

UNRULY PRACTICES

POWER, DISCOURSE
AND GENDER IN
CONTEMPORARY
SOCIAL THEORY



NANCY FRASER

Unruly Practices:
Power, Discourse, and
Gender in
Contemporary
Social Theory

Nancy Fraser



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Unruly Practices

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Introduction

Apologia for Academic Radicals

It is fashionable nowadays to decry efforts to combine activism and academia. Neoconservatives tell us that to practice critique while employed by an educational institution is a betrayal of professional standards. Conversely, some independent left-wing intellectuals insist that to join the professoriat is to betray the imperative of critique. Finally, many activists outside the academy doubt the commitment and reliability of academics who claim to be their allies and comrades in struggle.

No one who has tried to be a politically critical academic in the United States can simply dismiss such complaints without residue. The distortions of bad faith notwithstanding, each of these charges points to a strand in the knot of genuine tensions and contradictions that are endemic to our situation. Radicals in academia *do* find themselves subject to competing pressures and counterpressures. We *do* internalize several distinct and mutually incompatible sets of expectations. And we *do* experience identity conflicts as we try simultaneously to wear several different hats. However, we should not rush to join in the chorus of left-wing professor bashing. The real contradictions of our lives notwithstanding, the radical academic is not an oxymoron.

The essays collected here were *not* written with the specific intention of prov-

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ing that thesis. They were, rather, occasional interventions in various political and social-theoretical debates of the 1980s. Nevertheless, it seems to me now that this collection can credibly be read as a contribution to ongoing arguments about the social role and political function of intellectuals. It is also the record of one socialist-feminist's and former New Left activist's struggle to *be* a politically committed, critical intellectual within the academy.

In one essay, I cite Marx's definition of critique as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age." This definition can stand as an epigraph for the entire volume. It intertwines three ideas about the relationship between critical theory and political practice: first, it valorizes historically specific, conjunctural struggles as the agenda setters for critical theory; second, it posits social movements as the subjects of critique; and third, it implies that it is in the crucible of political practice that critical theories meet the ultimate test of viability.

Something like this nexus of ideas provides the existential and political underpinnings of this volume. At the same time, the political and intellectual history of a generation lends it a distinctive physiognomy. The struggles and wishes of *our* age have found expression in movements for social justice ranging from civil rights, welfare rights, and anti-imperialism, to environmentalism, feminism, and gay and lesbian liberation. Moreover, as the radical impulses informing these movements have been simultaneously disseminated and attenuated, numerous veterans and well-wishers of such struggles have found their way into the academy. These scholars are working to recover and to extend the intellectual heritages of American radicalism, brutally severed and suppressed by McCarthyism. As a result, even despite the decline of mass activity and the rise of an unfavorable broader *Zeitgeist*, we are seeing the emergence of a vital academic left counterculture. One consequence is a veritable explosion of new theoretical paradigms for political and cultural critique, paradigms ranging from variants of Western Marxism, Foucauldian new historicism, and the theory of participatory democracy, to deconstruction, postmodernism, and the many varieties of feminist theory.

The essays in this book grew out of this specific generational history. Accordingly, they are bifocal in nature, responding simultaneously to political conditions and to intellectual developments. Whatever the subject under discussion, I have always kept one eye on theoretical debates and the other on actual or possible political practices. In other words, I have tried to keep simultaneously in view the distinct standpoints of the theorist and of the political agent, not to reduce one to the other. For example, as a partisan of, and participant in, the feminist movement, I have insisted on holding new theoretical paradigms accountable to the demands of political practice; at the same time, as a critical social theorist, I have tried to assess the viability of alternative forms of practice in light of the results of theoretical reflection.

This double aim is reflected in the character and style of my writing. These essays are abstract and theoretical, yet they evince an accent of urgency that speaks engagement. On the one hand, I write as a social theorist trained as a philosopher and influenced by recent developments in literary theory, feminist theory, and cultural studies. On the other hand, I write as a democratic socialist and a feminist. In general, I have tried to perform the difficult but not impossible trick of straddling the ground between a scholarly profession and a social movement. Consequently, even the most unabashedly theoretical pieces are responses to problems generated in, and solvable only through, political practice; and even the most ostensibly impersonal essays grew out of existential dilemmas and personal/political conflicts.

The first three chapters—the essays on Foucault—are a case in point. What attracted me to Foucault was his focus on “power/knowledge.” This was a compelling subject for a newly certified Ph.D. with a political past who was struggling to establish herself as a “professional philosopher.” Indeed, I read in Foucault a theoretical reflection of my own divided consciousness: on the one hand, I observed a new kind of institutional critique of academic business as usual; on the other, I discerned a voice and a stance that exemplified an alternative intellectual practice. This was an irresistible combination for someone who had once protested the war research of the “New Mandarins” and tried to lure workers to study groups on Marxist political economy but who was now having to grade students and to publish or perish.

