' strategy, the ways in which work was produced constituted in themselves a transformation of traditional institutionalized modes of acquiring knowledge.

Partly as an outcome of, and partly in tandem with, this work, the last few years have seen the foundation and expansion of an area of academic and/or intellectual work called 'women's studies', the struggle for the establishment of which has a twofold and potentially contradictory rationale: women's studies was seen as a means by which women could produce knowledge about themselves, of their own history and condition, and disseminate that knowledge by means of a pedagogical practice. This very pedagogical impetus in the women's studies movement entailed a tendency towards its institutionalization as a discipline or field of study at various points within the education system – to date largely in further and higher education and adult education, and to a much lesser extent in schools. But appropriation may easily accompany such a process of legitimation, which at the same moment as accepting women's studies as a new 'subject' may

either isolate it by 'ghettoization' or defuse its radical potential by incorporation. Here the contradiction, or perhaps more accurately the potential contradiction, turns on the character and provenance of women's studies and the implications for that character of its becoming a discursive practice of educational institutions. We would not want to suggest that because of this contradiction, women's studies should simply remain outside the formal education system: marginality is too high a price to pay for purity. What we do feel is that there has been a tendency of the contradiction, alongside its potential implications for the women's movement, to remain unremarked and hence impossible to deal with. Some of these implications revolve around the problem of 'theoreticism', which we discuss below. The point we would like to make here, however, is that we do see this book as an intervention in women's studies, the risks of which we are well aware. We also feel that the time is now past when almost anything written about women and informed by any kind of feminist perspective is to be taken automatically as an important contribution. What we aim to do in producing this book, therefore, is to confront in a systematic way a number of theoretical problems which arise in the various kinds of work being done in the name of 'women's studies' or 'feminist theory', particularly those problems which arise so acutely at the point when the posing of feminist issues constitutes an attack on existing theoretical frameworks, and can proceed only by actually transforming them. Although there is no total consensus among feminists on what the exact issues are, there is a widespread recognition of the need for development of a theoretical practice.

Indeed the need for theory formulated itself precisely out of the unifying eclecticism of descriptive and empirical work undertaken under the banner of women's studies. The original aim to produce knowledge out of little or nothing meant that much work of an exploratory nature – work which would by its nature be heterogeneous – needed to be done. There was a necessary and inevitable tendency to draw on a variety of theoretical positions, often without formulating or arguing out the implications of these positions. The problematic potential of such a situation did not, however, emerge as long as the fact of work of any kind whatsoever being done was to