It was the great works of Foucault’s middle period that I found most compelling. Here was an approach to “the politics of truth” that simultaneously contributed to and extended more familiar theoretical and political paradigms. *Discipline and Punish*, for example, proposed new ways to understand what the Marxist tradition cast as “the formation of the professional-managerial class,” “the increasing social division of manual and intellectual labor,” and “the spread of Taylorism.” By tracking these processes beyond the boundaries of the official economy,¹ Foucault also recast what Weberians and Critical Theorists have understood as “societal rationalization” and “bureaucratization.”

Many of Foucault’s great themes recur throughout the essays in this volume. I return again and again to the problem of the politics of knowledge, especially to the relation of intellectuals and of expertise to social movements and to the state. Indeed, it is a focus on the problem of expertise in relation to the institutionalization of “social services” that links the papers on Foucault in Part 1 of this book with those on “the politics of need interpretation” in Part 3.

However, even as I have taken up Foucault’s thematic focus, I have been puzzled by his self-positioning. What, the activist in me has repeatedly wondered, were the sources of his engagement? What was his practical intent, his political commitment? On the one hand, his account of the “capillary” character of modern power seems to multiply possible sites of political struggle and to valorize the

proliferation of new social movements; it thereby gives theoretical support to New Left critiques of economism and to an expanded sense of what counts as “political.” On the other hand, it is harder to know what to make of Foucault’s extreme reticence on normative and programmatic matters, his reluctance to consider how all these various struggles might be coordinated and what sort of change they might accomplish, and his much-discussed archaeological “coldness.”

Puzzled by these and related lacunae in Foucault’s work, I have tried in the three essays that make up Part 1 to dope out the normative political orientation of his writings. I have looked for standards of critique, for the sketch of an alternative, for a rhetoric of resistance that could promote the struggles and wishes of contemporary social movements. In short, I have tried to understand and to evaluate Foucault’s analysis of “disciplinary power/knowledge” from the standpoint of the exigencies of political practice.

A related set of preoccupations informs the essays constituting Part 2 of this volume. Here the focus shifts from the “specific intellectual” to the “universal intellectual,” from the social scientist to the philosopher and the all-purpose critic of culture. Consequently, the problem of “power/knowledge” shifts to the construction and deconstruction of elite traditions; and the politics of knowledge takes the form of struggles over where to draw the line between “the philosophical” and “the political,” “politics” and “culture,” “the public” and “the private.”

In Chapter 4, “The French Derrideans,” I cast a political-theoretical eye on the phenomenon of deconstruction. The context for this essay was the flowering in the United States of this astonishingly energetic new movement of literary criticism. Given my political history, I was fascinated by the figure of the intellectual as deconstructor, an academic virtuoso whose rhetoric was leftist but whose practice verged on esoteric formalism. And, once again, I was puzzled by the sources of contemporary critical vitality. Why did deconstructionists see critiques of the metaphysics of presence as *political* acts? Why did they think that to undo binary oppositions in high culture literary texts was to contribute to social transformation? How did they square their insistence on the unity of the “closure of the West” with their opposition to historically specific inequalities and oppressions?

On leave in Paris, I sought answers in the more explicitly and self-consciously political writings of a group of French deconstructionist philosophers. I was surprised to learn that for them the critical intellectual bore a striking resemblance to the transcendental philosopher. On the one hand, they privileged the archaeologist of the conditions for the possibility of “the political” over the participant in political struggles. On the other hand, they hoped to extract an ethos of political engagement directly from their philosophy without having to make a “detour” through empirical sociology or normative political theory. In general, they wanted “the political” without “politics,” and so they spared themselves the

effort of trying to connect their theoretical reflections with the struggles and wishes of the age.

“The French Derrideans” bares some of the dilemmas inherent in this “pure” deconstructionist *Weltanschauung*. It does not, however, tell against more limited and selective uses of deconstruction as a technique of *Ideologiekritik* for political ends such as feminism. Nevertheless, the essay seems to me to have acquired some timely new resonances in the wake of revelations about the political pasts of Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man. The problem of “the political” and “the philosophical” is central to controversies surrounding these writers; and in *their* postwar writings, too, one finds an attitude of disdain for the “merely ontic” character of politics, history, and society. But of course the difference is that in Heidegger and de Man this attitude has subterranean roots in unmastered histories of fascist involvement.

One response to the tortured relations of some European intellectuals with politics is to celebrate the down-to-earth, reformist ethos of American pragmatism. This is the tack taken by Richard Rorty, the subject of Chapter 5, “Solidarity or Singularity?” Rorty figures here as a major influence on my intellectual development, since it was his brilliant immanent critique of the analytic tradition, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, that created a space in American philosophy in which former New Leftists could “go continental.”

As my essay makes clear, my response to Rorty’s later work is deeply divided. On the one hand, my own holism, historicism, and antiessentialism find a congenial echo in his pragmatism. One could hardly ask for a more elegantly articulated distrust of the universalist pretensions of traditional philosophy—nor for a more thoroughgoing insistence on the priority of practice, on the contingent, historically conditioned character of subjectivities and rationalities, and on the decisive importance of vocabulary choice for the framing of political issues. This certainly looks like an approach that is “user-friendly,” open to the potentially transformative voices and aspirations of subordinated social groups. On the other hand, I am considerably less impressed by Rorty’s political views: the knee-jerk anti-Marxist one-liners, the smug celebratory references to the glories of “the rich North Atlantic bourgeois democracies,” and the cozy assurances that radical metaphilosophical critique does not threaten politics as usual. I am profoundly out of sympathy with the voice that professes loyalty to “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism,” and I am not won over when it repackages itself as “social democracy.”

Entertaining such a divided response, I could not help but wonder: What is the relation between Rorty’s philosophy and his politics? How can such critical metaphilosophical views sit so comfortably with such complacent political attitudes? Is there some deep connection between pragmatism and “bourgeois liberalism”? Or is their conjunction in Rorty merely fortuitous? Can a

democratic-socialist-feminist accept Rorty's metaphilosophy while rejecting his politics? Or, in embracing the one, will she be led ineluctably to the other?

In "Solidarity or Singularity?" I try to settle accounts with Richard Rorty. I take a close, hard look at his dichotomization of "public" and "private" intellectuals. I argue against a division of cultural labor that allows for the atheoretical practice of liberal social workers and engineers, on the one hand, and for the apolitical theory of radical ironists and aesthetes, on the other hand, but that has no place for the radical political theory of critical intellectuals with ties to oppositional movements. My aim in this essay is to rescue the possibility of another pragmatism—a democratic-socialist-feminist pragmatism—with another understanding of the relation between theory and practice.

Several recurrent themes run through the essays I have just been discussing. One is an insistence that you can't get a politics straight out of epistemology, even when the epistemology is a radical antiepistemology like historicism, pragmatism, or deconstruction. On the contrary, I argue repeatedly that politics requires a genre of critical theorizing that blends normative argument and empirical sociocultural analysis in a "diagnosis of the times." In this, I am affirming a fairly classical left view found in Marx and in Frankfurt school Critical Theory. At the same time, I am opposing a tendency in some sections of the academic Left to engage in what can only appear as esoteric forms of discourse unless and until connections to practice are elaborated, indeed mediated, through sociopolitical analysis.

However, this is not to endorse a traditional, narrow definition of "the political." A second and closely related recurrent theme in these essays is precisely the broadening of that designation to encompass issues classically viewed as "cultural," "private," "economic," "domestic," and "personal." Interestingly, this question about the limits of the political is precisely a *political* question. In addition, it furnishes an excellent example of the process by which practical exigencies give rise to theoretical problems. This issue was put on the critical-theoretical agenda by New Left, feminist, and gay and lesbian liberation movements fighting to legitimate heretofore marginalized struggles over things like sexuality, medicine, education, and housework. In this respect, these movements have followed in the tradition of working-class and socialist movements, which fought to make "economic" issues "political."

My own approach in this volume is to defend the broader conception of politics. On the other hand, I have also wanted to specify more directly than many left academics the ways in which cultural critique is political. I have elaborated a quasi-Gramscian view, in which struggles over cultural meanings and social identities are struggles for cultural hegemony, that is, for the power to construct authoritative definitions of social situations and legitimate interpretations of social needs. *Pace* some left critics of the academic Left, such struggles can and do occur in universities as well as in extra-academic public spheres. In both cases,

their political bite comes from their links, however mediated, to the oppositional movements whose needs and identities—indeed, whose struggles and wishes—are at stake.

This question of links between left academics and social movements is another major theme of this volume. It emerges most concretely and explicitly in the essays in Part 3. There, I put my own involvement as a feminist at the center, and I write from amid the struggles and wishes currently swirling about gender. In my case these struggles and wishes have roots in painful experiences of sexism in the New Left, in the academy, in fact in all spheres of cultural and social life. But they are also informed by countervailing, empowering experiences—of consciousness-raising, sisterhood, and participation in the creation of feminist theory. Because they are enlivened by a personal stake, the essays in this section bear a special intensity. They represent the coming together of a radical academic's individual needs with the historical needs of a political movement. Thus, these essays are exercises in *situated* theorizing. In addition, they are *interventions*. They function to dispel the myth that all critical intellectuals are similarly placed with respect to the levers of social power, on the one hand, and to the movements that oppose them, on the other.

Chapter 6, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory?” is a case in point. Here, I cast a feminist eye on the social theory of Jürgen Habermas. This theory attracted my notice for two reasons. First, Habermas is the heir to the tradition of Frankfurt school Critical Theory; his work, therefore, had a *prima facie* claim on the attention of a former New Leftist once directly touched by the thought of Herbert Marcuse. Second, Habermas’s social theory is the most ambitious recent attempt to do for the capitalist societies of the late twentieth century what Marx’s *Capital* tried to do for those of the late nineteenth. It aims to identify the structural dynamics, the crisis tendencies, and the forms of conflict characteristic of these societies. Moreover, the theory is elaborated with the “practical intent” of promoting emancipatory social transformation. It seeks to clarify the situation and prospects of social movements whose practice might contribute to such a transformation. Thus, critical intellectuals with ties to social movements have no choice but to engage it.

My essay assesses the empirical and political adequacy of Habermas’s theory from the perspective of feminist theory and practice. Thus, I have taken *political* issues—as opposed to metatheoretical issues about, say, “totality” or “foundationalism”—as my point of departure.² Consequently, I have elected not to affect a stance of supposed archimedean neutrality but rather to speak out of a sociologically specific, explicitly gendered, and practically engaged situation. In so doing, I am taking seriously Habermas’s professed “practical intent” of clarifying “the emancipatory potential” of contemporary struggles. Likewise, I am taking seriously his professed support for the cause of women’s liberation. My general strategy is to hold him to his word by measuring the success of his theory

in terms of its ability to contribute to “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes” of contemporary women.

Sadly, the results are less than satisfactory. It turns out that Habermas’s work, like that of many male leftists, remains relatively untouched by the enormous recent outpouring of creativity in feminist theory. As a result, his social theory reproduces androcentric bias at the level of its basic categorial framework. It presupposes rather than challenges dualistic, ideological ways of counterposing “family” and “economy,” “private sphere” and “public sphere,” “symbolic reproduction” and “material reproduction,” “system” and “lifeworld.” These dichotomies make it difficult to see, much less to analyze, some important dimensions of male dominance in late capitalist societies. For example, they occult forms of domestic gender oppression that are not only “normative” but also “systemic” and “economic.” Likewise, the dichotomies occult forms of gender inequality in the official economy and the state that are not only “systemic” but also “symbolic” and “normative.” One result is that Habermas’s theory misconstrues some empirical features of late capitalist societies. Another is that, politically speaking, it fails to do justice to the struggles and wishes of contemporary women.

Yet even despite all these problems Habermas’s social theory remains extremely important. Given the scope of its ambitions and its general political seriousness, it contains scores of positive and negative lessons for socialist-feminist critical theorists. One of these lessons is that apparent indifference to gender often masks implicit masculinist bias. Another is that ideology loves dichotomies. It follows that critical theorists need to problematize gender-associated binary oppositions lest their theories succumb to the disease they aim to diagnose.

The last two essays in this volume represent my attempts to put these and other lessons to work in the making of socialist-feminist critical theory. Here, I have tried to put my money where my mouth is—that is, to bring to bear in constructive social theorizing the fruits of my critical work on Foucault, deconstruction, Rorty, and Habermas. In general, I have sought to develop an approach that integrates the useful dimensions of each of these critical paradigms while avoiding their respective weaknesses.

The approach elaborated in these last two essays is intended as an alternative to “dual systems theory,” which was a type of socialist-feminist theory, popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that posited the existence of two “systems” of oppression—namely, capitalism and patriarchy—and then tried to understand how they were related. Dual systems theory was one of the first feminist efforts to avoid “single variable” models by theorizing the intersection of gender with class (and, in some cases, with race). But despite this laudable aim, it soon reached an impasse: having begun by supposing the fundamental distinctness of capitalism and patriarchy, class and gender, it was never clear how to put them back together again.

Some socialist-feminists have responded to this impasse by proposing to replace dual systems theory with “single system theory,” a theory in which class and gender, capitalism and patriarchy would be internally integrated from the very beginning through analysis couched in a single set of categories.³ Although this represents an improvement over dual systems theory, it is not the route I have taken. Like Foucault and Habermas, I have wanted to avoid objectivistic, functionalist models that purport to show how “systems reproduce themselves.” These models screen out “dysfunctional” actions that resist, contest and disrupt dominant social practices. In addition, they neglect the self-interpretations of social agents. More generally, functionalist approaches slight the entire active side of social processes, the ways in which even the most routinized practice of social agents involves the making and unmaking of social reality. Unfortunately, “single system theory” remains implicitly functionalist, and so for all these reasons I decided to eschew it. I have tried instead to devise an approach capable of representing human agency, social conflict and the construction and deconstruction of cultural meanings.

Chapter 7, “Women, Welfare, and the Politics of Need Interpretation” represents one effort in this direction. It follows Habermas in taking on the methodological task of relating structural and interpretive approaches to the study of social life. But it combines this with the feminist *political* task of disclosing the existence and character of some specifically late capitalist forms of male dominance. Sometimes (somewhat misleadingly) called “public patriarchy,” these forms of male dominance arise in the wake of greater state regulation of the economy. They are characteristically found, among other places, in social-welfare programs.

The essay analyzes the continuation and exacerbation of sexism “by other means” in the U.S. social-welfare system. It shows that this system is currently divided into two gender-linked subsystems: an implicitly “masculine” social insurance subsystem tied to “primary” labor force participation and geared to (white male) “breadwinners”; and an implicitly “feminine” relief subsystem tied to household income and geared to homemaker-mothers and their “defective” (i.e., female-headed) families. Premised as they are on the (counterfactual) assumption of “separate spheres,” the two subsystems differ markedly in the degree of autonomy, rights, and presumption of desert they accord beneficiaries, as well as in their funding base, mode of administration, and character and level of benefits. In other words, they are separate and unequal.

The account presented in this chapter is simultaneously structural and interpretive. It treats what are usually seen as “economic” phenomena as “institutionalized patterns of interpretation.” The point is that social-welfare programs provide more than material aid: they also provide clients, and the public at large, with a tacit but powerful interpretive map of normative, differentially valued gender roles and gendered needs. Thus, my analysis shows how social-welfare

practices encode sexist and androcentric interpretations of women's needs, interpretations erected on the basis of ideological, gender-linked dichotomies like "domestic" versus "economic," "home" versus "work," "mother" versus "breadwinner," "primary" versus "secondary" labor.

Although these sexist need interpretations are powerful and institutionally sanctioned, they do not go uncontested. In Chapter 8, the last essay in this collection, I broaden the focus of inquiry to take in the whole arena of conflict over needs in late capitalist societies. Here, interpretations embedded in the practices of the social state represent only one of several major kinds of discourses about needs. They intermingle, often polemically, with competing interpretations associated with oppositional social movements, social science experts, and neoconservatives, respectively. Likewise, state-based actors represent only one of several kinds of agents engaged in interpreting people's needs. They interact, often conflictually, with social-welfare clients, professional knowledge producers, movement activists, trade unionists, party politicians and others.

"Struggle over Needs" theorizes this "politics of need interpretation." It represents my most ambitious effort to date to develop a socialist-feminist critical theory. By analyzing contests among rival discourses about needs, I draw a map of late capitalist social structure and political culture. I link the politicization of needs to shifts in the boundaries separating "political," "economic," and "domestic" spheres of life. I also show how needs politics is implicated in the constitution of oppositional social identities, on the one hand, and in professional class formation, on the other. In addition, I identify three major kinds of "needs talk" in welfare state societies: "oppositional" discourses, "reprivatization" discourses, and "expert" discourses. Finally, in a series of examples I chart two countervailing social tendencies: one is the tendency for the politics of need interpretation to devolve into the administration of need satisfactions; the other is the countertendency that runs from administration to resistance and potentially back to politics.

In "Struggle over Needs," I have put discourse at the center for several reasons. First, by focusing on "the politics of interpretation," I have tried to provide an alternative to standard theories about needs that look only at the distribution of satisfactions. Second, by applying ideas from literary studies to the domain of social and political theory, I have tried to bridge the divide between culture and society, the humanities and the social sciences. Third, by insisting on a plurality of agents and discourses, I have tried to develop an alternative to currently fashionable discourse theories that suppose a single, monolithic "symbolic order."

I have assumed throughout that there are multiple axes of power in late capitalist societies. Thus, I have tried to allow both for crosscutting lines of stratification and for complex processes of group formation. Likewise, I have assumed there are a number of different "publics" in which groups and individuals act.